Gaining Perspective for the Vision: The First Step in Becoming a Visionary Principal[*]

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Abstract

Gaining a perspective in the development of a vision is the first step principals must take in becoming visionary leaders for their campuses. What, then, does it mean for principals to gain a perspective for the development of their visions? The purpose of this paper is to consider one aspect of becoming a visionary principal and that aspect is gaining perspective in order to develop the vision. Specifically, we share (a) the definition for visionary principals, (b) issues of global and societal conditions to be considered by principals when gaining perspective in the development of a vision, (c) ways in which principals can bring their visions home to the school culture, and (d) the development of a systemic vision, taking into account multiple relational standpoints in the development of a vision.

1 Introduction

Many famous people in history have been criticized for their visions. For example, Einstein was criticized for saying that $E = mc^2$. Einstein's vision of matter, energy, space, and time in a four-dimensional universe was

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published in 1905; however, it was not until 14 years from that point that his vision was realized. Only then did technology catch up to his earlier vision during a solar eclipse when astronomers were able to record the path of light (curved) in relation to the sun's gravitational force ("Einstein," 2008). Another example is that of DeKlerk who was chastised for his vision for antiapartheid when he was elected president of South Africa in 1989; his vision then was realized five years later in 1994, when Nelson Mandela assumed the presidency ("F.W. DeKlerk Biography," 2007).

There have been others, particularly in education, who have been criticized for envisioning a new future. Some examples are Montessori, Piaget, and Vygotsky. Admonished for educational experiences being too structured and an educational environment being too prepared or stilted, Maria Montessori focused on "the pupil's liberty as the basis for developing independence, his freedom to work when and for as long as he wants to on a given task and to progress at his own rate" (Kramer, 1976, p. 295–296). Upon opening her first school in a poor area of Rome, Montessori dreamed of helping children who were mentally challenged, but she never realized that a century later, her method of teaching would be central in educating not only children with special needs, but also those who are special in other ways– gifted, second-language learners, or economically disadvantaged. This method is now used in over 7,000 certified schools internationally, with thousands more using Montessori concepts.

Piaget was ridiculed for his research techniques of observation, description, and analysis of child behavior that began in the early 1950s; however, his research was the foundation of his vision for the future of education for children (Van Wagner, 2009). A result of Piaget's research was his theory of cognitive development. Approximately 20 years later, beginning in the mid-1970s, this theory alone has altered not only how teachers and curriculum developers have created curriculum and instructional strategies within U.S. classrooms, but also it has influenced how they view observational research. The groundswell of acceptance for Piaget's work also added to the base support for qualitative research which has reached an all-time high in publications approximately a half-century since Piaget's original work.

Lev Vygotsky lived during the Stalinist period when psychology was heavily influenced by Pavlovian theory. Promoting an alternative human interactive view from Pavlov, Vygotsky believed that cognitive development was influenced by the quality and quantity of social relationships. For this, he was denigrated, but Vygotsky's vision of cognition continued to be advanced and influenced the thinking of Albert Bandura in his theory of social learning (Hamblin, 2005). Only until the latter part of the 20th century was much of Vygotsky's vision considered noteworthy, particularly as his theory was applied in child development and in language and literacy development.

Though they were criticized, all of these individuals were able to develop a vision by gaining a perspective on their present situations, taking risks, and considering the future. In other words, they were visionary leaders and were able to (a) reflect on what *was* in order to gain a perspective on what *could be*, (b) provide a perspective on their visions through clear articulation of them, (c) share their visions though criticisms emerged, and (d) consider the impact of their visions on the future.

Gaining a perspective in the development of a vision is the first step principals must take in becoming visionary leaders for their campuses. What, then, does it mean for principals to gain a perspective for the development of their visions? First, they must be open to possibilities. This requires the use of imagination since imagination is a key in developing a vision; as Einstein indicated, imagination might be even more important than knowledge.

Gaining a perspective on a vision requires principals to use imagination, and add to it—information, as well as consequential and critical thinking. Thus, visions emerge from vivid imaginations, possibilities, or dreams that consider future implications and consequences of the vision as it could be realized. The visions principals develop become expressed ideals and standards for future judgments and actions that ultimately impact the advancement of the society through education. The purpose of this paper is to consider one aspect of becoming a visionary leader or principal—gaining perspective in order to develop the vision. Specifically, we share (a) the basis for visionary principals, (b) issues of global and societal conditions to be considered by principals when gaining perspective in the development of a vision, (c) ways in which principals can bring their visions home to the school culture, and (d) the development of a systemic vision, taking into account multiple standpoints.

1.1 Visionary Principals

Visionary principals are those principals who can think globally, who know where their sights are set, and who look beyond the here and now to imagine a future that could be positively different. More specifically, based on a study by Hemmen (2009), visionary principals must (a) know their entire organization which indicates they have a global sense of relationships, (b) build a culture of teamwork which indicates that they know the people within the organization in terms of their strengths, (c) motivate stakeholders which intimates that they are able to communicate well, (d) know their own role in the change process, (e) build relationships, (f) communicate at all levels, (g) contend with their own challenging role of principal, (h) know how to obtain resources, and (i) understand all aspects of dealing with personnel.

According to Lunenburg and Irby (2006), visionary principals are keys to the success of a school, and they able to reflect on their roles and behaviors as a leader. Further, Lunenburg and Irby indicated that visionary principals, as they gain perspectives on their visions, are those who are able to take data and relate those data to what is in the best interest of students, faculty, and the entire school community. Visionary principals begin with their own beliefs and know the beliefs of their faculty members and broader school community; they take those beliefs to begin their vision development and toward moving to a shared vision with all stakeholders (Brock & Grady, 1991; Lunenburg & Irby; Mendez-Morse, 1992). Developing the vision for the school means that principals must examine the students in the school as well as the expectations for the students in the present and in the future from the larger community, both locally and globally.

1.2 Considering the Present, Future, and the Global Society in Gaining a Perspective for the Vision

Society is global and is characterized by diversity in cultures, religions, and languages. With technology, the world had become virtually borderless. Teachers and students are able to access people and information in a matter of minutes. With immediacy, students are able to witness events from every point on the globe. With this view of the world in their living rooms, students are able to observe inequities and exclusions at home and abroad.

To many who have not witnessed firsthand such events as those that follow, nor who have lived in such conditions, such events, conditions, or situations are hard to comprehend. However, living in such a global society, students are exposed to the events of the world on television daily—or, in some instances, they live these events daily. Therefore, it behooves principals who lead these students and teachers to (a) understand world events, (b) address issues of learning related to such events within this global society, (c) recognize their position in the challenges for student learning, and (d) consider globalization impacts and national impacts in their development as a visionary leader.

For principals to gain a global perspective and place it within the context of their locale, the following type of information should be sought by principals so that they understand impacts of the global society on students in the United States and in their schools. The 2002 United Nations Development Report and the 2003 United Nations Millennium Report illustrate such globalization and inequities and are combined with data from the U.S. Census Bureau from 2002. A few notable global items are provided for consideration.

- The number of people on earth living in extreme poverty is slowly declining, from 29% in 1990 to 23% in 1999. (Nationally, the official poverty rate grew from 11.7% in 2001 to 12.1% in 2002, and the real median household income show no change between 2002 and 2003. A total of 34.6 million people were classified as poor in 2002, representing a 1.7-million rise [Proctor & Dalaker, 2003; DeNavas-Walt, Procter, & Mills, 2003]). Principals can consider how this will impact their students in their own schools as they develop or even restructure their visions.
- Primary school enrollments have risen worldwide, from 80% in 1990 to 84% in 1998. However, of the 680 million children of primary school age, 115 million school-age children were still not in school, 94% were in developing countries, and 56% of them were girls (Millennium Development Goals, 2003a). Principals can consider this phenomenon related to early childhood education globally for boys and girls as it relates to their own local vision of their school and the broader community.

- Since 1980, 81 countries have worked toward developing democratic governments, and civilian governments have replaced 33 military commands. From this information on a global scale, what should principals consider for their own visions regarding democracy, equity, transparency, and peace?
- Daily, over 30,000 of the world's children die of preventable diseases, while nearly 14,000 people are infected with HIV/AIDS. What should principals concern themselves with related to international preventable diseases related to their own campus visions?
- Nearly one in five Americans speaks a language other than English at home, compared to one in seven in 1990. Most speak Spanish, followed by Chinese. Some 47 million Americans five and older used a language other than English in 2000 (U.S. Census, 2000). Why should principals be concerned about languages in a vision for their schools?
- In the world's richest country (the United States), 16.5% of the people live in poverty, 20% of adults are illiterate; and 13% of the population has a life expectancy of shorter than 60 years (Millennium Development Goals, 2003b). Principals will certainly be concerned about global literacy levels as they gain a perspective for the development of their visions.

United States concerns. Principals as visionary leaders must be using today's data and must apply it to future conceived actions. At current rates of immigration, minorities will make up almost half of the U.S. population by the middle of this century. According to the 2002 estimates by the U.S. Department of Commerce, as reported in 2003, the number of people who identified with one race, regardless of whether they also reported any other races, was as follows: 236.2 million for Whites, 38.3 million for African Americans, 13.1 million for Asians, 4.3 million for American Indians and Alaska Natives, and 943,000 for native Hawaiians and other Pacific islanders. Because Hispanics are classified as an ethnic group, they can identify with any race; however, there were reportedly 38.8 million Hispanics accounted for in the Census. This number surpasses the African American minority population. According to *The Social Context of Education* (1997), published by the National Center for Education Statistics, it is projected that between 2000 and 2020, there will be 61% more Hispanic children ages 14–17 and 47% more Hispanic children ages 5–13. The numbers of Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Alaskan Native children ages 14–17 are projected to increase by 73%, while the numbers of those children ages 5–13 are projected to grow by 67%. Between 2000 and 2020, the number of White children ages 5–13 is projected to decrease by 11%, with White children ages 14–17 decreasing by 10%. With Hispanics being the largest ethnic majority and with a native language of Spanish, there is increased awareness of the growing numbers of English language learner (ELL) students in schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

These changing demographic figures present an intricate picture of education in the United States, and, perhaps, as principals gain perspective, they will consider needing teachers who understand the various ethnic or racial groups with which they work. The changes in the demographics contrast with the number of teachers who serve these ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students. Nationally, according to the National Education Association (2002), the shortage of minority teachers represents a discrepancy with the student population demographics. For example, only 5% of teachers are minority in this first part of the 21st century, but the student population is 40% minority.

Though the gaps have decreased, still there are discouraging achievement findings among racial groups. For example, results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2005 showed that both African American and Latino students perform significantly lower than White students in reading and math at the 4th and 8th grade levels (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). The challenge for principals as they develop their visions based on such national data is to create a vision in which minority children will receive an equitable education and will be prepared to compete economically in this changing world.

In addition to minority teacher shortages and the apparent achievement gaps, many more factors affect the nation's global society and may perpetuate the exclusion of certain groups. For example, in 2003, over 75 million children under the age of 19 are living in poverty and have no health insurance (Proctor & Dalaker, 2003). Poverty leads to social exclusion and generates the lack of requisite knowledge to get work. According to Barton (2003), poverty was found to be one of 14 correlates contributing to the achievement gap among

racial/ethnic groups. A turn of the century Urban Institute study revealed that about 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, are likely to experience homelessness in a given year (Urban Institute, 2000). These findings present challenges to principals as they gain perspectives to develop their visions. Their challenge is to develop a vision with as much direction as possible to increase the learning capability of children while they are in the school's care.

Another challenge to principals as they gain a perspective for their visions is with regard to the learning situation for children who are abused and/or neglected. During 2007, an estimated 794,000 children were determined to be victims of abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2009). Earlier in 2001 the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse determined that more than six million children lived with at least one parent who abused or was dependent on alcohol or an illicit drug within that year. This total involved about 10% of children aged five or younger, 8% of children aged 6 to 11, and 9% of youths aged 12 to 17 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Over six million children with disabilities were served in 2002 in federally supported programs (Digest of Education Statistics, 2007).

Although the conditions of children present challenges to principals who care about their students' learning, the changing technological society does so as well. Dias de Figueiredo (1995) suggested that several challenges, including learning, cannot be equated only with schooling, because the key issue of education has become the much broader one of supporting the lifelong learners of a society adjusting to ever-changing knowledge. He suggested that education is currently in the age of the learning societies. Within these learning societies, public schools no longer have the monopoly on educating children and youth. There are many choice systems for education, and more are on the horizon. The author further suggested that traditional schools are badly equipped to face challenges of interactivity, mobility, convertibility, connectivity, ubiquity, and globalization. This means that principals must think nontraditionally– outside the box– as they gain perspectives on their visions. Dias de Figueiredo proposed that another challenge for the school of the 21st century is its ability to include the human component and to transmit the culture. He said that culture can be understood as a unifying force.

The challenges in education are many for the principals as they create, recreate, or restructure an educational vision for the schools full of students and teachers under their care. Principals must reflect on broader social issues and where they find themselves in the present, in order to build a vision that is socially responsible for the future. A socially-responsible vision challenges principals to educate and assess all children, with their diverse needs, who enter through the schoolhouse doors—which open in the opposite direction to a myriad of diverse situations and needs of the society at large.

1.3 Bringing the Vision Home to the School Culture

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), signed into law in 2002, admonished principals to hold all students accountable to high academic standards. The 2001 legislation expanded the federal role in public education by requiring stronger school accountability, more stringent qualifications for teachers, and an emphasis on programs and strategies with demonstrated effectiveness. The legislation is focused on ensuring that all students meet state standards by 2014 and that achievement gaps based on ethnicity, race, income, and language are closed. This is an inclusive piece of legislation. The provisions of the law were designed to ensure that *all* students make adequate yearly progress toward achieving *proficiency* on state standards within 12 years of its passing. All learning challenges must be taken into account. The goals of the new law challenge educators in states, districts, and schools in ways that require them to create visions that rethink the structure, organization, and delivery of education in public schools.

One of the first steps to rethinking the structure of a school and establishing a vision for such a restructured school is the consideration several aspects of the school culture. School culture, as defined by Stolp and Smith (1995), is the historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community. They suggested that this system of meaning often shapes what people think and how they act. According to Stolp (1994), a vision specifies the particular values and beliefs that will guide policy and

practice within the school. The creation of a vision is not a static event, because the vision must change as culture changes. Principals who are able to adapt a vision to new challenges will be more successful in building strong school cultures (Stolp, 1994). According to Pasi (2003), the process of adapting or developing a vision for the school, and we add, gaining a perspective on that vision, sets expectations for the culture, climate, programs, and policies.

Considering global and national challenges as previously described, while couching them in the context of the lived culture (the community, the place, one finds oneself in the present) is part of the development of visionary leadership and gaining a perspective on the vision. Browder (2001) aptly shared a story of a high school principal.

With thoughts of the definition of moral poverty in her head, the principal concludes that she feels a better sense of understanding a complex shift in American society, one that unfortunately leaves a growing number of children-on-their-own. She senses that the best way to deal with this phenomenon is to focus the school's resources for involving parents and engaging teachers and students. She believes it will be necessary for her to assume a leadership role as a moving force and cheerleaders for establishing the school's institutional attitude—a positive one anchored in academic achievement and a firm sense of right and wrong. While this approach seems very traditional and may not work well today, the principal senses that, for her community, it is perhaps the most appropriate choice.

Meanwhile, more study will be necessary on determining ways of injecting "contagious" moral attitudes into adolescent peer groups. She realizes it is far easier to offer such a prescription than it is do to so. It is our obligation, however, to try, thinks the principal... (p. 258)

The principal that Browder portrayed considered her culture, saw herself as the facilitator to move the vision with many stakeholders involved, and to include very human and moral factors that obviously had been neglected within her setting. She had gained a needed perspective for developing her vision. Because she was about to embark on a collective venture with parents and teachers, she was setting out to create relationships while promoting her vision. Wheatley (1994) stated:

To live in a quantum world, to wave here and there with ease and grace, we will need to change what we do. We will need to stop describing tasks and instead facilitate process. We will need to become savvy about how to build relationships ...The quantum world has demolished the concept of the unconnected individual. More and more relationships are in store for us, out there in the vast web of universal connections. (p. 38)

1.4 Gaining Perspective on the Vision via the Systemic Vision

As principals gain perspective for the development of their vision, they must ensure that all vantage points are considered. Perspective provides a broad view of a situation as it exists in context. A systemic vision is placed within the context of the school and the district. Principals can the structure of the systemic vision to develop their own visions. Figure 1 depicts the systemic vision and its connection to context and relationships.
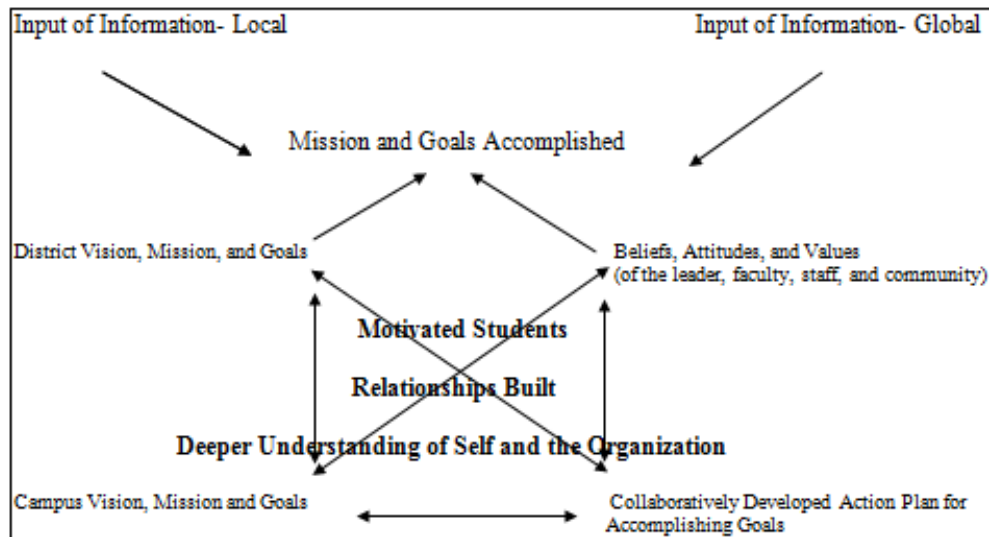
Figure 1. Gaining a perspective on vision via consideration of a systemic vision.

Figure 1

The systemic vision includes inputs from the local and global vantage points which help principals to gain perspectives as they develop their visions. As well, it includes relationships between and among the following components: (a) the district's vision, mission and goals, (b) the school's vision, mission, and goals, (c) the school's strategic action plan, and (d) the considered values of the principal, teachers, staff, and community. Each component is grounded in professional relationships, because such relationships are established as teachers, principals, support staff, and other stakeholders develop and collectively understand each component. Systemically and cyclically, these relational components lead to the accomplishment of the mission and goals. The process of the systemic vision in developing these factors leads to more highly motivated students, better person-to-person relationships among teachers, principals, and community members, and a more sensitive or deeper understanding of each person in the organization, the organization itself, the vision, the mission, and the goals.

Ultimately, visionary principals gain perspective for developing their visions by studying and reflecting not only nationally and globally, but also upon the school, the context, and the district culture. They consider their own beliefs and values in this process which helps them shape their visions. Ultimately, principals will share their visions with the entire school community. Their visions can serve not only as the compass for their success as leaders, but also, for the success of their schools.

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