

How do Principals View Themselves? As Conductors of the Band

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What is the essence of the role of a principal? How much of an influence does a principal have on student achievement? What impact does a principal have on a school's culture and climate? How do principals manage to perform the myriad duties they are responsible for completing on a daily basis? What are common characteristics or behaviors of effective principals? How do principals view themselves and their role in the school?

For the past six weeks my classmates and I have been reflecting on these questions in our EAD 610 School Principalship class as we seek to deepen and refine our thinking about what it means to be a principal. We have read numerous books and articles about the principalship. We have interviewed current principals about their experiences and their strategies for leading their schools and have listened to class presentations from a wide range of administrators. We have discussed *administrative moments* and decided which course of action we would take if we were a building principal facing the given situation. Taken as a whole, these experiences have served to inform and clarify our understanding of the role and nature of the principalship.

When asked about the essential nature of his role as principal, Mark Slosek, Principal of Fulton Junior High School in Fulton, New York, replied, "I see myself as a conductor bringing all the parts together" (personal communication, February 3, 2006). When asked the same question, Jeanne Brown, Principal of Soule Rd. Elementary School in Liverpool, New York, responded, "I see myself as the conductor of the band, trying to make it all work" (personal communication, January 31, 2006). Both went on to explain that they were the ones responsible for making sure that all of the various pieces that go into running a school work together. I find this analogy of principal as conductor of the band to be quite useful. Many of the qualities needed to be an effective conductor are essential for school leadership as well. So what are these characteristics, skills and actions that enable some principals to help their schools make beautiful

music while so many others struggle to get their schools through rehearsals? The following is a discussion of practices that are used by principals who are effective conductors of the band.

A Good Conductor Knows What He Wants the Music to Sound Like

As a conductor must be able to see, or in this case *hear*, how he wants the music to sound so must a principal be able to envision a positive future for his school. In each case it is not enough to have a personal vision but is essential that this vision be shared with others and that others have opportunity for input into the vision. According to Speck (1999) creating a vision for a school community is essential for success. Without a firm sense of direction, principals and their schools will not reach their full potential. To be truly effective a school should have a shared vision that is developed in collaboration with the school community. Once a school has a common vision, this view of a desired future serves to focus and guide the individual daily actions of each member of the school community. As Speck (1999) writes

The vision thing is a key concept of successful leadership for the principalship. A principal whose daily actions are not linked to an overall dream of what the school could be is a mere manager, doomed to fall short of the leadership that can elevate a school to the higher state of learning community. (p.118)

Having a clear vision of a positive future is an essential condition for success.

A Good Conductor Keeps the Focus on the Music; This is Why the Band Exists

The reason the conductor and band come together is to make music. This fact must not be forgotten. As it is the conductor's role to help the band play music it is the principal's role to help the school community engage in learning. Cotton (2003) discusses the importance of principals maintaining a strong focus on learning as the school's primary goal. There is a strong positive correlation between the amount of emphasis and involvement that principals place on

learning and on students' level of academic achievement. Schools with principals that promote learning as their chief mission and focus their time and resources in addressing this goal are more likely to be successful in helping their students reach high levels of academic achievement.

DuFour (2002) discusses the dramatic changes that occurred at Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, when he shifted his focus as principal from being an *instructional leader* intent on improving teaching to being a *lead learner* intent on improving learning. At first glance this change may seem insignificant, or a mere exercise in semantics. To the contrary, DuFour argues that this shift in focus from teaching to learning had profound and positive effects on the school. The focus on learning led to greater collaboration as teachers worked together to help students meet the learning outcomes established. The staff made better use of data and tracked the progress of individual students on a more consistent and continual basis. Numerous interventions were put into place to help students meet the learning goals. DuFour (2002) explains

This systematic response to those who were not learning made it clear to both students and staff members that we expected all Stevenson students to learn. Time and support varied – the expectation that all students would achieve the intended outcomes of their courses was a constant. (p.15)

A Good Conductor Makes Sure the Band Has Enough Time to Practice

There is an old joke that goes something like this. A young musician is visiting New York City and wants to go to Carnegie Hall. He stops a man on the street and asks, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The man glances down at the musician's instrument before looking back up at him with a smile and answering, "Practice my boy, practice!" To be good at something you need to practice. Just as a conductor needs to make sure his band has sufficient time to

practice a principal needs to ensure that his teachers and students have ample time for teaching and learning. Cotton (2003) reports that principals of effective schools establish procedures that protect instructional time from interruptions and are proactive in creating opportunities for students to receive additional instruction outside the regular school day. In her list of indicators of effective leadership, Connors (2000) states, “Effective leaders avoid unnecessary distractions throughout the day. The best leader is the one who never forgets what it is like to be a teacher. Consequently, effective leaders do everything in their power not to disrupt the flow of the school day” (p. 33). By establishing norms that cherish and protect instructional time principals can help create school environments that promote and support student learning.

A Good Conductor Pays Attention to the Notes

A good conductor makes sure that all of the various elements that go into putting on a performance are taken care of. Depending on the size and resources of the band, the conductor may be responsible for, among other things, scheduling the practice sessions, maintaining the instruments, promoting the concert, selling tickets, keeping the books, arranging for security and seeing that the auditorium is clean and attractive. If these tasks are not attended to, the show will suffer. In order to be effective school leaders, principals need to be good managers. Speck (1999) illustrates the critical role of management to the success of a school when she asserts, “Good management is the foundation on which a school learning community can be built. The principal’s management skills – good or bad – determine whether the school will run effectively and efficiently” (p. 75). Speck emphasizes that one of the most important results of sound management is that it creates conditions in which a principal’s leadership can emerge. While good management doesn’t guarantee effective leadership, poor management will almost certainly prevent it from taking hold.

A Good Conductor Expects All of the Musicians to Play Good Music

As a good conductor expects the best out of all members of the band, a good principal expects the best out of all members of the school. Payne and Michailides (1998) emphasize the importance of creating a school culture in which students, staff and parents have high expectations for student achievement. They include holding high expectations as one of their *ten commandments* for principals. They discuss how these high expectations should not be seen as being imposed by pressure from others but should rather be viewed as an extension of pride in one's work. Effective schools are able to create cultures that promote and value high expectations and norms of continuous improvement. Bob Lynch, Director of the Geneseo Migrant Center, describes the culture of high expectations that has developed within this program in the following interview excerpt

We have a fairly positive working environment where people, for the most part, enjoy coming to work. It is a work environment where people's ideas, differences and creativity are respected and encouraged. The culture, historically, has instilled that the quality of one's work is very important. This was instilled in me many years ago from Dr. Mattera. Farm worker needs come first and those of staff follow. We have tried to maintain this and I feel that we have been successful. (personal communication, February 10, 2006)

According to Cotton (2003) a key characteristic of high performing schools is the extent to which their principals hold and communicate high expectations for student learning. Like Payne & Michailides (1998), Cotton also emphasizes that holding high expectations does not imply harsh or demanding treatment of children. She explains that high expectations and high

levels of achievement should be a natural condition for children. As educational leaders we need to strive to create an environment in which children's natural propensity to learn and achieve will flourish. Heller (2002) expresses similar sentiments when he writes, "Excellence in education doesn't necessarily mean being tough. It may well mean just the opposite – holding high standards, but at the same time providing compassionate support to help students and staff reach those goals" (p. 1).

A Good Conductor Talks to the Musicians and Listens to What They have to Say

Communication is the essence of conducting. The conductor's main role is to communicate with the musicians as they work together to make music. While the directive nature of conducting is fairly obvious from the waving of the baton, the best conductors, like the best principals, view communication as a two-way process. A skilled conductor not only provides direction to the musicians but takes cues from them as well in order to get the most out of each musician and each song. Cotton (2003) discusses the importance of strong communication skills and the positive relationship between human interaction and student achievement. In addition to sharing information widely, effective principals actively seek out feedback from others. Obtaining and considering feedback are key aspects of effective communication. Principals should reach out to students, parents, staff members and the wider community to engage in dialogue about their schools. Jeanne Brown uses a variety of strategies for communicating with the various groups that make up her school community. These include, but are not limited to, a Friday memo to all staff providing information about activities that are happening in the coming week, regular attendance at grade level and curriculum committee meetings, weekly meetings with the school counselor, school psychologist and school nurse, a

weekly *lunch club* with students and regular phone contact with the school's Parent Teacher Organization (personal communication, January 31, 2006).

A Good Conductor Shares the Baton

A good conductor shares the baton and lets others help to lead the band. Cotton (2003) identifies shared leadership and staff empowerment as key elements of effective schools. She states, "Principals of high-achieving schools involved their staffs in school governance and instructional program decisions" (p. 21). Merrow (2004) acknowledged teacher empowerment as a key element in the success of Lincoln Elementary School in Mount Vernon, New York. In describing the principal's leadership a teacher stated

He's a master at capitalizing on the talents and expertise of others. He loves to admit that we know more than he does, and he's not afraid to say that. And so he empowers us, and he delegates tasks. He makes us feel important, and he gives us a lot of respect. And that's what keeps us going. (p. 36)

Mark Slosek, Principal of Fulton Junior High School in Fulton, New York, expresses a similar philosophy when talking about his role as principal. "I see myself as a facilitator and draw on the expertise of those around me. I try to empower people and be someone who opens doors so people can help kids." (personal communication, February 3, 2006)

A Good Conductor Takes Care of His Musicians

As a good conductor cares about and cares for the members of his band a good principal must care for and attend to the needs of his students and staff. It has been said that, "before you can teach them, you have to reach them." Cotton (2003) found that principals of high-achieving schools were able to effectively communicate their concern for the well being of their staff and

students. These principals were aware of, and responsive to, the needs of students and staff and were able to forge relationships that were based on mutual trust and respect.

A Good Conductor is Visible for All the Musicians to See

A good conductor realizes that the musicians will look to him for leadership and direction and makes sure that he is visible for all to see. The importance of principals being visible and accessible cannot be overstated. Speck (1999) uses the term *deploying self* to describe the joint practice of being visible and accessible for students and staff. She writes, “Leadership involves being there when people need your help and guidance as well as when they need affirmation of their work” (p. 58). Jeanne Brown makes it a goal to visit every classroom in her building everyday. (personal communication, January 31, 2006). Likewise, Beth Lozier, Assistant Principal at West Genesee Middle School in Camillus, New York, strives to be visible and accessible. She is a regular visitor in classrooms providing teachers with frequent feedback through formal and informal observations. Additionally she makes it a priority to be in the halls interacting with students and teachers before and after school, during lunch periods and between classes (personal communication, February 6, 2006).

A Good Conductor Helps His Musicians Tune Their Instruments

A good conductor makes sure that the members of the band have their instruments in tune. In the same manner a good principal makes sure that all members of the school staff are engaged in ongoing, relevant professional development. Cotton (2003) found that much of the success that effective principals have had can be attributed to the professional development opportunities that they have provided for their staff members, especially their teachers. These effective principals not only provided more extensive and diverse opportunities they also were much more likely to participate in professional development activities with their staff. In

describing the Geneseo Migrant Center's commitment to professional development, Bob Lynch states, "We are very good about allowing people to participate and grow by participating in professional development. Several staff members have been to Mexico for a Spanish immersion program, we also provide tuition assistance" (personal communication, February 10, 2006). Staff participation in ongoing, relevant professional development is a key element in establishing and sustaining school norms of continuous improvement.

A Good Conductor Doesn't Let the Music Get Stale

Whether they do it by playing new music or by putting new twists on old favorites the best conductors know how to keep the music fresh for their audiences. In the same vein the best principals work with their teachers to develop curriculum and instructional practices that are fresh and engaging for their students. According to Speck (1999) principals need to develop the habit of reviewing research and visiting exemplary programs. By reviewing research and reflecting on the practices in their own schools principals will gain a better understanding of why educational programs and strategies work, or don't work, and what factors need to be considered before implementing an instructional program or approach. By engaging in this ongoing investigation, principals and their staffs will be able to make more informed choices regarding curriculum, instruction and assessment.

With ongoing professional development teachers' instructional practices should change over time. To be effective, this process of change will require leadership and support. Support for *risk taking* was identified as a key practice of effective principals (Cotton 2003). For what use is participating in professional development if you are not going to be supported when you put what you have learned to use. When asked about her strategies for creating and maintaining a positive school culture, Jeanne Brown responded, "I work hard to create an environment in

which people are willing to take risks. I want people to think outside the bowl” (personal communication, January 31, 2006). Mrs. Brown visibly expresses her support for risk-taking with the poster she has on her wall showing a picture of a fish bowl along with the slogan, “Think outside the bowl.”

A Good Conductor Promotes the Show and Celebrates Good Performances

A good conductor promotes the show to a wide audience and makes a point of acknowledging and celebrating good performances with the members of the band. Similarly effective principals promote their schools widely and celebrate the achievements of their students and staffs. Speck (1999) discusses the importance of principals involving and empowering staff and the wider school community in order to help the school reach its vision. Peterson & Deal (1998) stress the important role that celebrating student and staff achievements plays in the development of a positive school culture. In a similar fashion, Cotton (2003) writes, “Ceremonies and rituals intended to honor tradition, instill pride, recognize excellence, and stimulate proprietary interest in the school as a collective endeavor are integral to effective schools and are often missing – or are curiously hollow – in less effective ones” (pp. 19-20).

When asked about the climate and culture of her building, Jeanne Brown stated that they have a number of traditional events and described a particularly powerful ritual that they follow each year to honor the students graduating from sixth grade. Each year every member of the school staff purchases a dictionary, inscribes it with a personal note to a graduating student and presents it as a gift at the *moving up* ceremony. The students then take their dictionaries with them as a remembrance and learning aid as they move on to the junior-high level (personal communication, January 31, 2006).

A Good Conductor Enjoys the Music and Might Even Dance a Bit Too

In conclusion, a good conductor enjoys his role, not just during concerts, but during practice sessions, breaks and informal time spent with the band. The job of principal is time consuming and demanding. In order to be effective over the long term principals need to find enjoyment in their work. Pat Mason, Principal of Tully Elementary School in Tully, New York, emphasized the importance of enjoying one's work in her *Top Ten* list of things one should know about being a principal. She advised us that, "You're never fully dressed without a smile" (personal communication, February 27, 2006). She also urged those who are thinking of becoming principals to make a habit of doing what she does by taking the time to go and dance with the kindergarteners. Spending time with students can remind us why we wanted to work in education in the first place and help rejuvenate and sustain us through the many challenges that await us when we take on the role of conductor of the band.

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