The Principal's Vision: Necessity or Non-issue?

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Abstract
Public school teachers and administrators share a common belief with regard to the principal's articulation of his school's vision. This fact was borne from a survey conducted in Georgia involving 4,700 teachers and other school professionals. The responses of teachers and principals to questions regarding school vision were markedly consistent and point to possibly an overlooked element in school administration – an element to enhance school improvement. In this paper, the authors seek to understand why both teachers and principals value a specific, clear vision and the potential benefits, which can be gained from understanding the nexus.

What is the purpose of public education? How are decisions made? What are the beliefs of educators? These simple, but complicated questions are at the foundation of policy debates that intimately affect the very fabric of the education system. Decisions are made, programs created, and initiatives mandated without much concern for understanding the beliefs of the professionals that are closely involved. The purpose of this research was to more clearly delineate the belief systems of educators from across the educational spectrum—from elementary teachers to school counselors, from administrators to paraprofessionals, from foreign language teachers to Career, Technical, Agricultural education professionals and everyone in between. Using the Purposes of Public Education survey (Page & Author, 2013) with added items regarding beliefs and purposes of special education, school counseling, physical education and school leadership.

Background

Understanding the beliefs of educators allows for a wide variety policy, program and personnel decisions to be made ranging from diversity (Flynn, Author, & Page, 2013), alignment with the goals of an organization (Edwards, Author, & Page, in press), understanding the worldview of teacher educators (Author & Page, in press) or the development of questions for hiring practices (Author, Page, & Wilson, unpublished manuscript). By looking at educator philosophies, a more thorough understanding of the underlying foundations of belief systems can be constructed for the purposes of helping schools meet the needs of 21st century learners.

While the overall purpose of the survey was to examine a wide range of issues dealing with philosophical, administrative, pedagogical and structural elements of public schools, the purpose

of this paper is to address a seemingly obvious, but necessary component of school administration—what is the relationship of the articulated vision of the school leader and the beliefs of the teachers about this vision.

Mendez-Morse (1992/93) in describing vision writes that a vision "provides guidance to an organization by articulating what it wishes to attain." That a vision, "… is a picture of the future for which people are willing to work" (¶ 3). She adds that a vision may function as inspiration, and motivation to engage people as a force which inspires commitment. Therefore, vision becomes more than a picture of the future because it instills a desire to attain that future. Kantabutra (2005), in particular to educational reform, states that vision is the starting point for educational reform. He continues (citing Baum, Locke and Kirkpatrick, 1998) that positive findings exist between follower performance and vision-based leadership, and that as of the date of their writing no studies indicated a negative relationship between charismatic/visionary leadership and individual performance (p.124). Kataburtra avoids trying to define vision altogether but purports (citing Baum et al. 1998, and Nanus, 1992) that the leader's own vision guides his actions and choices. Kantabutra prefers this pragmatic definitional approach for two reasons: first, each leader develops a vision in his own way perhaps rationally and objectively but often intuitively and subjectively and, second, visionary leadership differs from leader to leader through the leaders' own style, the content of the leader's vision, and the context within which the leader's vision is developed (p.125).

Accepting Mendez-Morse and Kantabutra's work and opinion, the actions of the school principal in *living* his vision for his school will inspire and motivate the faculty in crafting plans and strategies for achieving *his* picture of the future for the school. And, the principal's vision is better shaped by his school's circumstances and the context within which his school/students/faculty/constituents live. Understanding his school's environment cannot help but shape the principal's vision and influence his leadership style in how he will go about expressing his commitment toward his vision.

Korkmaz (2006) in writing about school vision and organizational health emphasizes that the relationship between a school and its environment is strong and that shaping the school's vision should be a cooperative endeavor involving all stakeholder groups, i.e. administrators, teachers, parents, and even students (p.16). Korkmaz (2006) noted that the development of a vision resulting from a cooperative effort will be sharply related to the administrator's leadership style. The principal's function as an effective leader is the catalyst for school change, and little improvement will result otherwise. The reason for this is because it is the principal who must display leadership practices in developing, maintaining, and conserving the school's vision. Korkmaz (2006) stresses that the development of a school's vision is directly linked to the organization's health, which he defines (citing Akbaba, 1997) as: leadership, integrity, interaction, organizational identity, and products as sub-components of organizational health (p.16).

The framework for developing a school's vision Korkmaz (2006, p.17-18) can be summarized as follows (with related citations).

- The vision of a school is the manifestation of its values, goals and aims (Whitaker &

Monte, 1994).
- A vision that reflects the needs and purposes of the community improves education, but also rebuilds relationships between the school and its publics (Mathews, 1996).
- The existence of a shared vision increases the effectiveness of a school.
- The vision's power lies in its ability to grab the attention of both those inside and those outside the organization and to focus that attention on a common dream (Nanus, 1992).

The resultant affect on the organization's health (p.19) can be complied as well (with related citations).

- A healthy organization is considered as a structure which continuously uses its ability to continue its life and overcome difficulties in the long run (Miles, 1969).
- The organizational health of a school is a useful sign of interpersonal relations among people in schools (teachers, students, managers and others).
- Healthy schools adapt themselves to the environment successfully and promote common values in their staff.
- In a healthy school technical, managerial, and institutional levels are in harmony, and the harmony between these three levels supports teaching and student learning (Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Hoy & Tarter 1997).

The results of the Korkmaz (2006) study found that teachers identified a significant relationship between a school's robust [his word] vision and organizational health (p.32). The benefits of knowing this can accrue to a school leader through his involvement in shaping his school's vision, because the vision creates the structure for organizational planning and thus outcomes. For without his direct participation and cooperation, teachers will lack a *compass* for which to develop plans. His study, therefore, was somewhat predictive of the outcome of our survey; in that teachers do place value in the school's vision and teachers will work toward fulfilling a school's clear vision.

Kantabutra's work (2005) is particular to the linkage between what he describes as vision-based leadership and school performance. He cites that vision-based leadership is associated with transformational leadership, which he says is widely regarded as the leadership style necessary for successful organizational change. As a result of his research, he developed a model (Figure 2) illustrating the pathways from the principal's vision through to school performance. From his research he states that, per the literature, vision-based leadership can have a positive effect on performance (p.130) and that a principal's vision should be brief, clear, abstract, challenging, future oriented, stable, and desirable.

Figure 1.
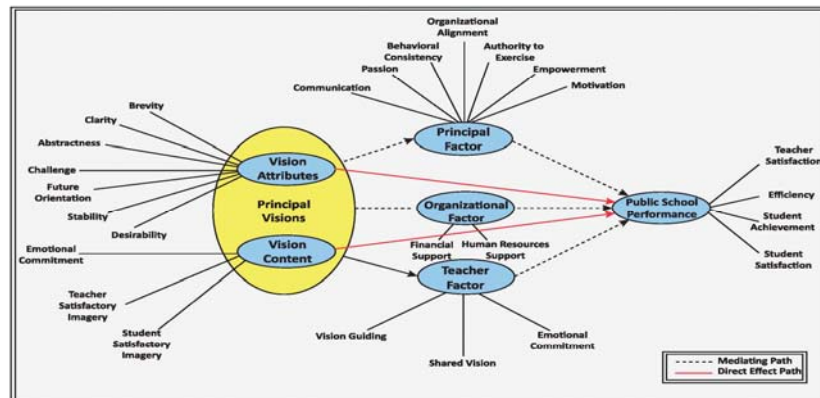
Also, the vision should serve to inspire teacher/student satisfaction, and school efficiency. As the illustration depicts, the pathway from the principal's vision to school outcomes passes through three intervening variables: the principal him/herself, the teachers, and the organizational setting. The implications from this model are clear: the principal should first understand him/herself, he/she should have a finger on the pulse of the faculty, and he/she should know of all organizational constraints within which he/she must operate. After all, the principal remains the major source of leadership influence. Awareness of these three internal and external variables will enable the principal to formulate a vision through which successful planning can occur. Plans made outside the parameters of the principal's ability or likes and dislikes; outside the working climate of the school (teacher variables), and outside the district's directions/policies, cannot be successful. Plans should be congruent within the framework of the leader, the followers, and the organizational setting. Effective principals view planning as a means to understand both the nature and causes of school success.

In order to assess this complicated issue, two questions were included in the survey related to school vision:

- A principal's clear articulation of his/her school's vision gives teachers a sense of the principal's values and beliefs and serves as a guide for teachers which enables teachers to develop plans and strategies for achieving the school's goals.
- Teachers are ambivalent regarding their principal's vision for the school.

Methodology

During the fall of 2013, faculty at Georgia Regents University compiled the results of the Purpose of Public Education Survey (Page & Author, 2013) designed to assess the beliefs of school professionals. This survey, previously used with teacher education students and College of Education faculty from around the United States, was given to teachers (classroom and

SPED), administrators, counselors, and paraprofessionals working in a six county region of eastern Georgia.

The Purpose of Public Education Survey, philosophically grounded in the work of Gutek (2004), is structured to allow respondents the freedom to investigate their own beliefs in relation to common educational philosophies (essentialism, perennialism, progressivism, and critical theory) along with beliefs related to special education, school counseling, school leadership, and health and physical education. The specific number of questions can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 2.
Statement Distribution

Statement Topic	Number of Statements
Essentialism	5
Perennialism	6
Progressivism	6
Critical Theory	6
School Counseling	6
Special Education	6
Health and Physical Education	6
School Leadership/Administration	7

Reliability and Validity

This was the sixty iteration of this survey, however, the first using the items related to school counseling, special education, health/physical education and school leadership. The survey had great internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .914 which is well higher than the .7 recommended by Pallant (2009).

Table 1
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.907	.914	50

Because there weren't any particular constructs being tested, the issue of validity was less important. However, content validity was determined to be acceptable due to the collaborative nature of the instrument construction. In a previous use of the instrument (with university faculty), there were efforts made to ensure validity beyond content validity, will also be addressed through convergent validity and discriminant validity. In order to show both of these forms of validity, a series of correlations were conducted to show the relationships between similar subjects. These different relationships are found in Table 1. An argument could be made

that a confirmatory factor analysis would be an appropriate analytical procedure to validity. However, because the instrument was not designed to confirm any particular construct, a confirmatory factor analysis would not be suitable. In addition, convergent and discriminant validity was not used in this case because of the varied nature of the respondents. With items relating to issues that had different meanings across grade levels (i.e., Getting a job and going to college is a purpose of public education), responses would be varied based on purpose of the school.

Table 2
Convergent and Discriminant Validity Correlation Matrix

		Promoting future economic success is one of the main reasons that we have public education.	Getting a job and/or going to college is one main reason for public education.	One main purpose of public education is to promote the American Dream.	Fostering patriotism is a primary purpose of public education.	Promoting the continuance of the cultural values of the United States is one of the main reasons for having a public education system.	A primary purpose of public education is to teach the content that is traditionally taught in schools.	One main purpose of public education is to promote social equality in society.	A main reason for public education is to expose the conditions of domination present in society.
Economic Success	Pearson Correlation	1	.629**	.455**	.361**	.360**	.289**	.067	-.143**
Getting a job/college	Pearson Correlation	*	1	.356**	.257**	.249**	.348**	.155**	-.092*
American Dream	Pearson Correlation	.455**	.356**	1	.470**	.549**	.288**	.030	-.102**
Patriotism	Pearson Correlation	.361**	.257**	.470**	1	.569** .5	.381**	-.108**	-.118**
Continuing Cultural Values	Pearson Correlation	.360**	.249**	.549**	.569**	1	.357**	-.027	-.075*
Traditional Content	Pearson Correlation	.289**	.348**	.288**	.381**	.357**	1	-.046	-.084*
Social Equality	Pearson Correlation	.067	.155**	.030	-.108**	-.027	-.046	1	.398**
Expose Domination	Pearson Correlation	-.143**	-.092*	-.102**	-.118**	-.075*	-.084*	.398**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Respondents

The survey was distributed to 4,700 school professionals. Because of the various difficulties of sending the survey to multiple districts, all surveys were sent to the principal of the school first to be distributed to the faculty, staff and administration. Of the responses, 539 individuals answered every question (11.46% return rate); while the overall response rate was low in relation to the number of persons provided a survey, it did fall within the range of an acceptable response rate (Nulty, 2008).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics follow from the survey questions by teachers and administrators specific to vision.

Table 3
Teacher Responses

	N	Range	Mean	SD
A principal's clear articulation of his/her school's vision gives teachers a sense of the principal's values and beliefs and serves as a guide for teachers which enables teachers to develop plans and strategies for achieving the school's goals.	502	1 – 6	5.23	.735
Teachers are ambivalent regarding their principal's vision for the school.	498	1 – 6	3.34	1.377

Table 4
Principal Responses

	N	Range	Mean	SD
A principal's clear articulation of his/her school's vision gives teachers a sense of the principal's values and beliefs and serves as a guide for teachers which enables teachers to develop plans and strategies for achieving the school's goals.	41	4 – 6	5.22	.475
Teachers are ambivalent regarding their principal's vision for the school.	41	2 – 5	3.22	1.061

The survey used a Likert scale from 1 through 6, with 1 indicating the lowest value, or belief, and 6 the highest. What is noticeable right away is the near exactness of the means between both groups for the responses to the first question. Although teacher responses ranged from the lowest to the highest on the Likert scale, the low standard deviation indicates teacher responses clustered close to the mean. Likewise, the principal responses shared the same level of consideration; perhaps even more so.

It is significant that the principals did not score the first question below a 4, and the mean score was nearly identical to the teachers. Even more noticeable is the lower standard deviation for the principal responses representing a more consistent commitment (of feeling) toward the value of a school's vision.

The second question is a mirror opposite of the first. Answers to the second question can serve to validate the first by assessing the strength of the beliefs of both parties to the first question. If the mean score for the answers to the first question did signify a strong commitment by the parties, the mean score for the second question should be lower than the first. The mean scores for both groups of responses to the second question were lower, and markedly close to one another, which leads to the conclusion that both groups do indeed feel strongly about the value of the school's vision as articulated by the principal. Now, what can we discern from this data? In general, it is the position of the authors that a school's vision *does* matter to the faculty, and therefore it is incumbent upon the principal to "live" the vision in his/her day to day duties of running the building and in particular in the role of instructional leader. After all, creating conditions under which individual variables combine to reach critical mass in schools fits the job role of the principal.

Correlations

In addition, it is important to realize the beliefs that make up the importance of the vision of the principal. While there were 23 variables related to philosophies and belief systems, only two had a strong correlation regarding vision.

This correlation matrix gives evidence that teachers do have a well-developed foundation for understanding the vision of the school. Because teacher's believe that knowledge is actively constructed and multiple sources of information are important, it suggests that professional educators have a deep and complex construction regarding the purpose of education. It is just a small leap to connect this belief with a deep and rich understanding of their own educational systems, schools and ultimately the vision of their school.

Table 4
Key Correlations

		A principal's clear articulation of his/her school's vision gives teachers a sense of the principal's values and beliefs and serves as a guide for teachers which enables teachers to develop plans and strategies for achieving the school's goals.	The active construction of knowledge is a primary purpose of public education.	Being able to use multiple sources of information to make decisions is a main goal of public education.
A principal's clear articulation of his/her school's vision gives teachers a sense of the principal's values and beliefs and serves as a guide for teachers which enables teachers to develop plans and strategies for achieving the school's goals.	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	502		
The active construction of knowledge is a primary purpose of public education.	Pearson Correlation	.277**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	497	515	
Being able to use multiple sources of information to make decisions is a main goal of public education.	Pearson Correlation	.304**	.622**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	496	512	515

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The tenor of the question about the principal's clear articulation of the school's vision is fitting of further analysis. The phrase, "…gives teachers a sense of the principal's values and beliefs…"

lends itself to concluding that teachers wish to know the attitude of the principal toward the school in general, and by inference his opinion of their place within the school. This shows this use of multiple avenues of information. Understanding what the administrator truly believes, manifested by his words and in his actions, and lends an air of certainty to the school's climate. The phrase,"… [clear articulation] serves as a guide for teachers which enables teachers to develop plans and strategies for achieving the school's goals" is even more compelling. If the teachers responding to our survey feel as though their understanding of the principal's values and beliefs, through his vision, add to their ability to plan for reaching the school's goals, then isn't it only a matter of the principal designing/ articulating a vision for his school wherein he creates an image of academic success for all? Maybe creating a vision of a *tomorrow* for his school in which specific goals can be laid out, goals which the teachers will accept as their own and strive toward reaching, is an essential element to effective school administration that is not being fully realized by school leaders. Creating a school's vision should be a well thought out process involving more than just a simple alignment with the district's vision. A school's vision should be particular to the school's environment and its constituents and should be developed at a minimum with input from the school's faculty.

Conclusion

The scope of this paper is not to include particular leadership styles as better, or best, for school administrators. But in the opinion of the authors of this paper it is important for school leaders to understand that current writings in educational leadership favor the transformational style of leadership. Without effective transformational leaders most goals of educational improvement are difficult to achieve. Transformational leaders demonstrate the following characteristics (Hughes, Ginnett & Curphy, 2012):

- Instills pride in others
- Displays power and confidence
- Makes personal sacrifices or champions new possibilities
- Considers the ethical and moral consequences of decisions
- Articulates a compelling vision of the future
- Sets challenging standards
- Treats followers as individuals, and
- Helps followers understand the problems they face

Citing Bass, 1985, these authors write "Transformational leaders are believed to be more successful at driving organizational change because of followers' heightened emotional levels and their willingness to work toward the accomplishment of the leader's vision" (p.590). Perhaps our survey merely brought out the desire in teachers to rather follow a leader with transformational characteristics and a leader who articulates a clear, compelling, or robust, vision outwardly displays a characteristic which may mean he/she possesses the other transformational characteristics, and a transformational leader is a more desirable type to follow. Certainly, a major part of being an outstanding leader rests in cultivating leadership in others. And too, perhaps, the principals responding to our survey also know of the importance of a clear vision, whether they display, or not, the other transformational characteristics. Perhaps the results of our

study shows that teachers would really rather follow a leader with a transformational style and school leaders would really rather be transformational leaders and that the school's actual vision statement is secondary to these other conditions. It could be that teachers and principals wish for a clearer vision for their particular schools, and not a vision crafted long ago and around something the district foisted upon them – a vision about which neither the teachers nor the principal feel a connection. But we will leave these questions for further study.

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