

1992


A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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Adams, Janie M., "A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay" (1992). *Graduate Research Papers*. 254.

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Some of the articles and books that are referred to in the body of this paper are written by African-Americans about the plight of our African-American children in yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's schools. In writing this paper I address some basic needs for all children. Yet of most pressing concern to me are the African-American student and other students of color. Brown versus Topeka, Kansas was in 1954, but in the eyes of many African-Americans separate but equal is alive and well. With the prospect of a voucher system looming on the horizon it is being driven home even harder. This paper is an attempt to provide information about these pressing issues from the viewpoint of one who is involved with the educational system, as a parent of six young African-American males, and as one who has lived through the Euro-centric educational fallacy. I am someone who sees the need for change as the African-American nuclear family begins to crumble under the oppression of the so called majority class.

**A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY
SCHOOLS**

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Janie M. Jones Adams

December 1992

This Research Paper by: Janie M. Jones-Adams

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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

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All things are possible once enough human beings realize that the whole of the human future is at stake.

Author Unknown

Some of the articles and books that are referred to in the body of this paper are written by African-Americans about the plight of our African-American children in yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's schools. In writing this paper I address some basic needs for all children. Yet of most pressing concern to me are the African-American student and other students of color.

Brown versus Topeka, Kansas was in 1954, but in the eyes of many African-Americans separate but equal is alive and well. With the prospect of a voucher system looming on the horizon it is being driven home even harder.

This paper is an attempt to provide information about these pressing issues from the viewpoint of one who is involved with the educational system, as a parent of six young African-American males, and as one who has lived through the Euro-centric educational fallacy. I am someone who sees the need for change as the African-American nuclear family begins to crumble under the oppression of the so called majority class.

There are many things that I believe about quality education. I've seen them in action at many schools where I've been. There are also some things that are going on that are hurting our students. Those things need to be stopped!!! I have developed the following belief statements that I believe to be important:

-I believe all children deserve the best education that we can provide for them.

-I believe if you have high expectations for your students they will achieve.

-I believe that all children should be taught by a diverse educational staff, because that is what reflects our real world.

-I believe we should celebrate our cultural and physical diversity, be accepting of strengths and weaknesses that are inherent in each of us.

-I believe that if any changes are to occur, they must begin with the individual and branch out. Staff reaching out to the students to understand their vantage point and not judge.

-I believe that there are other forms of assessments that are valid, and standardized test scores should not be the only measure to show growth in our students.

Addressing belief number one of my paper, I believe all children deserve the best education that we can provide for them. In the various jobs that I've held in a number of neighboring districts I have seen in action the inequality of the educational system. Jonathan Kozol says it best in Savage Inequalities (1991), "There is a plea for fairness and decency in the way we pay for the education of all children in this country, an argument for saving at least some of them from destruction and despair." (p. 126) Their fates are bound up in ours; to continue to neglect them is, as Kozol puts it, "is to soil them needlessly." (p. 134) In the two districts I have most recently worked this situation is very clear. There are certain schools in certain parts of these communities that are almost totally forgotten when it comes to equitable funding. These students require

more of an experience base since most of them come into our schools not equipped to handle the academic rigors we put before them. Kozol takes us into the cities of East St. Louis, New York, Chicago, Washington, DC., San Antonio and Camden, New Jersey. We do not have to be that far reaching. The Waterloo-Cedar Falls area holds the same kinds of situations, but not to these extremes.

Marva Collins, nationally known educator and founder of the West Side Prep School in Chicago, shared her views on my first belief statement. In her books, Marva Collins' Way: Returning to Excellence in Education (1982) and Ordinary Children. Extraordinary Teacher (1992), she was appalled at the miseducation that she saw going on in the public school system of Chicago. She was ostracized because her students were achieving well above their counterparts. Marva was accused of teaching to the test, falsifying test scores and the like. She told her students, "None of you have ever failed, but the schools have failed you!" (p. 21). We have failed our students because we have a tendency to lump them into one category and label them as failures without really trying to teach them to succeed. This can be verified by the number of behavior referrals, the drop-out ratio, and students in special education rooms that have been labeled ADD, BD, MD.

I believe if you have high expectations for your students they will achieve. This is my second belief statement. I believe it because I have used it in my classrooms and it has succeeded. Before ever reading Mrs. Collins' books I had practiced the belief that children will achieve to a level

that you expect them to. Set goals high but attainable for each student within the room. The achievement level will be different for each child, for there are no two children that are alike. In her book, Marva's approach was to build self-reliance and make them responsible for their learning. She challenged them to challenge themselves and never accept or let them accept mediocre work. As a teacher these were the words that I lived by and now in the role of administrator I find this even more crucial. As the building leader I set the climate for high expectations in the school. I model the behaviors that I ask my staff to exhibit to their students. For I not only have students in my charge but also the staff of the building. From certified personnel to the classified, I must elicit the same kinds of responses that I expected from my students. As a classroom teacher I expected a certain type of behavior from my students. Now on a larger scale I expect my staff to maintain a level of high professionalism and enthusiasm for the career choice they have made because they are dealing with our future. I must nurture and cultivate the next crop of leaders from within the teacher ranks, just as they are planting the seeds for our next generation of teachers.

Jonathan Kozol in Savage Inequalities (1991) gives us examples of teachers that have seemingly worked miracles with underprivileged, low achieving students within their schools. These are some of the poorest schools in our country, yet these students succeed because their teachers set high expectations for them and are willing to do that extra for the good

of the student and their teaching profession. They take the same risk that they challenge their students to take.

Third, I believe that all children should be taught by a diverse educational staff, because that is what reflects our real world. Children of color need role models to pattern their lives after if they are to succeed. The majority race children need to see that people of color can do more than play football, basketball, baseball, or sing and dance. They need to know that we have made major contributions to the formation of our country in the past, in the present, and we continue to make contributions for the future. We have never been a mono-ethnic world! It has only been in recent years that our (people of color) accomplishments have ever been mentioned. As an African-American in my last graduate year, I have only had one instructor of color. If it had not been for the strong family ties and my inner drive, this could have had an adverse effect on me as it does on children with negative self-concepts.

In The Mis-Education of the Negro, by Carter G. Woodson (1933), he states that:

The educated Negroes of this time had the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools, Negroes were taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin, and the Teuton and to despise the African." (p. 1)

After almost 60 years since the first printing of Woodson's book this thought process is still quite prevalent among some of our learned African-American brothers and sisters. With a diverse teaching force more than one viewpoint of the world could be imparted to our children and learned

African-Americans along with other ethnic groups could be taught to be proud of their ancestry also.

Fourth, I believe we should celebrate our cultural and physical diversity. I know for a fact that the latter was brought home to me more when I taught in a district where I had students with hearing impairments in my classroom. I later taught in a school that had children of varying mental as well as physical disabilities at all levels of learning with total to partial inclusion into the regular classroom. For some of the students this was the best situation that they could have been introduced to. For others, least restrictive added to their personal confusion and the confusion of the educator, who was not trained in special education, and restricted the pursuit of the educational process for the other students and their parents. This fear and concern was very high in our building. The staff would not deny any child a right to education, but did not want to neglect the regular education student because of understaffing for a weighted student.

In the celebration of cultural diversity within the classroom, it is very important that each student sees themselves as a worthwhile part of the school community. This can only be accomplished if the educator sees them as unique individuals with something of importance that shows who and what they are. It should be no longer said by the educator that they do not see colors when they look around their rooms. If it is said, then they are color blind. Those colors must be addressed for the beauty that they add to our world. We are no longer considered a melting pot, but are now referred to as a mosaic painting. Each ethnic group that makes up

these United States adds their grand and glorious past, present, and future to what we call the United States of America. We are a better human race because of these cultural differences. This causes our children to find pride in their ancestors and in themselves.

Fifth, I believe that if any changes are to occur they must begin with the individual. Before you can affect change on others you first must change the way you, yourself, think. This change must be one of inside out and not just on the surface. In other words, no lip service, walk your talk. In all of my graduate classes it has been repeated over and over that change takes time. In order for an administrator to affect change on their school community it will require 3-5 years. If that is the case then my present district is doomed to failure. There are only a very few administrators in the district that have been in their particular building for that length of time. With such constant change of leadership and personal philosophies, the concerns of the African-American students are lost in the paper shuffling. Parents have to try to build new lines of trust and communication with the new leadership. In Instructional Leadership: How Principals Make a Difference, by Smith and Andrews (1989) it is stated, "the central role of the principal has been viewed as building manager, administrator, politician, change agent, boundary spanner, and instructional leader" (p. 1). Several other authors have said that principals, as the instructional leaders are accountable for the academic achievement of students (Schlechty, 1990; Pierson, 1989; Schön, 1983). The effective schools studies reflect direct responsibility for improving

instruction and learning rests in the hands of the school principals. Using this as one premise it would seem to make sense if strong competent African-Americans were placed in the role of principal in those schools where there are large percentages of African-American students achievement would improve. They could be placed there as role models, and also to be the instructional leaders for the entire school community. "Referent power, motivation, and high self-esteem strongly influence a principal's desire to change behavior and practice new skills that will reinforce those changes over time" (Smith and Andrews, 1989, p. 72). This in return reflects on the teaching staff and impacts their teaching methods which will be reflected in the academic behavior of the students. I believe that all students can learn, but their learning capabilities are dependent on the instructional strategies used by the school staff. Strategies used to teach the grandparents and parents of today's students are not viable with the school demographics of the 21st century.

Sixth, I believe that there are other forms of student assessment and that standardized test scores should not be the only measure to show growth in our students. The following statement was taken from Testing African-American Students written by Asa G. Hilliard III (1991):

This questionable development seems to have spawned and fostered the notion that the salvation of our nation and our schools requires that we concentrate on testing school children rather than on teaching them; on blaming and embarrassing school children for low test scores instead of teaching and nourishing them; on decapitating prospective teachers professionally by holding them up to public ridicule and scorn, before they can ever begin their teaching careers, because of their test scores rather than encouraging them and teaching them how to teach children. (p. 35)

An example of this is the local paper printing the test scores of the schools in the district and the comparison that is made between neighboring school districts. Of what help is this? Does it help us change our curriculum or teaching strategies to better meet the needs of our students? Do these tests measure what we are looking for or are they just to reinforce the disparity between the haves and have nots? I, as principal, must help educate teachers, parents, students, and the community at large that testing has its merits for helping us in education see where we must change teaching techniques, bolster areas of weaknesses, commend areas of strength and utilize this information for the benefit of the students. I, as an instructional leader, must also help my staff use other forms of assessment to show growth in our students and not depend solely on the standardized tests.

Caucasian students that are in teacher training programs are not adequately prepared to deal with the plethora of unique challenges that will present themselves when working with students of color. Since many will not be afforded the choice of deciding whether they will teach in the suburbs or in inner city schools with large numbers of students of color they must be capable of using effective teaching and testing (alternative assessment practices) strategies for students of color. (I am refraining from using the word minorities because of the last census. The minority is increasingly becoming the majority and by the year 2025 it will be a reality.) Alice M. Scales (cited in Hilliard, 1991) address alternatives to standardized testing. In, Effective Strategies for Teaching Minority

Students (Hill, 1989), some alternatives for standardized testing are addressed and the author gives a multitude of ideas to help the new and practicing teacher of minority students.

During the course of my graduate years I have been confused and concerned at the information that has been imparted to me by my professors. The confusion comes from what I witness out in the field from practicing administrators. Events and situations that have been discussed at length in my classes are not handled at all as I thought they would have been. Granted each particular circumstance has to be judged on its own merit and it is also a matter of the practitioner's style of leadership. An example of such a problem dealing with supervision and evaluation occurred at my previous school with a teacher who has been on staff at that building for 18 years. During the last five years I was there a large number of parents requested their students not be placed in her class. As a substitute teacher I was in her room quite often and her lesson plans were very sparse and/or incomplete. She refused to have a student with special needs in her room and when a student of color is placed in her room she tends to isolate them and label them as a learning and behavior problem. This I know from first hand experience because my son was placed in her class. She does not work well with her peers and conversation will most likely stop when she enters the room. She is very religious and when she is invited into conversation she tries hard to convert the staff. The principal has received calls every year about the amount of homework, worksheets, and small amount of modeling time she

does with her students when new materials are presented in class. Each year this teacher receives a more than favorable evaluation and none of the other issues are brought up for discussion. For me a red flag had gone up when I was serving as a substitute for her class, yet the building administrator turned a deaf ear. Why does she sit with a class of 18 when the other three sections have 24-26 students? Why evaluate if that is not used to address those concerns that have been brought forward. As principal it is my duty to help this teacher in a non-threatening manner, move forward to become the best that she can be for her benefit and also for those students that fall under her charge.

My second concern is about the evaluations themselves. Of what purpose are they? I was under the impression as a staff person they were to be used to help improve teaching abilities. Never once did any of my principals use them that way. In 13 years as a teacher I know I had not attained "Master Teacher" status and as a young teacher there were probably many things I could have worked on to improve. Never once were any of the deficits addressed or made known to me. There were some instances when I received an excellent evaluation and was never observed by my administrator. I understand that times can get a little harried in the front office, but for an entire year? As the administrator I will be very conscious of the evaluation process and have a working relationship with my staff that will encourage them to have me in their rooms often to critique their work for growth and extension.

In my present position I have a budget that I must work within. It becomes difficult to think about bringing groups in or having get acquainted functions if after 2 1/2 months you don't have a clue as to how much money there is to work with. After making sure that each room is staffed with the appropriate personnel it becomes of paramount importance what the financial situation of our building would be. Since, in the scheme of things, we as administrators look to the leadership of our superintendent for guidance in financial situations, we must not always look at things from the money standpoint, but also from the viewpoint of what is good for our students.

If it is true that good principals can make a difference, is it not also true that a good superintendent can make an even bigger difference to how a school district is perceived? We as building administrators look for leadership from the district and the board to set or overturn the cart of educational practices.

Teachers' perception of the school principal as an instructional leader is the most powerful determinant of teachers' satisfaction with their professional role (Schlechty, 1990; Smith and Andrews, 1989). Improving teacher perceptions of the principal as an instructional leader is essential to the reading and mathematics achievement of students, particularly among historically low-achieving students of color studies (Kunjufu, 1989; Hale-Benson, 1982; Rodriguez, 1990). Students from Laos, Cambodia, and other Eastern Asian countries score better because of the extra E.S.L. help they receive. Why shouldn't all students receive the help they need

without being labeled? Studies of teachers' perceptions of the principal as an instructional leader suggest that many practicing principals are instructional leaders. These studies also suggest, however, that many more principals fail to exhibit day-to-day instructional leadership behavior. If we are to improve the quality of schools, we must improve the professional practices of our school principals. (Andrews, 1985; Cawelti, 1984; Iannaccone and Jamgochian, 1985). It is my belief to do this it is crucial that we (a) understand the meaning of "instructional leadership"; (b) develop school administration programs that are designed to select and educate good principals, both female and male, who can perform such roles; (c) help our school districts develop selection processes that will identify new principals who have capabilities; and (d) implement supervision, evaluation and staff development models that will allow quality decisions to be made by school district official personnel concerning performance of their current corps of principals.

The heart of our work is to improve the professional practices of our school principals. By doing this we fulfill the obligation that good school principals must create good schools. By good schools we mean that we use our professional knowledge and skills to create conditions in which each and every child, regardless of sex, race, or SEC, can grow to their full potential and all children are given equitable opportunity to succeed in our society. As a professional in both the role of administrator and teacher I must be an integral part of the ongoing development of criteria that assures our teacher candidates have full awareness and competency in

human relations. Students need more than 3 semester hours so they may be immersed into the community, and particularly the African American community.

It is my thesis that school leaders, like business leaders, must come to an understanding that if America's schools are to meet the needs of the twenty-first century, they must be reinvented and not just restructured. It is not enough to try to fix the schools; they must be reconstituted in fundamental and radical ways.

Phillip C. Schlechty in Schools for the 21st Century: Leadership Imperatives For Educational Reform (1990) gives a definition for restructuring as a means to altering systems of rules, roles, and relationships so that schools can serve existing purpose more effectively or serve new purpose altogether:

Changing the structure of school--or any other organization--is no simple task. Since social structures are embedded in systems of meaning, value, belief, and knowledge; such systems comprise the culture of the school. In the business of school, as in other aspects of social life, it often seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same. (p. 6)

The future is ahead rather than in the past of our grandparents and parents. We must educate the children of today for their lives for tomorrow.

For me purpose shapes vision and vision shapes the structure of my purpose. As a youth and young adult I had long dreamed of being a teacher. Once that was attained and I had taught for a while I began looking for another avenue for me to help children, especially the African-

American students that I would come in contact with. I toyed with becoming a school counselor but changed my mind. The thought of becoming a principal was the furthest thing from my mind. Why? Until three years ago I felt that administrators had jobs that were easy and this was a way for them to get out of the classroom plus make more money. Later with a more mature outlook I decided I could do the job better than several of my previous principals and could create a climate of educational excellence with learning and fun being the prime goals.

There needs to be some relevance to what is being taught in our schools for our children. We are losing them by the thousands because they don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum they are forced to take. In the role as instructional leader I think the students and parents should have a say in what will get them ready for their lives in the twenty-first century. As adults we choose what we want to study; we choose areas of interest to us. This same principle can be applied for the students in our schools. Ask them what they will use that will be relevant for them in their adult lives.

Robert J. Marzano in A Different Kind of Classroom, Teaching with Dimensions of Learning, (1992) has six basic assumptions about learning that I agree with and plan to incorporate into my leadership style in my present position and later when I become a building principal. They are as follows:

1. Instruction must reflect the best of what we know about how learning occurs.
2. Learning involves a complex system of interactive processes that includes five types of thinking - the five dimensions of learning.
3. What we know about learning indicates that instruction focusing on large, interdisciplinary curricular themes is the most effective way to promote learning.
4. The K-12 curriculum should include explicit teaching of higher-level attitudes and perceptions and mental habits that facilitate learning.
5. A comprehensive approach to instruction includes at least two distinct types of instruction: one that is more teacher-directed and another that is more student-directed.
- *6. Assessment should focus on students' use of knowledge and complex reasoning rather than on their recall of low-level information.

(p. 32)

Number six is starred because it relates back to earlier in this paper when I posed the question as to our purpose for testing.

I see my role as principal as one of collaboration as well as leader. I want to help my staff be paradigm shifters and have ownership of our building vision, have them feel empowered to risk for the good of the student. I want them to remove themselves from their comfort zones and dream a dream into reality, to have the best school, with the best staff to make up our school community.

When all the research has been gathered and figures tabulated I know the most important key in educational reform will be effective leadership. Change will begin whenever I am in a position to recognize the need for change and have the capacity to conceptualize and articulate the nature of the change. Change can be most effectively implemented when those who are committed will do what is needed to support the changes, believe in, and understand that it is for the good of all. In my role as principal this task falls to me, but I must be willing to accept consensus and make it thoroughly known to the others that while they may not agree they must not sabotage the organization and must be willing to keep an open mind about the changes.

For change to be sustained--especially changes that are structural in nature--it is essential that those in positions of authority (superintendent) actively support (as opposed to passively tolerate) the change. This belief is based on what I've read and seen in action in the different districts I've worked in.

Keeping these points in mind, a book entitled In Praise of Followers, observes that the "skills, abilities, and attitudes it takes to be a good leader are strikingly similar to those required to be a good follower" (Kelley, 1988, p. 41). Since the superintendent is the leader of the district it is also my responsibility to be a quality follower just as I ask my staff to be followers with me.

When I chose to go into educational administration I chose elementary administration for several reasons. A few of these reasons can be found in Schools That Work:

1) What we learn in elementary school sets the foundation for a life of learning. 2) Elementary schools can be a place where, in addition to and beyond the mere memorization of facts, children learn to think, cooperate, and to be actively engaged. 3) It is the place where we can lay the foundation upon which democracy is built, a foundation of insight, creative, compassionate, happy and wise young people. In elementary schools--that work--the building of such a foundation is one job! This is the job that I willingly take on because these young people mean the world to me. (Wood, 1992, p. 17)

Healthy schools--healthy in body, mind, and spirit--do more than just raise test scores; they give us ideas about how we can improve our children's workplaces, and they provide the inspiration to get it done.

Healthy schools and classrooms exist today in our cities, suburbs, and rural areas. They are located in both wealthy and poor areas, serving African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans--all different types of children--in all areas of the country. These schools and their improvement plans are not a one size fits all. Rather they are models from which we can learn, each one offering educators something different. The point I make here is not to try to copy what we find out there, but to use

those ideas as they relate to our own individual school communities and custom fit our program for each building.

In closing there are two key points I want to emphasize. The first imperative is to have good leadership within the building and district. The entire climate of the school depends on how strong the building principal is. They must champion the cause of the best education and equitable education for all children. They must believe that all children can learn and that it is our job as educators to adjust to the needs of our students. A good leader must also champion the causes of the people that they work with. Support is two-fold and the staff must know, not just feel, that their principal sees value in the job they do and will support them when it is for the good of the students. The other part is that as a principal I must feel that I have the support of my staff and the parents of my students as well as the community.

Secondly, high expectations must be the prime directive in our schools; now, tomorrow, and for the future. If our children are to survive in a world that is constantly growing smaller and more technological, we must set our expectations high to help them develop into citizens of the world. In this, know that all levels of learning differ, but when expectations are set low students will only achieve at that level.

I believe and will practice the belief that all students can learn and I will be a good leader!

A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove. But, the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child.

Author Unknown, reprinted in
"Progressive Farmer"

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