A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
As a future school administrator, I have established what I feel are my personal beliefs or philosophies about how I might effectively minister or serve others. This reflective essay discusses two of those beliefs – the beliefs that effective communication, and the acquisition and utilization of organizational skills, are essential in any leadership role.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership,
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Jean M. Johnson
May 1997
This Research Paper by: Jean M. Johnson

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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Thomas J. Sergiovanni (n.d.), Lillian Radford Professor of Education and Administration at Trinity University, adequately and concisely defines the term "administration" in "The Wingspread Superintendents: A New Definition of Leadership." He says to administer is "to serve." "Taking this role seriously places serving ideas, serving convictions, serving teachers, serving others who work to make ideas and ideals real, and serving students and parents at the heart of the work of school administration." (p. 5)

As a future school administrator, I have established what I feel are my personal beliefs or philosophies about how I might effectively minister or serve others. This reflective essay discusses two of those beliefs - the beliefs that effective communication and the acquisition and utilization of organizational skills are essential in any leadership role.

Equally important as the establishment of a personal philosophy is the development of a knowledge base in such areas as instructional strategies, technology, curriculum, educational legal environment, and school/community relations. These subjects of thought are also discussed in this essay.

Strategic leadership skills are so critical now with our ever changing educational system. They take on an importance of their own for a practicing administrator. These skills are noted and briefly defined in this paper as well.

Finally, I share my personal visions for administrative practice. These visions encompass students, teachers, and the community along with the administrator so that together we all can ensure that what we have to offer and what we have to give to society is nothing but the best.
Personal Characteristics

Leadership

School administrators are expected to provide leadership in many important educational endeavors. These endeavors include guiding instruction, goal setting, implementing curricular changes, organizational planning, and evaluating personnel as well as managing transportation, maintenance, and food service activities. What is leadership and how might one become an effective leader in each of these areas?

According to Guthrie and Reed (Educational Administration and Policy: Effective Leadership for American Education, 1991), leadership is "that quality which enables an individual within a given setting to establish an organizational vision to motivate and inspire others to embrace that vision and achieve and maintain organizational and individual goals" (p. 232).

Communication

Accomplishing such a complex and awesome task requires administrators to possess a wide range of traits. One such trait is that of an effective communicator. An administrator who communicates effectively can articulate his/her vision to parents, staff, school district, and the larger community. In the book Instructional Leadership: How Principals Make a Difference, this communication of vision is described as "purposing" which is defined as the "process of emphasizing selective attention and modeling important goals and behaviors in such a manner that it signals others of what is valued in the school" (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p.16 ). Everyone certainly needs to realize and understand the purpose in what they do.

Effective communication is not only a crucial factor in the articulation of a vision but is also a factor in situational conflicts. The component of communication that
is particularly important in conflict situations is active listening. The ability to see other points of view by listening and by making an effort to understand them are the essence of respect, a trait that is extremely crucial when one is in a leadership position. Keeping an open mind, which is necessary for actively listening, and clearly communicating one's thoughts and ideas can be helpful in developing a sound and trusting relationship with all staff.

Another benefit from active listening is that of learning. One can learn a great deal from other people if one listens and learns to value a nurtured dialogue with others (within the organizational structure as well as with other sectors in the community). This is what collaborative leadership is all about. Working and leading collaboratively with others in problem solving and decision making endeavors often times leads to greater creativity and greater productivity among individuals. A sense of ownership resulting from collaborative efforts may lead to a stronger commitment to follow through on the decisions that have been made (See Figure 1.).

One does not just communicate with words but one also communicates with feelings and attitudes. I believe another valuable trait found in effective leaders is that of enthusiasm. Dale Carnegie said, "A person can accomplish almost anything for which he has unlimited enthusiasm" (Siemens, n.d., p. 1). Emerson said, "Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm" (Siemens, n.d., p. 1). Certainly an enthusiastic leader will inspire and motivate others to embrace an organization's vision and to achieve the goals needed to reach that vision.

Indirectly related to communication and every bit as important, an effective leader must be organized and must know how to manage his/her time. Prioritizing,
delegating, balancing, scheduling (one's priorities), and evaluating are key components of effective time management. Covey (1989), in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, shares a weekly worksheet used for managing one's time (See Figure 2.). The worksheet includes a review of one's role/roles and goals for the week so that a leader's mission and vision is always in the forefront of his/her mind.

**Reflective Leader**

Finally, an effective leader is reflective. This humanistic trait requires one to think and ponder and carefully consider one's thoughts and actions as well as the thoughts and actions of others. Ideally some time for reflection should be built into everyone's day - perhaps at the end of a busy and productive day.

Rolfe Kerr's personal creed that appears in Covey's book (1989), *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, so appropriately summarizes my values, my philosophy as an individual and as a future educational leader. His creed emphasizes some of the very traits I discuss in this essay:

Succeed at home first.
Seek and merit divine help.
Never compromise with honesty.
Remember the people involved.
Hear both sides before judging.
Obtain counsel of others.
Defend those who are absent.
Be sincere yet decisive.
Develop one new proficiency a year.
Plan tomorrow's work today.
Hustle while you wait.
Maintain a positive attitude.
Keep a sense of humor.
Be orderly in person and in work.

Do not fear mistakes - fear only the absence of creative, constructive, and corrective responses to those mistakes.
Facilitate the success of subordinates.
Listen twice as much as you speak.
Concentrate all abilities and efforts on the task at hand, not worrying about the next job or promotion. (p. 106-107)

Knowledge and Skills

The overwhelming task of educating today's youth requires an enormous amount of knowledge, skill, and wisdom - not just of teachers but also of the educational administrator. According to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, there are seven areas in which administrators should be knowledgeable (Donmoyer, Imber, Scheurich, 1995):

1. Societal and cultural influences on schooling
2. Teaching and learning processes and school improvement
3. Organizational theory
4. Methodologies of organizational studies and policy analysis
5. Leadership and management processes and functions
6. Policy studies and politics of education
7. Moral and ethical dimensions of schooling

While each of these areas are important, one must remember that what one knows in these areas may not pertain to every administrative situation. I prefer to take a more realistic and practical view of what an administrator's knowledge base should be based on what I have learned through the course work of this master's program in educational administration and on my practicum experiences. The five areas I feel administrators should be knowledgeable in are:

1. Instructional strategies
2. Curriculum
3. Technology
4. Educational legal issues

5. School/community relations

Thinking back to the purpose of education, i.e., helping all students reach their full potential so that they can become productive individuals and able to compete in a diverse, global society, the importance of knowing just how to maximize the potential of our students becomes an extremely important question to ponder. With such diversity in the school population, this question becomes even more complex.

**Instructional Strategies**

As a prerequisite to learning, one must understand how one thinks. Once we understand the different ways in which students think, we can then begin to help them develop their full potential. Understanding and using the Dimensions of Learning Model, developed by Marzano and Pinkering (1992) and discussed in *A Different Kind of Classroom: Teaching with Dimensions of Learning*, will help one to focus on authentic student learning by altering the current instructional paradigm to reflect what is now known about how children learn. The Multiple Intelligence Theory, which was developed by Gardner (1993), offers yet another framework for understanding cognitive diversity in students. He proposes that people use at least seven relatively autonomous intellectual capacities, each with its own mode of thinking, to approach problems and create products. In applying Gardner's ideas, students discover diverse areas of strength and apply numerous intelligences to classroom work. Behavior problems are minimized, self-concept is enhanced, and cooperation and leadership skills are developed. Most importantly, students' love of learning increases. What better way can one maximize the potential in students? Understanding and utilizing instructional strategies such as
the Dimensions of Learning Model and the Multiple Intelligence Theory is the key to unlocking the potential in all students.

Curriculum

If the purpose of educating students is to be realized, understanding curriculum issues is also vitally important. One issue of extreme importance is that of curriculum coherency. In other words, what students learn must have meaning for them. Students must be able to see the "big picture." What is taught to students and the learning experiences they are engaged in must be relevant and pertinent to them. Numerous strategies that can be used to achieve the goal of curriculum coherency are discussed in Toward A Coherent Curriculum (1995). These strategies suggest that curriculum must be holistic, integrative, authentic, and student directed. There is more emphasis on depth of learning rather than in breadth of knowledge. Students are seen as active learners, creative thinkers, and problem solvers. There are clear, worthy performance tasks and requirements so that each student knows "where s/he is going." The administrator has the responsibility of seeing to it that what is being taught in his/her school has meaning for all students. Knowledge of how that can be achieved is certainly important (for the administrator).

Technology

The area of technology is one that is quite exciting as it is ever changing and its potential in educating our students needs to be realized by school administrators. Technology can provide and create a multitude of opportunities for students - opportunities to communicate, create, discover, think, interact, problem solve, work cooperatively, explore and experiment, make choices, and reflect.
Technology can provide opportunities for powerful learning, for personalized learning, and for successful learning for students. In essence, technology can empower them, giving them skills for lifelong learning. Perhaps the most important benefit to students is that technology makes them aware that they are a part of a global community allowing them to connect with others around the world. Technology can empower teachers and administrators in many of the same ways as it empowers students. Teachers and administrators have the potential to show students that there are other ways to learn and to interact and that way is through technology. We must all embrace the power of technology as our world continues to undergo many changes. We need to be ready for those changes and accept the challenges that change has to offer.

Legal Issues

Administrators must be knowledgeable in yet another area where changes can occur quite frequently - legal issues in education. A general knowledge of teachers' rights, students' rights, school sanctions, equal educational opportunities, liability issues, and state codes are critical when dealing with the every day happenings within the school setting. Knowing and understanding board policy and procedural issues within one's school district is also critical to the administrator, keeping in mind that laws and policies do change. Staying current on legal issues and board policies and procedures will ensure that uniformity and fairness exists within one's school district.
School and Community

Finally, knowing the importance of and maintaining a positive relationship with the community will benefit both the students as well as the various businesses and organizations within one's community. Geiger (1995), then president of the National Education Association (NEA), was quoted as saying:

We need to build learning communities within schools. We need to reach out to parents and citizens in new and creative ways to form broader education coalitions. We need partners, we need parents, we need families, we need community members, we need civic activists, and we need business people to join with us in our crusade to raise the quality of education for all children. Public schools are, after all, community schools. When schools succeed, the entire community benefits. When schools succeed, economic prospects brighten. When schools succeed, the nation wins. (p.2)

It is by realizing this importance of community involvement, of community expertise, of positive community relations through school/community partnerships, service learning projects, tech prep, school to work programs, and mentorships that administrators can begin to fulfill the purpose of education as stated previously. Educating our student population must fall on everyone's shoulders. It must be a community wide effort if we are to succeed in preparing students for the future.

Strategic Leadership Skills

Along with this knowledge base, an administrator must possess an array of skills in order to be an effective leader. Communication skills, active listening skills, and organizational skills have been previously mentioned and discussed and the importance of each has been noted. I would also like to discuss the skills of strategic leadership. Tom Payzant (n.d.), Superintendent of San Diego Unified School District, describes twelve skills of a strategic leader in the videotape entitled Leadership in Education for the 21st Century. To summarize Mr. Payzant, he
suggests that a strategic leader is visionary and that s/he must have a sense of what is and then begin to establish goals for the future. A strategic leader is also daring and willing to take risks and able to deal with ambiguity. A strategic leader is motivating, ethical, and trustworthy and models those behaviors for others. A strategic leader is intuitive, going beyond data and anticipating consequences. A strategic leader is a creative problem solver who uses creativity to come up with and solve different scenarios. A strategic leader is a strategic planner who starts with a vision and then develops specific goals and objectives with an action plan and an evaluation procedure. A strategic leader is a team builder, sharing decision making and valuing other people's experiences. A strategic leader is an evaluator, obtaining specific data and making judgments pertaining to that data. A strategic leader is a communicator. S/he can speak well, write well, listen well and expresses herself/himself clearly and concisely. Finally, a strategic leader is a lifelong learner and teacher, reaching outside the field of education and being aware of the "big picture." These skills are essential in order to lead effectively in a continually changing environment.

Personal Professional Vision for Administrative Practice

I envision myself as a strong instructional leader helping educators truly focus on the education of students and helping them to develop their full potential both in school and beyond. There are numerous ways this can be accomplished:

1. By personalizing instruction to meet individual student needs and ability levels.
2. By engaging the minds of students in meaningful ways such that they become the constructors of their own learning.
4. By focusing on realistic, authentic tasks.

5. By linking new content to something students already know and extend and refine what they know.

6. By fostering positive attitudes and perceptions about learning.

7. By creating a learning environment in which all students will be successful learners.


In order to help educators focus on these eight points, they must be given the appropriate staff development/professional growth opportunities that will enable them to address these objectives. In addition to staff development/professional growth opportunities, offering educators opportunities to visit other schools, other classrooms, and with other teachers will enable them to see first hand how effective new teaching strategies can be in helping students find success in school.

I also envision myself as a collaborative leader encouraging creative cooperation among teachers, parents, community leaders, and neighborhood organizations and institutions so that we all can better prepare students for the future. The community must understand that schools have only part of the responsibility of educating the youth of today. After all, learning does not just take place within the four walls of a school room. By taking students into the community and bringing the community to its students, knowledge will be shared, problems will be solved, collaborative decisions can be made and most importantly, all involved can be empowered.

So very, very critical in the collaborative process is open and frequent communication. Even though I have already spoken of its importance earlier, it is
certainly worth mentioning once again. It is through effective communication and collaboration that one can instill a sense of ownership and commitment (of individuals) so that shared goals will successfully be accomplished (See Figure 1.).

I envision myself as a competent, effective, and fair evaluator. Effectively supervising and evaluating teachers and other staff members is critical if we are to realize the purpose and the goals of education. As an evaluator, I will:

1. encourage participation in staff development and peer coaching opportunities.
2. facilitate the decision making capabilities of teachers by providing opportunities for them to make collaborative decisions/judgements regarding their teaching performance.
3. help teachers to perfect their personal styles by recognizing and building on existing strengths.
4. collaborate with teachers in the evaluative process by asking for their input and their suggestions for further growth and success.
5. foster professional growth and success in teachers by continually encouraging and challenging them.
6. verbally share my vision of effective teaching with all staff members at the beginning of each new school year.
7. encourage confidence and respond to the emotions of teachers by genuinely listening to them and by providing positive feedback to them when appropriate.

Additionally, in my efforts to help teachers to be the best they can be, I will also provide for their "higher order needs" by recognizing and rewarding their achievements through both oral and written communication and by developing a
school climate in which feelings of belonging are enhanced and there is a respect for all.

Finally, I envision myself as a positive role model for students and teachers alike by:

1. pursuing activities that will result in growth in both personal and professional dimensions of my life.
2. showing respect, kindness, and consideration for others.
3. setting goals and working toward them and never losing sight of them.
4. being self-reflective and always striving for self improvement.
5. embracing opportunities to learn for one should never stop learning.

I am reminded of a framed picture that sits on my desk, a picture of a child looking down a long dirt road. Under the picture is a powerful message to all those people responsible for educating children. It says: "Children are always the only future the human race has; teach them well." This is my driving force as a teacher and as a future administrator.
References


Sergiovanni, T. J. (n.d.). *The wingspread superintendents: A new definition of leadership*. Unpublished manuscript, Trinity University at San Antonio, TX.

Siemens, S. K. (n.d.). *Don't die until you're dead!!* Paper presented at the opening meeting of the 1996-97 school year, Sioux City, IA.


Impact of Effective Communication in Leadership Roles

Effective Communication

- Active Listening
- Respect
- Trust
- Learning Opportunities
- Collaboration
- Ownership
- Commitment
- Creative, Productive Individuals

Figure 1. Effective Communication Model, J. Johnson (1996)
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Figure 2. Weekly Worksheet taken from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey (1989)