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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Julie E. Niemeyer
University of Northern Iowa

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Any visioning activity must necessarily begin with an examination of where you've been, which brings you to where you are, which lays the foundation for where you want to be. Core values and beliefs must be identified, and they will guide the direction of the vision. It is with this in mind that I present my vision for administrative practice.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
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and Postsecondary Education
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Master of Arts in Education

by
Julie E. Niemeyer
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Dale R. Jackson

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

Head, Department of Educational
Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

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Any visioning activity must necessarily begin with an examination of where you've been, which brings you to where you are, which lays the foundation for where you want to be. Core values and beliefs must be identified, and they will guide the direction of the vision. It is with this in mind that I present my vision for administrative practice.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

There are many reasons why an educator might choose to pursue a career in school administration. For me it happened perhaps by accident, perhaps just serendipitously. Five years ago the principal at my school left in October to take another job. I was asked to "fill in" as Lead Teacher while the search for a new principal ensued. I had never fostered aspirations to be a principal. I loved being a teacher I had served for a number of years in leadership roles in our school. Two of my past administrators whom I greatly admired, had planted the "seeds". . . . "Have you ever thought of being a principal?" I was at a point in my life when I welcomed a new challenge. Most importantly, I was drawn to serve my school community in what would naturally be a time of transition. The principal who was leaving was on less-than-friendly terms with the Board of Education and many of the parents. I represented a teacher who had a history with the school, but who had not taken sides

during controversy. The out-going principal assured me that I would hold the position -- half-time in the office, half-time in the classroom -- for just a short while, probably for a couple of months. However, he again planted a seed, by explaining that many administrators entered the field not because they wanted the job, but because they realized they *could* do the job. Within three months I knew that I could do the job . . . and I wanted the job. That spring I submitted an application and was hired on the condition that I complete my Masters in Educational Administration. I began my course work that summer, but did not formally request admission into the Masters program until I had completed a full year as principal and was committed to administration, not just as a job, but as a vocation.

BELIEFS AND PHILOSOPHY

Besides the fact that my vision is based on the experience of a "practitioner in training", it is also important to note that my experience as a teacher for eleven years and then administrator for four years has been in a Catholic school. The values I have assimilated, combined with the organizational structure and environment in which I have worked, are largely responsible for my core beliefs which guide my vision of administrative practice. Glatthorn and Shields (1983)

articulated a set of beliefs for Catholic schools, which I have paraphrased to reflect my fundamental beliefs about the purpose of education:

- Each pupil is a gift who needs the nurture of caring adults who believe in his/her worth and potential.
- The school should be a community that shares a set of values.
- Each classroom should be a caring community in which individual differences are respected and appreciated.
- A primary goal of education is to develop the ability to make moral decisions and act upon them.
- All teachers can grow professionally and personally in ways that enable them to contribute their unique talents for the good of all students.
- The role of the principal is to provide experiences for students, teachers, and parents which will help them to grow as learners.

Regardless of what school I was entering as administrator, I would want my staff, parents, and the wider community to perceive these four foundational elements of my philosophy of education.

1. All children can learn. Teachers need to determine learning styles, try new approaches, make accommodations, offer challenges, design authentic assessments, and use a variety of activities that will

help each child succeed to the extent that he/she is able. A good teacher never gives up.

2. School should be a safe place. Besides the obvious concerns for security and physical safety, I believe that the school should foster an environment where all in the community -- children and adults -- feel accepted and free to take risks that will, hopefully, result in success. School is all about growth and change. Uncertainty seems to be inherent in this process. Children and adults need to feel that the school will be there to offer advice, encouragement, recognition and acceptance. We must remember that in today's society, school offers a safe harbor to many.

3. We need to educate the whole child. There is so much more to a child than academic concerns. We should accept the responsibility to address the needs of children intellectually, physically, morally, emotionally, socially, aesthetically, and in the case of a Catholic school, spiritually. Family and societal structures have changed in recent years, whether we like it or not. The school can be a resource for providing experiences in areas previously thought to be in the realm of the family. School administrators should be cognizant of the many needs of the child, even when the district's expectations focus mainly on the academic domain.

4. We need to prepare students for the future. At one time, this directive would have been focused on developing a base of knowledge and the skills an individual would need as an adult. I believe this now includes preparing students to be learners in a world where change is a fundamental reality of life.

THEORIES OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

As I progressed through the Masters's program, I knew that I needed to fulfill the requirements for an administrator's endorsement, but I also rediscovered the joy of learning for the sake of learning. More importantly, I have had time to reflect on the nature of learning itself which has led me to advocate a constructivist approach. I found that the most satisfying experiences were those which required that I tap into prior knowledge and construct meaning based on past experience and the present reality of what was happening in my school community. It was in making sense of the discrepancies between the theoretical knowledge base and what I knew about the daily realities of a school principal that I learned the most.

Having been part of a Catholic school system for a number of years, my faith is naturally a key element in how I interpret my role as school administrator. At a recent National Catholic Education Association convention, I heard Dr. Thomas Groome explain

that after many years of writing about effective catechesis he has come to the conclusion that it all must be about connecting life to faith, then faith to life. I realize that this same approach has the most meaning for me -- first connect practice to theory, then theory to practice.

In those first months in my role as administrator, I realized immediately that it was a multi-faceted one, much more so than that of a classroom teacher. This realization was both exhilarating and daunting. I discovered that there was a myriad of management tasks that at times took precedent over those activities that were directly related to students. There were building maintenance concerns, issues of compliance with district and state requirements, trouble-shooting complaints from parents and staff, and dealing with the powerful influence of the political workings of the school community - among staff, parents, Board of Education, and the parish community. At the same time I grappled with the sense that some of the personality traits and relational skills that had served me well in my role as a teacher were perhaps not adequate for my new position. I also knew pretty early on that I could learn the management techniques, but I felt there must be a larger, more comprehensive purpose to being a school principal. I wanted to do more than simply maintain the

status quo. It was with these life experiences that I first encountered theories of educational administration. It is with these in mind that I consider the meanings I have gained from the conceptual and empirical research that constitutes the knowledge base in educational administration.

Some may question whether there actually is a knowledge base in educational administration. Although number of theories and models have been proposed over the years, none has emerged as the specific formula to guide administrative practice. I believe that to deny the existence of such a base would negate much valuable information garnished from professional practice. It could be that a number of models have been proposed because school administrators must operate in several different roles. Murphy (1995) believes that research in the area has changed directions so many times because of a reaction to society's dissatisfaction with how children are educated. Though failure of schools is often precipitated by changes in society, the call for change is often accompanied by the need to blame someone for the deficiencies. Educational leaders and the universities which prepare them have been the recipients of much of the criticism, and the shifts in theoretical models have been a reactive response to that criticism.

I perceive that the shifts in educational administration theory mirrors the paradigm shifts in education research generally, from positivism to post-positivism to critical theory to constructivism, as described by Guba (1990). With the help of Helm's (1989) historical survey of the research in educational leadership, I have made the following connections. I relate positivist thinking to the early research and accompanying models that focused on task analysis and efficiency. Necessary tasks were identified and prescriptive "how-to's" described the best ways to accomplish those tasks. This paradigm places focus on what Pristine (1995) describes as "a collection of discrete, functional managerial areas of concern."

With post-positivism came the realization that when dealing with human beings, there's a "people" component that positivist theories did not address. In this paradigm came the trait studies which sought to show that leaders possess certain personality and ability traits which would predict success. The realization that patterns of behavior rather than isolated traits and skills led to behavior studies. The result has been a number of questionnaires and surveys which provide opportunity for self-analysis or identification of preferred leadership styles and behaviors to compare with what research has shown to be the most effective. I

believe that decision-making models and conflict resolution models can also fit in this category since many propose a set procedure for a leader to follow.

Serving as somewhat of a bridge between post-positivism and critical theory are the situational/contingency studies which take into account that people may exercise different personality traits for different roles or situations. In this category fall case studies, like those devised by Bolman and Deal (1993) and Kowalski (1995) which emphasize the need to identify the variables in a particular situation which work to enhance or nullify the leader's traits, skills or behavior. Along with the task itself, past history and culture of the group are included in such case studies. With the addition of values into administrative practice comes that area of research which falls into the critical theory paradigm in which reality cannot be known outside the context of values. In this category are the power/influence studies which attempt to explain a leader's effectiveness in terms of their ability to exercise either positional or personality power over followers. Helm cites Yukl's work to exemplify this type of thinking as he differentiated five types of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, and referent power. Combined with recognition of the powerful influence that a school leader can

exert, is the realization that effective leaders are those who use their power in pursuit of goals based on the shared values of the school community. Peterson and Deal (1998) wrote often about the importance of developing a positive school culture and described the role of a principal as that of potter, poet, prophet, actor, and healer. As Sergiovanni (1990) states, "The challenge of leadership is to translate values and ideas into actions and programs." (p. 82)

The attention to the leader-followership dimension is what I see as evidence of the constructivist paradigm in educational administration. It fits into the realm of transformational leadership, which is described by Burns (1978) as ". . . leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations -- the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations -- of both leaders and followers" (p. 19). It is constructivist in that meaning for the school leader is dependent on agreement with and commitment to the mission/vision statement of the school community.

In such a view reality exists only as it relates to a combination of all those things previously included in research -- social, experiential, local and situation specific knowledge. Inherent in this philosophy is the realization that a school is a community undertaking and the principal is not alone in exerting power/influence,

that a leader's core values which have been shaped by prior experiences should guide administrative practice, and that shared values provide the framework for both the managerial and visionary workings of the school. Deal and Kennedy (1983) state that strong school cultures go hand in hand with school improvement when they provide a bonding spirit which helps "teachers to teach; students to learn; and for parents, administrators, and others to contribute to the educational process." (p.15)

PERSONAL VISION FOR ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICE

While there are several theories and models in the knowledge base of educational administration to choose from, I find that I can learn something from each era. I agree with Wallace, Engle, and Mooney (1997) that "Theory is potential knowledge and once confirmed by practice, it is established knowledge. Such established knowledge, in turn, is used as a basis for future action (practice)." (p.22)

When examining various types of theories, it is natural to feel more comfortable with some based on your own personality, prior experience, and core values. My own preference for a human resource vs an authoritarian/structured management style has been corroborated in three personality/leadership-style inventories I have encountered in my course work. My

background in Catholic education - as a student, teacher, and administrator - has strongly influenced the development of my belief system which includes emphasis on community and values. For these reasons, I relate and adhere most strongly to those theories which recognize the leader-follower relationship and have the values component. Bass (1985) reflected on such transformational leadership and spoke of the leader motivating followers to work toward transcendental goals which tap into the needs for self-actualization rather than just for immediate self interest. Williams (1998) proposes that "leadership is earned, not appointed and successful leadership is dependent upon an 'umbilical' relationship between leaders and followers" that is based on a sense of collective purpose. This is the essence of transformational leadership which shifts the emphasis from positional power to participative decision-making and puts the principal's role in the school community into perspective. I believe that a principal must willingly accept a leadership role but must also recognize the potential of many "contributors" in the pursuit of the school's mission.

Sergiovanni's writing on moral leadership (1992) has impressed me and is exemplified most strongly for me in his description of value-added leadership (1990), especially his conception of servant leadership:

"'Servant leadership' may be popular among Catholic school educators, but has more universal implications. A servant leader is responsible for 'ministering' to the needs of the school served. Those needs are determined by shared values and purposes. Servant leaders administer by furnishing help and being of service to parents, teachers and students. They highlight and protect the values of the school. The leader accepts the obligation to serve the mission of the school." (p. 152)

With this as the core of my beliefs about school leadership, I prefer as well to use Sergiovanni's description of five forces available to school leaders in their work: technical, human, educational, symbolic, and cultural, as I synthesize what I have learned about administrative practice. I particularly like the term "forces" because it implies that each is a powerful factor in effective school leadership.

Technical Force

In some regards recent research, with its departure from prescriptive lists of tasks and procedures, seems to downgrade the importance of technical/managerial skills. It's common to read that there's a real difference between management and leadership. When I assumed the role of administrator, I was immediately overwhelmed by the scope of managerial concerns. I realize there are differences between public and non-public school administrators, but in my own situation I found there were compliance issues related to maintaining accreditation, building maintenance

concerns, budgeting and monitoring of finances, dealing with our local Board of Education, reporting to the Archdiocesan central office, hiring and supervising staff, and a preponderance of day-to-day work tasks that could arise from simply opening the mail!

It would be easy to become consumed by the technical aspect of the principalship. In hindsight, I realize that was probably the case for me in the first couple of years. While I am not completely comfortable with extrapolating a school into a business system, I do believe there is much to be learned from organizational theories and efficiency models for business.

Freestone and Costa (1998) propose that an administrator apply a "value quotient" (VG) to the work they do. They differentiate the work of a school principal into three categories: 1) Value-added work that relates directly to learning; 2) Waste work that does not contribute to learning because it is work that could have been avoided if it had been done properly the first time; and 3) Necessary work which consists of keeping the school running but has no direct impact on learning.

Covey (1989) echoes this in his offering of a time management matrix in which all activity falls into one of four quadrants: Urgent and Important, Not Urgent but Important, Urgent but Not Important, and Not Urgent and

Not Important. I have definitely seen tasks fall into each of these quadrants on a typical day. Sometimes an administrator must necessarily focus on "urgent" activities, whether they are important or not. The key to being highly effective, which I'm still learning about, is to make sure to spend time taking care of Important issues before they become Urgent (for example, don't wait until the due date to file a report!), and learn from mistakes and experience in order to minimize the "waste time" described by Freestone and Costa.

I agree that fundamental to any discussion of time management or effective technical skills is the administrator's sense of what is important and valuable. Without being grounded in an articulated set of beliefs about the purpose of a school and a personal philosophy about the potential of education, a school principal will likely be "spinning his/her wheels" in a myriad of managerial tasks. A chronically low VQ is characteristic of burnout as more and more time is spent on wasted work, making the school an ineffective system.

While continuous improvement of skills in the technical realm is a necessary goal for an educational leader, I personally find more value lies in the remaining forces.

Human Force

In Sergiovanni's model (1990), the human force points to the power derived from the school's social and interpersonal relationships. Given my experiential background, I cannot help but to recall two sources pertinent to the Catholic school – or any school – that illustrate this force.

"For it is . . . the lay persons, believers or not, who will substantially determine whether or not a school realizes its aims or accomplishes its objectives." (Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith, 1982, no. 1)

"Christ was the most effective executive in the history of the human race. The results He achieved are second to none. In three years, he defined a mission and formed the strategies and plans to carry it out with a staff of twelve unlikely men. He organized Christianity . . . He recruited, trained, and motivated twelve ordinary men to become extraordinary. He is the greatest manager and developer of people ever." (Hind, 1989. pp. 13-14.)

Gorton and Schneider (1991) explain that two areas of particular importance in the realm of the human force are the development of "high staff morale and a humane school environment." (p. 88) I see these two areas as being interdependent. I believe that establishing positive staff morale requires selecting the best staff available, being a fair, informed, and consistent evaluator, and recognizing/utilizing the strengths and leadership qualities of staff.

Staff Selection.

Many school leaders may muse, "If only I could hand-pick my staff and work with them to build an effective learning community." I have learned that the reality is that given current compensation packages and budget constraints -- especially in a non-public school -- there are few recruitment incentives that would make this possible. And yet, the quality and commitment of staff personnel makes a tremendous difference in the effectiveness of the school.

I believe that selection of new staff members works best if others in the school community (teachers, Board of Education members, etc.) are involved in the process. However, I have also been "burned" by hiring a staff member on the recommendations of others when my "gut reaction" opposed it but other alternatives were not available. I have found that when a potential candidate's philosophy is closely attuned to the culture and expectations of the school community, it's a good match. I continue to gain the confidence necessary to act on my personal reservations and say, "No, let's look further." Settling for "second best" usually gets you just that! Knowing your "value quotient" and acting on it can save the administrator from spending valuable time in trying to align a staff member's performance with the values of the community. All this points to the

need to take time to screen applicants and carefully prepare for interviews so that you are sure of what qualifications/characteristics you desire.

Evaluator Competencies.

One of the texts I encountered in my course work was Edward Pajak's Approaches to Clinical Supervision: Alternatives to Improving Instruction (1993). Acting in the role of evaluator really becomes "value-added work" when its potential for direct impact on learning is recognized. More than just record-keeping or satisfying district requirements, evaluation should be a time to share with the teacher in reflection on best practice, meeting student needs, and goal-setting. It can and should be an opportunity for both affirmation and challenge.

In my classes, it wasn't unusual for colleagues to report that formal observations and evaluations were done rarely or were limited to checklists that could be done quickly in a very top-down management style. Practicing administrators bemoaned the fact that there was simply too little time for this important activity. I believe that the principal must make time for regular observation and evaluation. Among the many models for supervision that have been proposed, the principal needs

to select and/or develop one that reflects personal and the school community values.

Following Sergiovanni's (1996) view of the principal as a "steward" with responsibilities for overseeing and caring for the school rather than controlling or directing, my style as an evaluator has evolved from technical to humanistic as I've come to recognize that the interpersonal relationship between teacher and supervisor is key. The supervisor should serve as the catalyst to help the teacher understand the art of teaching based on classroom reality. Spending time in the classrooms, on both formal and informal occasions, is necessary for informed and meaningful discussion and sharing.

Recognizing and utilizing the strengths of people.

The power of the human force lies in seeing people as resources. There are many leaders in a school community – teachers, students, parents, and community members. Their contributions and their potential should be recognized and celebrated.

In describing the qualities of effective educational leaders, Davis (1998) highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships. "[Successful principals] understand how to galvanize the energies of diverse interest groups, build trust and support, manage conflict, prioritize

important issues, and empower school stakeholders through collaborative decision-making process." (p. 7) No one person can, should, or must possess all the skills and attributes often listed in management theory. The principal should seek to activate the talents of others by establishing advisory groups, sharing responsibilities, and providing opportunities for participative decision-making. The result will be a shift from positional to transformational leadership in which there is a relationship of mutual stimulation and followers are converted into leaders.

Educational Force

A school administrator exercises the power of the educational force through expert knowledge in matters of education and schooling. Scheurich (1995) explains that "the external function of a knowledge base is to prove to those outside the profession that there exists a body of specialized knowledge and skills the mastery of which confers special status to its practitioners." (p. 20) He goes on to point out that values and the social context of schooling must accompany the craft dimensions of the knowledge base. Put in another way by Donmoyer (1995), a knowledge base consists of "knowing that" which includes theoretical knowledge, "knowing how" which involves skills and the ability to perform particular kinds of actions, and "knowing what" which is the understanding

of when it is appropriate to apply a particular theory or skill. In any case, I believe an educator - either as a classroom teacher or an administrator - must possess a solid knowledge base and must continuously and purposefully build upon that base by pursuing professional growth opportunities.

As a principal, I have found that keeping abreast of current research in areas such as curriculum, accommodating for special needs of students, assessment, educational and pedagogical skills, and educational psychology has been most beneficial. Taking a class, attending conferences, visiting other schools, reading professional journals, or participating in a study group not only adds to my knowledge base, but also sends a message to others that learning is a necessary life-long process.

If, indeed, learning is at the heart of what the school is about, the principal must model and encourage that among all the learners in the school community. Make information available to families via newsletters or parent meetings. Show students that you, too, are a learner and share your knowledge with them. And, of course, be committed to finding the resources and providing support (and sometimes incentives) for continued professional growth among staff members.

Believing in the educational force leads to being a principal teacher. I have found that meeting with teachers individually, either as part of the supervision/evaluation plan, or in regularly scheduled conferences is a tremendous opportunity to "plant seeds" by citing current research or suggesting professional reading. The principal also has the responsibility for planning staff development. This becomes value-added work when inservice topics are related to identified needs and shared concerns.

We must believe that there is a knowledge base in education, but we must also accept that it is forever changing and improving. To rely on what we learned in our undergraduate programs would be a disservice to our students.

Symbolic Force

Symbolic leadership is comprised of all those things which signal to others what is important and valuable in the school. In Sergiovanni's own description, "Touring the school; visiting classrooms; seeking out and visibly spending time with students; downplaying management concerns in favor of educational; presiding over ceremonies, rituals, and other important occasions; and providing a unified vision of the school through proper use of words and actions" are behaviors

associated with this force. (p. 88) Deal and Peterson (1990) even more specifically explain that the community sees signals about what the principal values in the office decor, his/her demeanor, how time is allocated, methods of showing appreciation, and writing style.

There is no prescription for how to be a symbolic leader. I am sure that I convey messages when I wear professional, but not formal clothing, have a ready smile (on most days!), adorn my office with gifts from students and inspirational plaques, schedule time for meeting with individual teachers and at least one parent group each week, practice courtesy with students and staff, and pay special attention to clear and correct written communication. These are not pre-planned or contrived but rather are a natural extension of my personality and values. I believe these behaviors are a good fit for the culture of our school, and I realize they may not be as well-received elsewhere.

Cultural Force

The culture of the school is made up of its history, values, traditions, beliefs, and ways. Peterson and Deal emphasize that "Culture involves all dimensions of life in schools. It determines individual needs and outlooks, shapes formal structures, defines the distribution of power, and establishes the means by which conflicts are dealt with." The principal must seek

to understand the culture by watching, listening, learning about the school's heroes and accomplishments, while always being aware of the values that emerge from the stories. Working within this framework the cultural leader articulates the school's mission, maintains and reinforces traditions and beliefs, socializes new members, and rewards those who reflect the culture. Of course not all school cultures are positive. If the culture does not compare well to the principal's conception of what a good school should be, he/she should work to strengthen what is good or seek ways to move the school in a new direction.

I have been immersed in the culture of Sacred Heart School for many years. I see this as a strength because it is helpful when affecting change, but it presents the challenge to look beyond what's comfortable to what's possible. I appreciate the power of culture and recognize the role it plays in the political workings of school. Should I ever seek a position in another school, I feel confident that I can and will make understanding and celebrating the best parts of its school culture a top priority.

Conclusion

Throughout my journey to earn a Masters in Educational Administration, I have appreciated the experiences that being a "practitioner in training" have

provided me. I have been able to make inferences and construct meaning from assigned readings and discussions in ways that allowed real-life application. The five forces of leadership have become very real as I have sought to "re-frame" challenging situations to work for what is best for our school community.

I know that I have grown in many ways, particularly in the areas of technical and technological skills, evaluation and supervision, and understanding of the learning process. I also realize that conflict resolution, time management, and relationship-building are areas in which I need to improve. I am committed to an educational program which values and promotes life-long learning. The process must begin with me as model and inspiration.

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