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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

With increasing concerns in education, attention has been focused on the roles and duties of the educational administrator, both in the operation of the schools and in the provision of that leadership. This is essential for maintaining the viability of public education in a dynamically changing society. The training of educational administrators has drastically changed, indicating a major shift in emphasis among those who assist to set the patterns of administration. Whereas the training of administrators previously emphasized the technological problems of school management, the new "movement" has stressed the values of administrative theory. The applications of the behavioral sciences to the problems of educational administration, the social context in which educational administration takes place, and the analysis of the school organization as a social system, are all important values of this new movement. The new movement has also emphasized the analysis of the mutual relationship of diverse roles within the organization and the interpretation of educational administration within the broader sphere of public administration. Regardless of the emphasis upon the development of 2 theory and the study of administration, the problems of the public schools persist. The administrator in the public schools is faced daily with the task of assisting the teachers and the community in the solution of complex problems that arise out of both the operations of the public schools and the needs and mobility of the broader society. The theory of administration might help the administrator to define his or her problems better and understand the structure of the social systems with which he or she must deal, but it does not necessarily help him or her to find the most appropriate strategies for maintaining the school as an agency fully responsible to and responsible for the educational needs of contemporary American life.

**A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

A Research Paper

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

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With increasing concerns in education, attention has been focused on the roles and duties of the educational administrator, both in the operation of the schools and in the provision of that leadership. This is essential for maintaining the viability of public education in a dynamically changing society. The training of educational administrators has drastically changed, indicating a major shift in emphasis among those who assist to set the patterns of administration.

Whereas the training of administrators previously emphasized the technological problems of school management, the new "movement" has stressed the values of administrative theory. The applications of the behavioral sciences to the problems of educational administration, the social context in which educational administration takes place, and the analysis of the school organization as a social system, are all important values of this new movement. The new movement has also emphasized the analysis of the mutual relationship of diverse roles within the organization and the interpretation of educational administration within the broader sphere of public administration. Regardless of the emphasis upon the development of

theory and the study of administration, the problems of the public schools persist. The administrator in the public schools is faced daily with the task of assisting the teachers and the community in the solution of complex problems that arise out of both the operations of the public schools and the needs and mobility of the broader society. The theory of administration might help the administrator to define his or her problems better and understand the structure of the social systems with which he or she must deal, but it does not necessarily help him or her to find the most appropriate strategies for maintaining the school as an agency fully responsible to and responsible for the educational needs of contemporary American life.

As never before, the administrator is forced to undertake problems that accumulate within his or her community as a result of both poverty and cultural deprivation. He or she has to take responsibility for the diverse aspirations and expectations of different segments of the community, the varying educational needs of the community, and changing manpower needs and allocations. Educational administrators need to understand the vast explosion of knowledge and the

restructuring of many of the academic disciplines. They must deal with the unrest among minority groups, parents and teachers who no longer permit themselves to be passive onlookers of the decision-making process, and changing characteristics of the teaching profession and its ability to deal more effectively with the complex educational problems of children.

Educational Leadership

It is important to make a distinction between administration and leadership. To maintain an organization moving in its ordinary direction, is management; to change the goals or procedures in the organization is leadership (Cambel, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990). This distinction does not prevent the administrator from being a leader, but it does suggest that for the most part, administrators try to keep their organization in its normal status. Part of the problem is that most of us are conditioned to think of educational administration as if it were an applied science. Within applied science, practice is enhanced by scientific knowledge on the one hand and by knowledge that emerges from one's experience as an administrator on the other. Knowledge in applied

science is created through theorizing and discipline oriented research. This knowledge is then used to build and field test models of practice through which universal prescriptions and treatments are to be generated. These are, in turn, communicated to professionals for their use in practice. The professional searches the context in which he or she works, carefully diagnosing and characterizing contingencies and situations according to predetermined and standardized protocols. Practices taken from research are then matched systematically to these problems. Applied science, however, frames our thinking too narrowly by projecting an imagination of tight alignment between the world of theory and research and the world of practice. Applied science conceptions of school leadership require practice conditions of reliability, predictability, and stability in order for them to be useful. Greenfield (1987) has pointed out that patterns of school practice are determined by a large extent of uncertainty, instability, complexity, and variety. Value conflicts and uniqueness are accepted aspects of educational settings. For these reasons, professional knowledge

constructed as applied science is mismatched to the changing characteristics and situations of practice. According to (Greenfield, 1987), there are three types of leadership.

Leadership One: Leadership one introduces the leader, almost always the school principal-- as the key element in effective schools. Leadership one emphasizes two qualities or characteristics of the leader. First, the leader is supremely rational. That is, the leader has the intellectual ability to ascertain appropriate goals for the school, to review possible alternatives, to balance consequences, and to select appropriate solutions. Second, the leader is supremely pragmatic. If a certain solution does not seem to be working, the leader is wise enough to complete another rational cycle and to propose another option compatible with the overall goal.

Leadership Two: In contrast to the reviews of literature, leadership two claims that leadership is influenced in special ways by the cultural context. Leadership two suggests that characteristics such as rationality and pragmatism are operationally defined in different communities in different ways. Leadership

Three: Leadership three considers a leader effective only if a consensus has been created by the group. The critical factor is the faculty; the principal may lead to the extent the faculty permits. This view receives considerable attention in the literature about effective schools. The concept popularly called "effective schools" (Jacobson & Reavis, 1963) has emerged as a major element of vision of better schools. The idea of effective schools began to grow when observant and inquiring educators noticed that some schools obviously served their students better than other schools. Although it seemed true that ethnic minority and low-income family youngsters scored lower on school tests than other pupils, scores of pupils in these schools were so much higher that the schools were easily identified statistically as "outliers"-- they fell well outside the expected range. Why? What similarities or common elements were shared by these outlier schools? Why couldn't students in other schools experience the same achievement and success as pupils in the outlier schools? Here, then, is the heart of vision--schools where poor children and children of ethnic groups are not identifiable based

upon their school test results.

Vision may help with the "why" and the "what" (English, Hoyle, & Steffy, 1990) questions, but it seldom tells us "how". The "how" question remains widely prevalent in much of the effective schools' work. Articles on effective schools identify the need for strong "building-level leadership". The current literature repeatedly advises as to what principals should do to build effective schools, but little attention is given to how effective principals go about being effective. Recent studies of schools almost invariably identify the principal's leadership as a significant factor in a school's success. Although there is considerable room for improvement in the research and evaluation dimensions of the effective schools' movement, the findings of effective schools' studies make sense. The studies contain the "craft knowledge" of schooling. Even if effective schooling studies do not yet live up to rigorous scientific standards, they sound right. They offer opportunities to "envision" into questions of school improvement. Effective schools' concepts and practices offer some useful tools to repair schooling's damaged image.

Generally speaking, advocates of effective schools' movement note that effective schools tend to have: strong and positive building-level leadership, an emphasis on teaching the basic skills, a sense of positive expectations for achievement on the part of everyone in the school, and an intent in using data derived from assessment of student progress to help guide the instructional program. Ronald Edmonds greatly standardized the effective schools' work and focused on the domain of inquiry. Since Edmond's (1979) description of the "correlates" of effective schools, researchers have worked to refine and expand them. Thus although emphasizing Edmond's correlates, later researchers identified other attendant variables such as, community involvement, support from the central office, stability of staff, resources directed at achieving school goals, and staff development efforts. The five correlates, however, have remained central to the effective schools' movement.

In recent years, the leadership role of the school principal has come under increasing scrutiny. The effective schools literature of the last decade has identified the characteristics of successful schools, pointing to the principal as a critical factor for school's efficient operation. This research has stressed that effective principals can provide leadership by setting academic goals and standards, visiting classrooms regularly, maintaining student discipline, and creating incentive for learning (Barrnet, 1989). As a result of the renewed interest in the leadership role of principals, they are expected to be the key persons for creating curricular and instructional reform in their schools; and thus, be both the "administrative " and "instructional" leaders. The growing need for retraining, refining, or supporting principals, and leadership skills have stimulated the development of a wide variety of in-service programs.

One of the major problems in developing useful training for principals is to insure that the training contract and process fit the everyday demands and circumstances of their job. The nature of the job

requires principals to retain bits and pieces of information that can be retrieved at a moment's notice. Events can happen in such rapid-fire order (Barnett, 1990) that principals' actions blend together in an undifferentiated jumble of activities that presumably are related to the ongoing rhythm and purpose of the larger enterprise. Training principals and allowing them to learn from their experience, therefore, become difficult because of the brevity and fragmentation of their actions. It is difficult for principals to recall myriad events in which they are engaged or to see underlying patterns in their behavior (Peterson & Tamma, 1991). The rapidity with which events occur is not conducive to reflective action and thoughtful on-the-spot response.

Although previous research of principals indicates that they have difficulty reflecting as they conduct their daily activities, there is much to suggest that reflection can be a powerful tool for allowing professional growth. Schon (1983), for example, considers reflection as a way for professionals at many levels to deal with the complexities, uncertainties, and value conflicts inherent in their jobs. He argues

that the "technical rationality" approach, where scientific theory and technique are used by professionals to solve problems in their workplaces is out of limited value. The demands of many professions include ambiguity and instability in which rational approaches cannot be practically applied. Instead, "reflection in action" is an art used by many professionals in dealing with situations that involve novelty, instability, and uncertainty. This reflective process could be likened to engaging in an internal dialogue with oneself using experience, intuition, and trial and error thinking in defining and solving a problem or dilemma. Schon further indicates that this reflective process can focus on a variety of objects including the tacit norms underlying a judgement, the implicit strategies behind an action, the feelings associated with a situation, and the role being fulfilled.

The implications for using reflection as (Wibel, 1991) a professional development for principals are clear as well. The hectic nature of principals' day-to-day activities forces them to make a host of on-the-spot decisions. Furthermore, principals lead very

isolated professional lives that (Begley, Cousins, & Leithwood, 1990) do not allow them many opportunities to observe other principals in action or to learn from their colleagues. Therefore, a professional development program that incorporates reflection can be very powerful in allowing principals to recall the intent of their behavior, reduce the uncertainty of their actions, eliminate their sense of isolation, and consider alternative ways to act. This training is referred to as Peer-Assisted Leadership (PAL) (Barnet, 1990) and stimulates principals to become more reflective about their actions, thus increasing their professional and personal effectiveness as leaders of their schools.

Based on the reactions of principals who have participated in PAL, it is clear that the activities promote reflection and self-examination. Principals have stated their belief that the reflection is critical for making improved decisions in leading their schools. Reflection, as Schon (1983) suggested, can be powerful tool when practically applied in the work setting. It is believed that the interaction of PAL activities is responsible for principals becoming more

reflective. No single PAL activity is solely responsible for stimulating reflection. Allowing trust to develop between partners, being observed and interviewed by a peer, observing and interviewing another principal, becoming familiar with the framework, and building models of leadership behavior--all combined to create an atmosphere where reflection, openness, and professional growth can occur. Keeping a nonjudgemental tone in the observing and reflective interviews is critical for allowing trust to develop between partners. Although many principals do ask for advice and suggestions from their partners, they request this advice rather than have it forced upon them. In this way, principals make conscious professional decisions regarding those areas in which they would like to improve. Professional development becomes personalized rather than externally mandated.

Using the trust relationship as a foundation, the observational and interviewing process becomes more reflective. Being observed and interviewed are just as critical as observing and interviewing another principal in reflective behavior. Having peers observe and interview one another allows principals to become

more aware of their overall goals and to understand the consequences of their actions. Observing and interviewing other principals provides a basis for comparing and contrasting their own styles with their partners. Professional growth, therefore, can occur by being observed as well as observing, analyzing, and interviewing a peer.

Another important element of PAL is the introduction of the general framework of instructional leadership. This framework is used to establish a common language for trainers and participants. Also, it is used as a device for helping principals organize their thinking about the complex set of facts that school administrators must deal with on a day-to-day basis.

The ultimate power of the PAL process, however, is the fact that "reflection in action" occurs as principals begin actively to use the reflective process on a daily basis, not just when they are being observed and interviewed (Wellington, 1991). The often frantic nature of their jobs forbids most principals from considering alternative ways of acting, clarifying their goals, or validating that they are acting in a

manner consistent with those goals. Reflection, therefore, becomes a process that principals incorporate in considering alternate ways to act and in confirming that they are acting consistently with their own goals and visions. Not only do principals reflect on past or future events, but also on the momentary decisions they make daily. In this way, they conduct an "internal dialogue" with themselves as they interact with teachers, students, and parents.

In summary, reflection as (Schon, 1983) indicated is something all professionals can benefit from by using it more systematically in solving problems and making everyday decisions. The challenge for school principals is to nurture and support opportunities for his or her faculty and staff to become more reflective. This may mean that priorities for staff development need to be rearranged; however, without having the chance to put reflection into action, principals are more likely to be reactors to situations rather than innovative leaders in the field.

Like reflection, the second most important ingredient of educational leadership is "vision": the ability to see feelingly. Vision is the best tool by

which school principals can reach their destination successfully. The search for better schools is part of an ideal, a dream, and a vision (Greenfield, 1987). Vision helps principals in the quest for better schools. Colton (1985) described vision as that "which establishes goals or objectives for individual and group action, which defines not what we are but rather what we seek to be or do" (p.33). Colton noted some influential people from recent history who had vision. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision contributed to improved education. Edmond's (1979, p.22) vision was of schools that were effective in educating the urban poor "How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of poor children?" These and other influential people pursued lofty visions. Vision is important not only for better schools in general or for particular groups, but for each pupil as well. The "craft knowledge" or conventional wisdom of school administration tells us, "As is the principal, so is the school." Edmonds noted that "there are some bad schools with good principals, but there are no good schools with bad principals" (Mazzarella, 1983, p.1).

The blending of these two themes--vision and building-level leadership--gives meaning to the search for better schools. Principals are key elements in the move toward better schools. Their three fold task is difficult. They must know "why" we need education and good schools; they must know "what" is needed to improve schools; and they must know "how" to administer the schools to achieve the desired results (Habber, 1968). As a starting point, principals must envision better schools, articulate this vision to others, and orchestrate consensus on the vision. Vision is a criterion by which to gauge success. Vision can make dreamers of us all. It lets us " see feelingly".

In my opinion, a fundamental challenge for school leaders is to attract and retain enough qualified teachers to staff their schools. There are numerous factors identified as contributing to unattractiveness of teaching as a career, including low salaries, low prestige, limited job options within the field of teaching itself, and unattractive working conditions. The related problems of the occupational attractiveness of education and of the retention of qualified teachers are generally recognized as a complex process. They

tend to require multiple solution strategies targeted at increasing basic compensation, improving teacher education, restructuring the teacher career itself, and improving the working conditions.

The work of teachers, working conditions in schools, and organizational structures and processes represent one cluster of elements over which school administrators and teachers can exercise considerable control. These are the factors theoretically and empirically associated with employee's motivation, involvement, and job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The current evidence indicates that work itself, working conditions, and associated organizational structures and processes are associated with productivity, morale, and other relevant variables. Understanding the social realities of teaching provides a critical reference point for instructional leadership and school improvement.

School principals cannot single-handedly make schools more effective. Teachers themselves are the key resource in schools, and the basic challenge for instructional leaders is to train teachers as vital sources of information regarding problems and

strategies for enhancing their work and the general working conditions in their schools. The goal of the strategies is twofold: The first objective is to identify and respond to matters of concern to teachers regarding their work and working conditions in their schools. The second is to cultivate positive norms and procedures among teachers and principals. These positive norms and procedures would help both principals and teachers to establish a cooperative environment in their workplaces and improve their practice-related relationships. The following recommendations are offered as a starting point for achieving these two objectives:

Listen

The first step for instructional leaders is to listen to the concerns of teachers and personnel. School principals must listen carefully to teachers and personnel concerns, identify the origin of their concerns, and satisfy them with any decision that will take place regarding their problems. In addition to listening to teachers' concerns, school leaders need to be attentive to the work-environment factors, the personal life dimensions and life-styles of faculty

members. In order to attract and retain quality teachers, principals must begin to think in terms of the "whole person" when considering the work and working conditions of teachers. Schools are staffed by people who are multi-dimensional; work is only one component of their lives. The personal life dimensions of employees are often overlooked or discounted in study organizations and work improvement strategies. However, these personal life factors may be central to teachers' employment decisions and work behavior. The opportunities for collecting information about faculty concerns are numerous. Principals will find that teachers may discuss certain kinds of issues in faculty meetings, but will share other frustrations only in one-to-one exchange with the principal or a close colleague. Other concerns may be expressed only in the faculty room or behind closed doors. No matter what the particular circumstance, be it through a formal or informal network, or in a group or individual setting, the message will be there for the principal who is attentive, tuned-in, and listening.

Interpret

In addition to listening to teachers' concerns, it

will be sometimes necessary to interpret or read between the lines of a message. A teacher's verbal complaint of, for example, "too many students in the classroom" may really be intended to express a variety of specific concerns: "there isn't enough room for five small-group work situations"; "I can't manage so many students"; "the teacher across the hall has fewer students in his class." The ability of a school principal to interpret accurately the concerns of teachers thus often requires "refining" the more covert message, and interpreting that message given his or her understanding of the individual and group dynamics of the faculty in that particular school.

Another foundation of interpreting teachers' concerns includes being able to see the "fit" between the type of employee and the nature of the work. While one cannot make an absolute generalization about any occupational group, one might assume some global characteristics of individuals who have chosen to become teachers. For example, one could probably safely assume that persons in the teaching profession (as well as other human service occupations) typically prefer to work and be engaged with people. If the

assumption is correct, then one needs to consider which aspects of the work itself may fail to meet the needs of that type of person. One of the mostly frequently identified characteristics of teaching as an occupational role is that most of the work is done in isolation from one's colleagues. There is very little structured time for engaging in meaningful work activities or instructional problem solving with other teachers or instructional personnel. This might be an example of the incompatibility of the structure of the work itself with the type of persons occupying or interested in entering the teaching profession. These and several others are examples of interpretation's functions that might be required of instructional leaders in order for them to identify accurately problems associated with the work of teachers or with working conditions in schools. This interpretation is critical because a decision about the stated problem may not adequately reduce dissatisfaction if the true problem goes unnoticed.

Respond

After having gathered and analyzed data about teachers' concerns regarding their work environment, it

is important that school leaders respond appropriately, and in a timely fashion. Nothing is likely to contribute to poor morale if a principal just gets "input" and shows no evidence of having done anything with it. Many problems are too complex to be fixed easily. However, some sort of administrative response is required to keep employees from feeling a sense of hopelessness, from becoming apathetic, and becoming increasingly frustrated. While evidence of responsiveness to short-term, relatively simple and concrete problems may be visible immediately, evidence of responsiveness to more long-term, abstract, or complicated problems may not be apparent. The principal may need to offer a periodic progress report to faculty concerning the resolution of more complex issues. If a problem cannot be addressed at the school level by the principal, or if it is an issue that the principal feels must be addressed at a later date, then the reasons for the delay must be adequately explained to teachers. If this is done, it will be clear to teachers that their voice has been heard and the principal has made a reasonable effort to respond to their concerns.

Another critical aspect for school leaders is to examine teachers' performance assessment and practices with their instructional supervisor role in view. These newer and more innovative techniques have evolved from large-scale assessment programs targeting at "formative " and "summative" evaluation decisions. However, these systems represent far more comprehensive diagnostic tools for the supervision and evaluation of instruction by school principals. Since recent research on effective schools identifies the instructional leadership role of the school principal as a key factor in school productivity, use of these newer techniques can seemingly facilitate implementation of this role. Although there is some controversy over the specific nature of instructional leadership, benefits of using these performance assessment systems may result because they are designed to measure elements of teaching that are documented through research on teacher's effectiveness.

Considered collectively, the emerging techniques in teacher effectiveness studies, and the use of these newer systems in an expanded supervision model can possibly impact the role of the principal as an

instructional supervisor at the building level. These emerging technologies can, I believe, help school principals to enhance instructional quality, school productivity, and pupil achievements.

In short, principals can no longer dominate. The top-down model is too unmanageable, too babyish, and too unprofessional. Leaders need to set general directions and create environments, structures, and school cultures that enable teachers to discover their own skills and talents. The role must be one of enabling rather than controlling. How will principals learn this? Principals must engage in their own professional development. Principals, too, need replenishment and animation and an expanded repertory of ideas and practices with which to respond to overwhelming demands. And even more, they need a sense of their own professionalism. Principals alone cannot make a profession of teaching. But principals and teachers working together can create a climate of reflection, growth, and professionalism. The relationship between teachers and principals must be based upon collegiality, shared decision-making in classrooms and within schools, personal vision, the

teacher as learner and mentor, and control of the quality of teaching. All these are the conditions that will cause teachers and principals alike to blossom rather than wilt when problems arise among them. And, once again, I stress that if school principals desire to be school leaders, not school administrators, they must act according to the suggestions mentioned above and must be versatile in their workplaces.

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