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## 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

When I started my educational administrative program I had very little knowledge of all the characteristics an administrator needs to be effective. My basic beliefs stemmed from when I was an elementary pupil. These beliefs could have been summed up into three basic areas: 1. Discipline students: I thought that every principal had a list of "things" to do to students when the student was sent to the office. These "things" were designed to make the student afraid to go back to the office, which would change the behavior of the student. 2. Pay teachers: this was why the teachers liked the principal so well. 3. Be friendly: the principal had to be friendly and get along with parents, regardless where the principal saw them.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Brian C. Litts

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ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper  
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When I started my educational administrative program I had very little knowledge of all the characteristics an administrator needs to be effective. My basic beliefs stemmed from when I was an elementary pupil. These beliefs could have been summed up into three basic areas:

1. Discipline students: I thought that every principal had a list of "things" to do to students when the student was sent to the office. These "things" were designed to make the student afraid to go back to the office, which would change the behavior of the student.

2. Pay teachers: this was why the teachers liked the principal so well.

3. Be friendly: the principal had to be friendly and get along with parents, regardless where the principal saw them.

In high school my list of perceived administrative responsibilities got longer. Principals had to keep track of classes that students took so it was possible for everyone to graduate. Along with that, principals had to go to all activities, to keep students under control. Principals attended school board meetings

and, most importantly had to be able to handle all kinds of pressure situations.

Many of these duties are very important for a principal to do. But after receiving a college degree and teaching for several years I began to understand why principals were doing all of these things. I also began to look more closely at the various ways principals handle different situations. I started asking myself, would I have handled that situation the same way? The majority of the time I would have.

The longer I taught, the more I became interested in learning about the students. I wanted to learn more about the type of environment and situations these students came from. Did the family structure have anything to do with how these students acted? Did it influence their attitude toward learning?

Another area I was interested in was how and why some administrative decisions were made. Decisions regarding scheduling, activities, rules and teaching assignments were all areas that I wanted to learn more about. I started to see more of the "big picture," rather than just my own classroom.

I became more involved in all of these areas when I assumed the position of activities coordinator for

the school. My duties included scheduling all activities conducted at the school. This was an eye opener! I had no idea all of the activities that went on. The school is basically used from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., not only by our students but the community as well. I began going to administrative meetings to present to administrators the "plan" for the week. This responsibility helped me with my organizational skills. It required knowing what equipment and locations were available for community use. It also helped me get involved with the community. People would contact me to schedule use of the gyms or classrooms. This experience gave me the opportunity to get involved in administrative activities on a limited level. As a result, I began to consider a career in this area. During one of my evaluations, my principal asked if I was planning to take classes to renew my teaching certificate. I told him yes, that it was time for me to get going on that. He encouraged me to pursue a degree in administration. I then decided to enroll at the University of Northern Iowa.

My first class was Administration of the Elementary School, instructed by Dr. Doud. One night in this class many of my inner-thoughts came together.

He simply asked how many of us were athletes and/or coaches? That certainly described me. Dr. Doud went on to say that many of us enter administration with the belief we can do a better job than someone else. Now, before I get myself into trouble, I have been very fortunate to work for some outstanding administrators, but as I think back, while I was beginning to ask questions about how situations were handled with students, I started handling students differently. Instead of sending them to the office for discipline problems, I started handling the students on my own. This meant spending time with the students before and/or after school. It helped the students understand how I wanted them to act and why. I found that my teacher-student relationships started to grow. Students knew what I expected of them, and I felt they knew that I cared about them.

Another thing that coaches/athletes have is the ability to work together with other people, to work as a team. In his book, Top Performance, Zig Ziglar (1986) talks about the concept of "gel," which means to work together, putting individual gain aside and putting the team, school or students first. I feel that as a principal it is important to work with other



people and give them the opportunity to provide input. Ziglar also identifies five basic rules and thoughts for acquiring cooperation. They are: (a) be sensitive and recognize that you probably do not have all the facts, (b) get along and work with others even if you don't always agree, (c) see things from all perspectives, (d) carefully plan projects and time them for best results, and (e) start out thinking that other people are partially right. For many people these five basic rules and thoughts are hard to accomplish. People have one way of doing things and just do not open their mind to other ways of thinking. Many teachers, with traditional backgrounds and experiences, have a difficult time incorporating some of the newer teaching techniques. One example of this may be the use of computers in their classrooms.

It is equally important that administrators also keep up with current teaching techniques and curriculum concepts. During a personal interview on September 12, 1990, Dr. Jack Christensen, principal of Kenwood Elementary School in the Cedar Rapids Community School District, stated that two of the most important things a principal should be concerned with are that the lesson objectives are being taught and mastered.

Outcomes ensure that the teachers are teaching the right lessons. He feels professional reading is essential for keeping up with current trends in curriculum development. I think it is vital that the principal know the curriculum. The principal should know the scope and sequence of the objectives in the classrooms. Knowing the scope and sequence is only half of the job. The other half is assessing the students "readiness." Principals must know how to meet the needs of the students. Hughes and Ubben (1989) refer to the obstacles that influence development of the curriculum. This also means that principals must be sensitive to the needs of the teachers so they can deliver the curriculum.

When a principal becomes effective in all of these areas, it will enhance their credibility with staff. When I think of curriculum I can't help but think of how textbook publishers are influenced by the large population states which have state text adoptions such as California and Texas. Because such large states mandate that schools use only state-approved textbooks, commercial publishers tailor their materials to reflect the political and ideological ideas of these states leaving the smaller states with little influence

into the writing, editing and promotion of textbooks. This profit motive of publishers has great impact on students throughout the nation and world (Michael Apple, 1985). I feel it is vital that students know and remain current on political issues and trends on a local as well as global level. These issues may have a dramatic affect on students' lifestyles. In order for this to happen, I feel the administrator needs to inform his/her staff that the textbook is not the only source of learning. Resource books about local events and issues, as well as the teacher's professional knowledge, need to be a part of the daily curriculum.

Time is an essential aspect for this type of curriculum to be developed. I think it is essential for staff to share their teaching styles and teaching experiences. Not only is it critical for teachers, but it is equally important for administrators to interact and create bonds in which effective administrative techniques can be shared and developed. In The Energetic Manager, Fred Pryor (1987) expresses that the ultimate responsibility of a leader is to facilitate other people's development as well as his/her own. I feel it is important to encourage staff to participate

in professional development whenever time and money allows.

One very important thing that plays a large role in the effectiveness of an administrator is time. In The Effective Executive, Drucker (1985), suggests that the executive's time tends to belong to everyone else. I think it is very important to have this kind of feeling. This means the principal should have an open door policy which encourages employees to stop in and visit with the principal about any issues. All staff members, from cooks to teachers, need to feel that they can talk to the principal. When staff members feel comfortable talking to the principal, I believe they will work together and trust the principal. I hope to focus on this area by having good listening skills and by helping them arrive at workable solutions. To do this, both my door and my thinking will be open to the personal needs of my staff.

Another area that relates to staff needs is the area of selecting personnel for jobs. Drucker (1985) indicates it is important to use the strength of each person as a building block for joint performance. The effective executive fills positions on the basis of what a person can do. I feel it is equally important

to make jobs demanding and big, so the staff member will feel worthwhile and a part of the school system. I feel if staff members think that their jobs are not important they will not put forth the effort to do a good job. Two things I will keep in mind while organizing personnel will be to never give anyone a job that I would not be willing to do myself. In addition, I will treat everyone the way I would like them to treat me. I will apply this to not only staff members, but everyone that I am in contact with. This kind of attitude will influence all staff members and will help the school create a positive relationship with the community.

It is easy to write these ideas down on paper and say that I will accomplish them. However, it will be difficult to follow through with them unless, as a principal, I continue to evaluate myself. One way to review this is to do a self-assessment and professional growth plan at least once a year. I have had an opportunity to do this before. It really gives a person a lot to think about and a chance to evaluate one's performance. I think it would be good for a principal to seek staff input about different questions from each area of the evaluation. As a principal I

would try to pull out the most important ideas for improving my own performance as an administrator, so that I would be able to help my staff, students and the community reach the school's mission. From my first self-assessment four areas came up as being highest personal priority. They were: leadership behavior, instruction, communication and curriculum.

Under the leadership behavior, I think it is important to provide a school vision to staff and give them opportunity to be involved in helping develop this vision. I think it is important to involve staff in building and developing programs that will help the school fulfill the school's mission.

Under the second priority area, instruction, the most important growth area was learning to make regular assessments of teaching methods and strategies. I feel, as an educator and now as an administrator, it is important to see that the teaching techniques and instructional activities used in the classrooms are appropriate, varied and effective. The only way to do this is to make frequent classroom observations to see what is actually happening.

To be effective in this role, I must be able to recognize good teaching and, when I witness it,

acknowledge and celebrate such successes. When there is a need for improvement, I must be prepared to provide helpful suggestions and coaching. Blanchard and Johnson (1982), talk about goal setting, praising and reprimands as part of supervisory responsibilities. I would learn effective ways of doing these things by attending meetings, seminars and conferences which focus upon effective instruction; by participating in local, state and national professional groups and attending their professional development programs; and by reading professional journals. Such experiences should also contribute to my credibility with staff members.

The third priority area is communication. Communication is clearly an area that is crucial in dealing with the staff, parents, students and the community. I feel one of my strengths is in the area of verbal communication. At parent conferences, interscholastic events and open houses, I have gained valuable experiences in communicating with parents and community members. My current role has also reinforced my ability to communicate with staff members. I recognize that I have some difficulty with written communication and will continue to push myself to

improve this area. The computer has become a very valuable tool to assist my growth.

Another area in which I need to become more effective is in the use of mass media. This is a very good method for showing the community programs that take place in the school. It is important that I look for opportunities for newspaper, radio and television coverage of special events that take place in my school. Newsletters can be utilized to share information with families and friends, but they fail to reach the larger community.

Curriculum is another priority growth area. In order to assure that a multi-cultural, non-sexist and developmentally appropriate program is in place for each child, I will need to gain knowledge about and experiences with curriculum development and implementation. I will encourage teachers to be less isolated, and to integrate overlapping curriculum activities that will help students master basic concepts.

Motivation and response play a large role in the effectiveness of a school (Eisner, 1991). If students learn to take responsibility and get motivated about what they are learning, they will want to learn more



because it will become a enjoyable thing for them to do. Getting students to take charge of their education is also important for later success when they enter the work force.

One evening during class we discussed school culture and how it affects change. Terrence Deal (1991) has described the importance of ceremonies, traditions, rituals, and norms of behavior symbols within the school culture. When I started teaching, I went along with "it's the way we do things around here" because I didn't want to do anything wrong. But as I worked for different principals and was introduced to different styles and ideas of how the school should be organized, I learned more about myself. I found myself willing to risk trying different things. The key was that I realized I didn't have to do the same thing every time. As a principal I think it is important to recognize which teachers will accept change. It's also important to remember that for change to take place it is likely to be gradual and occur over several years. Change that happens quickly usually does not last. People tend to go back to more traditional ways if change is not steadily reinforced until it becomes institutionalized. Stability of staff

can be both a blessing and a serious problem. The school's culture works both for and against change. Learning to manage the culture so it works to the principal's advantage is important. That is why it is necessary to know staff members as well as parents and the community.

One Saturday in April, 1991, I participated in a workshop which focused on interaction management. This workshop was designed to help everyone develop or maintain positive, participative, productive relationships with all of the people that we come into contact with. There were two basic elements that I took away from this workshop. The first was three key principles (Development Dimensions International, 1987) of successful interaction:

1. Maintain or enhance self-esteem
  - a. be specific
  - b. be sincere
2. Listen and respond with empathy
  - a. respond to feelings and content
3. Ask for help in solving the problem
  - a. seek and develop ideas
  - b. provide support without removing responsibility (p. 6)

Implementation of these key principles helps a person communicate and gain commitment from others. They also help people maintain a positive attitude while dealing

with other people. Asking staff for ideas for problem-solving increases their participation and productivity. The key to doing this is to show where and how staff ideas were considered and applied, or why the ideas weren't used. Remember to "gel" (Ziglar, 1986) with the staff.

The second component of this workshop examined the area of "handling complaints." Development Dimensions International (1988) has identified six Critical Steps in handling complaints:

- (a) listen intently and with empathy to the individual,
- (b) get all the details of the complaint and make notes,
- (c) respond by showing that you understand the situation,
- (d) openly present your position,
- (e) decide on a specific follow-up, and
- (f) thank the individual for bringing the complaint to your attention. (p. 4)

These six steps not only helped me as a teacher but also in my new position. These Key Principles and Critical Steps have also helped me deal with situations that occur in my personal life as well. Everyone could benefit from this skill practice and awareness.

During my School and Community class, I became more aware of how much the school is dependent on the

community. Volunteers can be utilized for many activities such as hallway and lunch room monitors, clerical work for teachers and assisting teachers in everyday activities. I also became aware of the vital communication needs between the community and school. Volunteers can help bridge the gap between school and community relations. During my role as activities coordinator I had learned about this type of communication, but during this class I realized the importance of two-way communication. This relates to Kindred, Bagin, Gallapher's (1990) concept of school-community relations. Communication between the school and the community is for the purpose of increasing citizen understanding of educational needs and practices and encouraging intelligent citizen interest and cooperation in the work of improving the school.

During that same summer I took Dr. Decker's class Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction. This class focused on the fundamental principles and key evaluation techniques of teacher evaluation. Before taking this class my idea of teacher evaluation was simple. The principal came in, observed your classroom and submitted a report that went into your file and that was it. Principals would usually look for things

that you were doing wrong. This was meant to make the teacher uncomfortable, so their teaching would improve.

After taking this class and having the opportunity to evaluate a teacher at Price Lab School, my attitudes and ideas have changed. I now believe the evaluation process should be a non-threatening event; an opportunity to learn and grow. All teachers should feel that it is beneficial to receive an evaluation. After participating and learning about the entire evaluation process, the teachers should feel a sense of commitment on the principal's part to help the teacher improve.

As principals we need to ask the question, "What can I do to help you become a better teacher?" We need to facilitate the needs of teachers. All administrators need to be sure that there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student every day learns, grows and feels like a real human being.

I like the way James S. Cangelosi (1991) has summed up evaluations. He describes three steps in the cycle: formative, summative and Professional Improvement Commitment (PIC). These three steps are clear and have helped me sort out what an evaluation is

and what it should do. It is important for the principal to make the evaluation process non-threatening and make it a way to communicate strengths and weaknesses. There also needs to be a true commitment from the teacher to work at their own plan for improvement as well. I feel if both the principal and the teacher work together, feelings of pressure will decrease and the school should benefit.

In the spring of 1992 I had my practicum experience. This provided me an excellent opportunity to become active in the school. When considering a project to do during this practicum, I thought back to the time when my exploratory teaching team got four new members. One of the biggest problems these new staff members had was discipline. They had difficulty remembering how to handle specific situations of each grade. I thought it would be helpful if we unified our discipline plan into a school-wide plan. This would make it possible for teachers to use the same plan and help students more quickly learn how the plan worked and why.

As I began researching the task of how to promote consistency, I first asked each of the grade level teams to explain how they were currently handling

discipline. Each had good ideas and plans, and it seemed that there should be a way where all teachers could use the same basic concept making it possible for students to become familiar with the plan no matter which grade they were in.

As I looked to find a consistent, effective plan, my first thoughts were to ensure that the primary theme would be that all students would take responsibility for their own actions. With the teachers' assistance, students would come up with a plan to get themselves on the right track. The President and Founder of the Institute for Reality Therapy, Dr. William Glasser (1965), addresses these two main objectives as well as the idea of treating students as adults whenever possible. Reality therapy helps people understand that they are responsible for the things they do, think and feel, and it teaches them that there are better ways they can live their lives. In helping people toward this end, the following questions are recommended:

1. What do you want right now in your life?
2. What are you presently doing with your life to get what you want?

If a person won't say what he or she wants, the next question is:

3. What are you presently doing in your life?

As much as possible you ask the person what he or she is doing now, and then ask, "Is what you're doing helping you, or helping you get what you want?" If it isn't, teacher and student plan together to do something different to make a better choice to achieve what the student wants.

At the end of the 1992 school year I made a presentation to the staff, explained my plan, and showed them some of the basic forms that I was asking them to complete. The school year came to a close, and I was left with a majority of the staff wanting to try it.

During the summer our associate principal was removed and placed at a different school. I was provided an opportunity to become the school facilitator. My role was to assume the duties of the previous associate principal.

One of the first things I did was to revise the discipline plan and present it at a staff meeting early in the year. Each grade level received the appropriate forms and was invited to edit them so that they would be developmentally appropriate. The school-wide program was then launched and seems to be working



very well. Feedback and suggestions from staff on how this procedure is working will be used to make necessary modifications.

If I were to single out two areas that have changed from my role as a teacher to my role as an administrator, the first would be the demands made on personal time. An administrator's time seems to go by so quickly. There is always something that needs to be done, or a student that requires some attention. I relate this feeling back to growing up on the farm. About the time you think you're caught up, 10 more things need to be done. I also find the principal frequently has three to five things on his/her mind at all times and is expected to think and respond quickly. Many times staff or students want or need an answer right away. You must be able to make decisions that will not have negative impact on the whole school. Being a principal means you have the opportunity to impact many people. Just one decision may impact the whole school.

The second area is the need for organization. The principal needs to have the ability to organize people to work for him/her. Secretaries, custodians, food service employees, aides and volunteers all play a very

important role in keeping the school ready for teachers and students. Peters and Waterman (1982), suggest that we must create a sense of us, not the typical we/they paradigm. The concept of instilling ownership into workers is important. They need to know their roles and what you expect from them.

As I reflect upon my impressions of administrators when I was a child, and think about where and what I am doing today, I have a difficult time believing the extent of personal growth and understanding about the role of the principal. I do know that being a full-time administrator will be a new "learning experience" each day, and I look forward to the challenge!

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