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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

One of the fundamental elements of society is education. From the earliest stages of my educational program I've experienced a desire to be an influential part of this process. I have been blessed with a stable, loving family life and an educational experience filled with instructional leaders that instilled in me a desire to learn. To be a small piece of a child's life in this same sense would be the ultimate high for me. Green (1987) pointed out that effective, quality leaders possess a conscience of leadership. "By conscience I mean simply the many ways we have to be critical of ourselves and others in the performance of our life tasks" (p. 110). Barth ( 1990) described a "community of learners" (p. 513) in which each member brings with him or her an individual conscience depending upon background and experience. Green (1987) suggested that this conscience is guided by the "voices of craft, membership, duty, memory, and imagination" (p.110).

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY

SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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One of the fundamental elements of society is education. From the earliest stages of my educational program I've experienced a desire to be an influential part of this process. I have been blessed with a stable, loving family life and an educational experience filled with instructional leaders that instilled in me a desire to learn. To be a small piece of a child's life in this same sense would be the ultimate high for me. Green (1987) pointed out that effective, quality leaders possess a conscience of leadership. "By conscience I mean simply the many ways we have to be critical of ourselves and others in the performance of our life tasks" (p. 110). Barth (1990) described a "community of learners" (p. 513) in which each member brings with him or her an individual conscience depending upon background and experience. Green (1987) suggested that this conscience is guided by the "voices of craft, membership, duty, memory, and imagination" (p.110).

It is the effective leader that can manage this diversity for the benefit of the learning environment. The "voices" I hear drive me to make a difference in the future lives of today's children. I feel I can accomplish this by being a positive role model who is excited to learn and is continually learning. I feel I can accomplish this by encouraging actively engaged learning by all members in our community of learners. I truly believe that I will make sound decisions on all matters

since my ultimate goal is to do what's best for kids. Having an administrative degree and fulfilling a position in the principalship will allow me to accomplish this goal.

Because of increasing pressure on education at the national and state levels, I believe the educational process as we now know it will undergo an essential transformation. Personally, I have strong beliefs and ideas to follow and lead with once I do gain an administrative role.

## Transforming Education

Educational critics accuse today's schools of continuing to teach in the same manner as grandpa was taught. Youth leaving the system today are emerging into a highly techno-logical society totally unlike the one of years past. It has been suggested that more class time will help to remedy the problem.

I feel this is not the answer because if more of the same is done we are still not meeting the future needs of students. This will only work if what is done during class time is altered. I feel our future lies in challenging today's youth by encouraging higher order thinking skills, time on task, problem solving, and updated curriculum.

To produce higher order thinking skills instruction must be designed to require higher order answers of application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation as suggested by Bloom's

taxonomy (cited in Doll, 1992). The demands of many career opportunities of the future are unforseen. It is vital that effective schools undergoing transformation prepare students for these demands. Higher order thinking skills will allow the student to adopt to these futuristic situations.

Doll (1992) suggested that effective use of time on task is demonstrated by the instructional leader who begins class promptly, maintains a minimum amount of time on managerial tasks and strives to reduce transition time. When a competent teacher implements time on task effectively, the student benefits by receiving optimum learning time. Transformation lends itself to promoting effective use of time for instruction.

Due to unforseeable demands of the future, an educator must have the capability to instill in youth the desire to face challenges with the goal of solving them. Experience in problem solving strategies will enable the student to realize there are numerous acceptable options. Acceptance of this realization will foster in them the ability to select the most appropriate option.

An innovative curriculum in today's schools should reflect the technology of the future and provide the framework for each student to become a productive member of society. Updating the curriculum during the transformation process

will give each student this experience in problem solving for situations in their future.

Allan Collins (1990) supported my opinion that this transformation which includes technology is inevitable. This is due to the pressures of the job market which will force the schools to adopt technology in the schools. This adoption into the curriculum will be one of coaching rather than lecturing and one of collaboration rather than one of competition.

One pilot project, Earth Lab, based its rationale upon the fact that students should use technology the way real scientists do: to communicate and share data for the purpose of collaboration. Technology provided the support to break down the boundaries between the disciplines promoting an integrated learning system. Students became more motivated as they were given more control over their own work rather than having it tightly controlled by the school schedule. Dennis Newman (1992) reported insight from this project when he stated, "technology can be a catalyst in the creation of new structures for learning" (p. 308).

Transformation supports the notion that our educational system as we currently know it needs to undergo significant changes in these areas. A classroom teacher since 1971, I have been a part of the initial steps of this transformation. By being involved as an educator I feel I am at an advantage and I
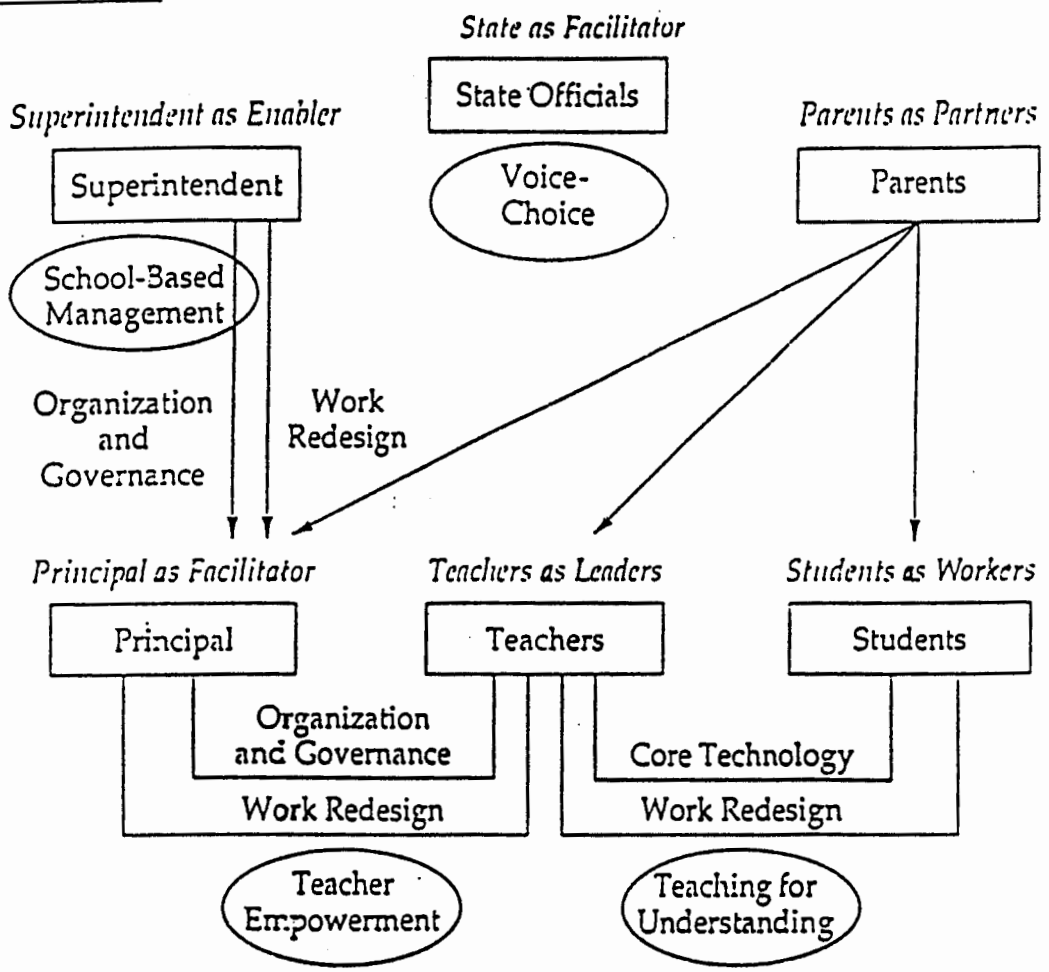
possess an insight to further assist in the shaping of today's youth as an instructional leader. The effective instructional leader will serve as a model by implementing each of these skills and techniques in his or her daily routine. As a new leader in administration, I feel challenged and confident to guide in such transformation.

Over the years, however, I have come to the realization that the major decisions concerning curriculum, parent-teacher relations, discipline, and other vital issues in the educational process are ultimately determined by the administrative team. By being involved in the educational community, I have noticed a shift in the direction of this power from top down to one of collaborative teamwork.

Collaboration

This trend is highly inspiring to me because it suggests the cooperation and communication of all educators involved, pooling their resources for the success of the student. Joseph Murphy's (1992) research stated educational restructuring generally involves systemic changes in one or more of the following: "institutionalized and governance structures, work roles and the organizational environment, the teaching-learning process, and connections between the school and the community" (p. 9). Figure 1 (Murphy, 1992, p. 10) illustrated these changes in a framework relatively easy to comprehend

FIGURE 1.    Restructuring Schools: A Conceptual Framework

_State as Facilitator_

┌─────────────────┐
│ State Officials │
└─────────────────┘

_Superintendent as Enabler_                                    _Parents as Partners_

┌──────────────────┐        ⟨ Voice-      ⟩        ┌──────────────┐
│  Superintendent  │        ⟨ Choice      ⟩        │   Parents    │
└──────────────────┘                               └──────────────┘

⟨ School-Based  ⟩
⟨ Management    ⟩

Organization        Work
and                 Redesign
Governance

_Principal as Facilitator_        _Teachers as Leaders_        _Students as Workers_

┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────────┐
│  Principal   │        │   Teachers   │        │   Students   │
└──────────────┘        └──────────────┘        └──────────────┘

Organization                        Core Technology
and Governance

Work Redesign                       Work Redesign

⟨ Teacher       ⟩        ⟨ Teaching for    ⟩
⟨ Empowerment   ⟩        ⟨ Understanding   ⟩

for such a complex process. The boxes represent key actors such as parents, teachers, students, and the principal. I feel Murphy suggests a positive collaborative experience occurring with his use of the terms principal as facilitator, teachers as leaders, students as workers, and parents as partners. The circles represent four strategies at the crux of restructuring to transform schools: school-based management, voice-choice, teacher empowerment, and teaching for understanding. From this figure it becomes obvious that teamwork is the focal point of educating and the interrelationships between the actors play a major role in each student's success. This way of thinking is representative of how I envision a positive learning environment.

This figure also points out that restructuring can be initiated in a number of areas and consist of a number of different strategies, depending upon the vision and beliefs of the district (Elmore, 1989). The framework is also designed to signal clearly that real education transformation will require the involvement of all the key players, work on all components of the system, and simultaneous use of the four distinct but interrelated restructuring strategies (Murphy, 1992). I feel that my beliefs are aligned to be this kind of facilitator. Effective leadership involves combining these

facets along with my own personal style to form a well-rounded leader.

## Effective Leadership

### Team Leader

An effective team leader encourages input from staff and values their insight on current issues and controversial situations. There are numerous situations when I will share the decision making with the faculty to instill in them a feeling of being a necessary ingredient for success. Saphier, Bigda-Peyton, and Pierson (1988) stated, "it is important for school leaders to do everything possible to ensure that the decision-making process binds staff members together and leads to legitimate decisions" (p. 2). I am basically relation-ship motivated and many of my strengths will be enhanced using this style. I feel I have been consciously improving my communication and listening skills and now count them both as strengths. However, in certain situations there will not be time for group interaction on decision making and I will be required to decide what to do based on knowledge gained through my masters program and personal experiences.

In a principalship, one has the best of both worlds. One world is a power position with many decisions resting on one's shoulders. The other world includes tapping the expertise of the faculty. I feel I am capable of modeling a teamwork

attitude by demonstrating a willingness and eagerness to collaborate with staff members. As a principal, one should value input on issues and follow through with appropriate actions. By doing this, the faculty will understand the importance of shared decision making and feel that each individual is actually heard.

Listener

In conjunction with teamwork, I plan to be an effective listener who acts upon what has been heard. A visionary principal adopts many ways of discovering what faculty members are thinking. Some methods, such as attitude polls, are more concrete; others, such as an open door policy, are more abstract . Because each listening method has its drawbacks, relying upon one specific method will not produce a sense of the whole picture.

Incorporating a combination of basic components will result in an open line of communication between staff members and the administrative team. Chernow and Chernow (1976) reported these components to aid in effective listening: "put listening on a systematic basis, use a combination of listening methods, and utilize the information you receive, not merely to assess employee morale, but as a guide to basic management decisions" (p. 25). Although these components are crucial to listening and communicating, without positive daily

interaction, visibility, and accessibility these facets are purely superficial.

If a principal is not perceived as approachable and accessible, numerous dilemmas could arise as a result. For example, a teacher expressed concern to the administrator about behavioral problems of a particular student that disrupted the classroom environment on three separate occasions. However, the first two incidents were not addressed seriously by the administration. By the third time, the teacher felt frustrated and unsupported in coping with this situation. Therefore, the problem was never addressed or resolved. This exemplifies how crucial listening can be to the principal, the staff, and the students because without effective listening everyone suffers.

Improving listening techniques by truly hearing what is being said in words and truly hearing what is being said in the actions of the staff will encourage a team approach. As a principal, if I express sincere concern and respect when communicating with faculty, then hopefully the staff will exhibit these same traits. By obtaining feedback from listening to staff and by acting efficiently on all comments, the principal will constantly be striving to grow professionaly to serve as a model learner for others.

## Model Learner

It is impossible to think that by serving the role of principal one will automatically be a part of a quality learning environment. It is suggested by Barth (1990) that principals serve as the model learner by being an active participant in their own learning and making their learning visible and exciting to those surrounding them. He warned against becoming collaborative only after realizing that goals cannot be attained by individual effort alone. Judith Warren Little (cited in Barth, 1990) stated that a good operational definition of collegiality in schools includes four specific behaviors:

> Adults in schools talk about practice. These conversations about teaching and learning are frequent, continuous, concrete, and precise. Adults in schools observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching and administration. These observations become the practice to reflect on and talk about. Adults engage together in work on curriculum by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum. Finally, adults in schools teach each other what they know about teaching, learning, and leading. Craft knowledge is revealed, articulated, and shared. (p. 31)

When principals, teachers, students, and parents are all striving to grow in their knowledge, truly a community of learners will exist. An excellent foundation for this community is a mutual trust between the administration and faculty.

Trust

As I view it, generating and sustaining a trust between the staff, students, and myself is the basis of a successful principalship. By consistent, positive actions, I would hope the community of learners would come to realize that I am on their side and that the relationship would be predictable and never changing (Barth, 1990). I believe trust is difficult to generate but extremely easy to lose. I am certain it involves numerous positive interactions.

Besides the trust faculty should have for me, I too should have ultimate trust in their actions and methods. It is necessary as an administrator to possess respect and to demonstrate support in staff members' abilities to educate the youth. If this mutual trust does not exist, progress will be extremely difficult to achieve.

Progress is also being deterred because of a paradigm that places women in the role of a teacher and not in one of an administrator. However, times have changed as more women move into leadership positions. "Society is finally beginning

to appreciate the fact that women complement rather than compete with the strength of male managers" (Cantor & Bernay, 1992, p.37). This way of thinking will enable women to be accepted and eventually appreciated as female leaders.

Female Leaders

The percentage of full-time female principals has nearly doubled over the last five years. In 1985-86, 8.7% of full-time public school principals were female. That number has risen to 16.5% in 1991-92. Of nonpublic school principals, 43.6% were female in 1991-92 (Iowa Department of Education, 1993). These figures are somewhat explainable by the growing acceptance of these three phrases: power and women; women in power; and powerful women. Cantor and Bernay (1992) suggested that these phrases at first seem incongruent. I agree. The stereotypical idea of women and femininity does not seem to include the idea of power. It is not surprising that women traditionally have not held positions of power.

Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary, edited by Soukhanov and Ellis (1988), lists 15 definitions of power. The ones that best represent my idea of power are the following: "the ability or capacity to act or perform effectively; strength or force exerted or capable of being exerted; and the ability or official capacity to exercise control over others" (p. 922). I define power as the ability to get

things done. I intend to develop and use the power of persuasion rather than the power of position. Through modeling and being visible as a learner myself, I feel I will be successful.

Carol Shakeshaft (cited in Griffiths, Stout & Forsyth, 1988) explained that an important factor to consider is that "the profiles and history of women administrators are not the same as the profiles and history of men in administation" (p. 403). These different points of view can be incorporated into education and result in a broad-based attitude toward leadership. Females possess a nuturing sensitivity in interacting with individuals whereas males tend to be more assertive and dominant (Santrock, 1993). This contrast in interpersonal skills is evident in their leadership styles and their methods of communicating.

In any aspect of society, a discomfort exists when the opposite sex and the degree of power are combined. For example, a male teacher would likely be more reluctant to express a concern to a female administrator than to a male administrator (cited in Griffiths et al., 1988). To avoid this paradigm my beliefs will drive my administrative role to be one of trying to look less authoritarian, less in charge, and less threatening in an effort to be effective.

Through my language and appearance I will strive to adopt a consideration style rather than a dominant style.

Beliefs

The quality leader must have strong beliefs and the ability to communicate these beliefs to others. This involves taking risks because change can be uncomfortable and painful. This also involves breaking down paradigms that may have caused the learning environment to become stagnant. While viewing a video narrated by Joel Barker (1988) I was exposed to the idea that paradigms become bad when they become "the" paradigm. As a principal, it will be my responsibility to prevent any paradigms from stifling the future of education.

My beliefs will enable me to be aware of when to intervene and when not to, and will constantly guide my preparation for how to best meet the specific needs of the students and staff. In an administrative role, I will be the sounding board of the entire faculty's concerns. I believe it will be my responsibility to perceive what constitutes a problem and what does not. This belief will play a crucial role in promoting consensus in the learning environment. Due to the challenges educators face from society, this bond among the community of learners is critical.

New Challenges for Schools

## Changing Families

With the increase of working mothers, blended families, and single parent families there is an increase on the demands imposed on the school. In 1990, almost 13 million children, two million more than in 1980, lived in single parent families (Center for the Study of Social Policy and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1992). These changes in the way children are raised have had an apparent effect on the way students learn. If a child is feeling pressure from home, the learning environment might not seem as important. Hughes and Ubben (1989) noted that a student is actually caught in a crossfire between curricular demands and outside pressures. These outside influences are accelerated if the family is financially unstable.

## Poverty

One out of every four children under the age of five currently lives in poverty, a statistic educators experience each and every day (Clayton, 1993). Living in poverty almost always assures that a child's basic fundamental needs are not being met. Millions of children come to school hungry, sick, or abused which in turn makes them physically, emotionally, and developmentally unprepared to learn. I feel such a condition

pushes the educational system to become more involved because these children are the key to our future.

One strategy for a visionary educational leader to address this situation is to become knowledgeable about and to support the development of public prekindergarten programs.

## Prekindergarten Programs

President Bush and the governors serving on the National Education Goals Panel set six educational goals to be accomplished by the year 2000. Goal one states that all children in America will start school ready to learn (Lancaster & Lawrence, 1992). In order for this goal to become a reality I feel early intervention is a must. Enrollment in prekindergarten programs is on the upswing. Snyder's 1986 study (cited in Kagan, 1990) reported that from 1970 to 1980 early childhood programs increased by 81%, and between 1980 and 1985, these programs increased another 25%. The percentage of 3- to 5-year-olds enrolled in prekindergarten programs grew from 37% to 55% between 1970 and 1985, and the number of children in this age group has been increasing since 1979. Even though prekindergarten enrollment is at an all-time high, it is expected to continue to rise in the 1990's.

These trends express the urgent need for educators, parents, and community members to join together to ensure

that all children will be ready to learn upon entering the formal K-12 educational system. ASCD President Knoll (cited in Warger, 1988) proclaimed the greatest hope for change lies in investing in those at the beginning of the system to break the chain of failure. In 1986 the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) established guidelines that would help to create a quality program. The guidelines (cited in Bauch, 1988) identify five main components in a quality program: (1) staffing patterns, (2) teacher qualifi-cations, (3) comprehensive services, (4) curriculum, and (5) parent participation.

With these guidelines as indicators of a quality program I feel I will maintain a focus in the leadership traits that will be required of me in the principalship. I truly believe that all children can succeed and the foundation for that must be in place at the onset of a child's educational experience.

## Conclusions

As a prospective instructional leader, I envision numerous roles that I must assume. One of the key roles is that of a team leader in establishing appropriate curricula that will progressively support and build on learning and development during early childhood years. It is imperative that futuristic instructional leaders incur the broadest

possible visionary perspective in defining and addressing curriculum challenges.

One of my goals is that I may be a proponent of the prekindergarten program so that all children enter our traditional school system ready to learn. Today, education is in the national arena. Society is looking for a new vision of education for all children. Hodgkinson (1991) used the analogy that American education is like a house. At one point in time the house was well maintained. But over time the owners have neglected the house and allowed it to deteriorate. First, the roof began to leak and as the leak went unrepaired the leak trickled down through the floors. "The leaky roof in our educational house is a metaphor for the spectacular changes that have occurred in the nature of the children that come to school" (p. 10). Because of the immense involvement in improving the system, it is an opportune time to be on the ground level and have immediate contact with the innovative changes to come.

My expectations for the principalship are high. Exposure to and gaining understanding of essential qualities needed for the role of an educational leader of the 90's has been like a surge of electricity flowing through my veins. I strongly believe that goals should be made and target dates be set. One must have something to aim for if progress is to be attained. I

have a desire to improve situations and I feel gratification when jobs are completed. It takes diligent work to be a principal and I feel I have this very necessary quality. Through high expectations, goal setting, and hard work I expect to be rewarded and to gain expertise in reaching my administrative potential.

Through current research available on teacher-principal collaboration, public prekindergarten programs, and transforming schools for the future my beliefs, goals and vision have been reinforced. These beliefs are merely a starting point to assist me in attaining my goals while my vision will always be beyond my fingertips. Dr. Else (personal communication, November 25, 1991) stated that, "Vision is what you believe should and can be!" If I'm to be an effective, quality leader these beliefs may be modified due to my administrative experiences and my continual professional development. What an exciting, fulfilling career I am about to undertake!

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