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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Trikelle M. Otkins  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

### Abstract

Upon deciding to become an elementary school administrator, I came to a frightening conclusion that I might be one of the key elements in the school that may determine the success or failure of all students. It will be my demeanor that would help to create the climate. It will be my daily mood that helps set the tone. I could be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I could humiliate or honor, hurt or heal. In a variety of situations, it will be my response that decides whether a crisis would be escalated or deescalated. I could be the most effective school administrator or the administrator that creates a climate of distrust and unsuccessful experiences for students, faculty, supporting staff, parents, and community.

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

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**A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
and Counseling  
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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education**

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**by  
TriKelle M. Otkins  
July 1995**

This Research Paper by: Trikelle M. Otkins

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper  
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Education.

Dale R. Jackson

July 28, 1995  
Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor/Director of  
Research Paper

Dave Else

7-31-95  
Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Second Reader of  
Research Paper

8.14.95  
Date Approved

Michael D. Waggoner  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Head, Department of  
Educational Administration  
and Counseling

Upon deciding to become an elementary school administrator, I came to a frightening conclusion that I might be one of the key elements in the school that may determine the success or failure of all students. It will be my demeanor that would help to create the climate. It will be my daily mood that helps set the tone. I could be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I could humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In a variety of situations, it will be my response that decides whether a crisis would be escalated or de-escalated. I could be the most effective school administrator or the administrator that creates a climate of distrust and unsuccessful experiences for students, faculty, supporting staff, parents, and community.

After visualizing all the possibilities, I could be perceived as, I questioned my abilities of becoming an effective administrator. Could I be an effective administrator? Could I fulfill all requirements expected? And what does it take to be an effective administrator? In order to have an idea where I stand in answering these questions, I first must examine my values, beliefs, and theoretical ideas about the

administrator's role, the principal. How I might see my future as an administrator.

### Personal Characteristics

Although, my parents did not continue their education beyond high school, they constantly expressed their concern about me continuing my education. As a family, we lived a comfortable life. We had summer vacations, all the essentials were provided; food, clothing, and shelter, and the majority of our wants were fulfilled. So naturally, I questioned the need to continue my education beyond high school. My parents explained how they made the best out of what was available to them. They consistently expressed having made the mistake of becoming comfortable and satisfied with their present conditions. At the time, my father was a laborer and my mother was a retail sales associate. They promised each other to go beyond the call of duty to strengthen the character of their children to want more out of life, to seek knowledge, and never settle for just anything. Parents create the conditions at home that make children want to learn at school (Honig, 1985). Thanks to my parents, I am proud to be me and there is no person I would rather be, but me.

Not all children are as fortunate as me to have parents motivating, cooperating, and supporting them during their educational development. But I am willing to go far and beyond the call of duty to grant each child the opportunity I had. I want the child to be excited about coming to school. Whatever I can do to stimulate the child about the educational process, I will do. If I can build their self-concept, strengthen their pride, and gain their respect as their principal, their desire to learn may come naturally.

I will constantly seek improvement and growth. Education is a never ending process and is constantly changing. The children are not the only learners in the school building. As an administrator, I must continue to grow professionally. Hencley, McCleary, and McGrath (1970) stated:

Some professional commitments that should be addressed through your professional career: (a) a commitment to development of a mature concept of the principal's mission; (b) a commitment to leadership; (c) a commitment to continuous improvement, self-education, active participation in professional learning; and (d) a commitment to building the profession. (p. 329)

Having an understanding of these commitments can help make the administrative role much more effective. However, while growing and developing professionally, there is a variety of duties and responsibilities that an effective administrator must consider.

#### An Effective Administrator

Without long term commitment and dedication, effectiveness as an administrator is not possible. If an individual can tolerate frustration, is stimulated by challenges, and is a competent decision maker, then educational administration as a profession can be a possible interest. The position requires long hours and stressful days. Holding an administrative position is not just a job, but it also becomes a part of your lifestyle.

The greatest contribution, as an administrator, is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student learns, grows, and feels like a real human being. There are so many of our children that have been deprived from receiving a good education, not because it was not there for them, but because no one ever instilled in them that desire to want to learn. Administrators should make a concerted effort to assure that every student, under their



leadership or guidance, receives adequate educational support. As Bradfield noted, "That classroom teachers and administrators have a common goal, the best possible education for children" (Bradfield, 1970, p. 311). The principal should provide the teachers the support needed for students to develop and grow emotionally, educationally, and spiritually. The teacher is just one of the inducements of a child's education. The primary source is the home and family structure.

The attitudes, values, and behavior of the family and it's social network strongly affect's a child's development (Comer, 1980). The family is the basic foundation in which children learn who they are, where they fit in society, and what kind of future they are likely to explore. The parents are the primary educators that have the opportunity to follow the child's progress from year to year. So, administrators must establish a professional, educational, and personal relationship with the families of our students. Be sure the families understand who you are, your intentions as a principal, and what the school's expectations are for their child's education. On an elementary level, the school and family relationship is

essential. By obtaining a relationship with the families, the child has a greater opportunity of reaching his/her highest level of learning. Not only will learning take place at school, but also at home.

#### An Effective School

As an administrator, you are responsible for the effectiveness of the school. Student achievement stems from the foundation and the base of the instructional program and the climate of the school. Edmonds (1979) argued that "The behavior of the school is critical in determining the quality of the students' education" (p. 22). The following are some common attributes of effective schools: (a) high instructional expectations; (b) assertive leadership by principals; (c) an orderly, work oriented atmosphere; (d) an academic emphasis; (e) ongoing monitoring of student achievement, and (f) collaborative planning allowing collegial relationships between teachers and principals (Weber, 1973). An administrator must be able to change, strengthen, and improve all areas that are preventing the school from being effective.

During my practicum, I received an opportunity to experience a school, in my opinion, that I would consider very effective. The school displayed all the

characteristics of an effective school. The principal worked hand-in-hand with her faculty and staff in developing and maintaining a climate that is conducive for a students development and growth. There were programs of many interest that were being implemented to help make learning exciting. The school reached out to parents emphasizing they were there to service them and their children, not to be afraid to come and get involved. The parents must realize the important part they play in their child's educational development. As Concha Delgado-Gaitan (1991) pointed out, "The difference between parents who participate and those who don't is that those who do have recognized that they are a critical part in their children's education" (p. 35). The bottom line is the students and future administrators should understand that an effective school is simply a result of an effective principal.

#### Key Administrative Characteristics

No one person has a greater influence upon every phase of school life than the administrator. The administrator can effect the conduct of students, the attitudes of teachers, and the organization of the school. One poor teacher on a faculty is bad, but a

weak administrator can ruin a school's educational capacity. So, administrators must be clear on their vision of an effective administrator (Levine, 1991).

### Vision

A clear, distinctive characteristic of an effective administrator is his/her vision. When the administrator clearly states the mission or vision of the school, the staff and faculty can begin to prepare some goals on how to obtain this vision. The school then advances from out of that conceptual, abstract world into a more concrete world of action. Years ago, I overheard a professor talking to a particular student about her future plans and goals and there was this one quote the professor said I shall never forget. She told the student, "Remember, vision without action is merely a dream, action without vision just passes time, and vision with action can change the world" (Barker, 1991).

### Instructional Leader

An effective administrator must also be an instructional leader. In order to monitor student progress, set expectations, and assist teachers in making instructional improvements, the administrator must be knowledgeable about the curriculum. "The heart

of effective leadership lies with the understanding of the curriculum" (Kanpol & Weisz, 1990, p.17). If the administrator is not knowledgeable about the curriculum he or she cannot assist in improvements. However, improvements often generate changes, and having a view to change, you must be knowledgeable of the facts involved. As an instructional leader, the principal's role in assisting teachers can possibly include several functions: identifying goals and objectives, selecting and organizing content, learning different activities, becoming familiar with different teaching/learning styles, and being able to measure/evaluate student outcomes or effectiveness of the instruction (Andrew & Smith, 1993). The principal must become familiar with the population he/she is addressing and an awareness of the curriculum being taught.

As an instructional leader, evaluation is also a tool used to improve instruction. "Evaluations are to promote improvement, not a strategy used toward termination" (R. Decker, personal communication, October 21, 1994). Effective instruction will be important to the faculty when it is emphasized by the administrator. An evaluation process should be viewed as a positive process toward improvement.

Administrators want teachers to respond to feedback about their teaching, to strive for self-awareness, to monitor and evaluate their decisions, and to improve themselves professionally (Garmston, 1987). The administrator is there to help, not hinder, the performer. The evaluation process aids the performer in recognizing vital points they are unable to recognize. It is a continuing process that takes place for a duration of time and evaluations are just the first step.

#### Ability to Change

An administrator must be flexible, seeking new challenges, and have a willingness to change. Society has changed sociologically and technologically and in order to promote life long learners, the schools must change also. New technologies and social changes associated with modernity have created new sets of experiences, influences, and opportunities for children (Horowitz & O'Brien, 1989). As an administrator, be aware of all the new technology that can assist our students in developing and growing. In education, the word change is a scary thought. It's a process that must be approached cautiously. Share with the staff the proposed changes, and ask for input and ideas that

may assist in the transition. The single most important factor as a precondition to changing oneself, changing your classroom, or changing the school is that of human support (Glickman, 1979). If there is no support, you are indeed heading for failure. For reform or change to take place, support will be needed from everyone.

#### Commitment to Shared Decision Making

Implementation of the shared decision making process is also a characteristic of an effective administrator. Administrators must be willing to give the faculty the opportunity to be partial owners in decisions. The principal should be willing to accept, respect, and respond to ideas and honesty, that may be different from their own. As educators, we must be able to agree, disagree, collaborate, and still reach decisions that are in the best interest of the students. Using this process, allows the principal to gain valuable knowledge and information from different sources.

The shared decision making process also opens the communication channels between the administrator and staff. It helps to establish trust, confidence, and gives the teachers a better understanding of the

functions of the school. The administrator must create a climate where teachers are comfortable with their surroundings. A climate where teachers can teach and children can learn.

#### Personal Professional Vision

When people sense a deep purpose and a personal commitment in the leader, they are more than willing to be led; they choose to follow (Snyder, Dowd & Houghton, 1994).

As I reflect on all the course work, personal experiences, and practicum experiences I received during the program, the foundation of my vision truly originates from the interest I have in the education of children. I believe there is a lack of interest among educators in the educational process that is preventing students from reaching their highest learning potential. As an administrator, I will try to instill in as many educators as possible the importance, the enthusiasm, and the passion to want to teach our children. Unfortunately, in today's changing society, educators may be the only adults that have or take the time to explore the hearts of children (Wilmore, 1992).

Children are our most valuable resource. Their brains are like roses, just waiting to bloom. Some



bloom faster than others, but every child can learn. Patience is essential (Meyer, 1994). I want the faculty to explore all the unique and remarkable qualities of children. Be patient, give the child a chance, and it's nothing more pleasurable than observing a child learn, and you being the teacher. As an administrator, my vision involves finding that particular piece to help educators discover the reward of self-gratification of teaching children. Some educators have become so "sophisticated" or so "professional" that they lose sight of what it's really all about, the children.

My vision involves viewing the school as a moral community. Moral connections are strong because they come from commitments of shared values and beliefs that teachers, parents, and students accept, and the other obligations they feel toward each other and their work (Sergiovanni, 1994). Collaboration is the key. Collaboration is defined as process used to reach goals that cannot be achieved acting singly. As a process, collaboration is a means to an end, not an end in itself (Payzant, 1992).

As an administrator, I will try to establish a school that is part of a caring community. A school

that understands that peers, neighborhoods, and families help shape the lives of children. They are all influential factors of a child's world, and the nature of that world can determine the character of that child. So, as an administrator, I would like a school that is in touch with the emotional and social aspects that may effect a student's development and growth.

The administrators and teachers who are most likely to reach out to the community are those who have a sense of the urgency of the nation's urban educational and social problems, who are willing to see themselves as part of both the problem and the solution, who don't find outrageous the belief that all children can learn and succeed, and who see that teachers and administrators can benefit from improved connections with families (Davis, 1991).

My vision tends to drift away from the concept of traditional education. As educators, we somehow believe the importance of what we do in a school is based upon how well the children perform on given tasks, I slightly disagree. In today's society, there are so many issues that need to be addressed outside the classroom, such as poverty, drugs, child

abuse (sexual & physical), that can have a profound impact on a student's academic achievement. We need to focus our attention on the complete development of a child; not just the educational aspect of it. Eisner (1991) stated:

The important effects of schools are located in the kinds of lives that children lead outside school and the kinds of satisfaction they pursue there. In research terms, the major dependent variables of schooling are not the scores on standardized achievement test, whether norm-or-criterion-referenced: they are the kinds of ideas children are willing to explore on their own, the kinds of critical skills they are able to employ on tasks outside classrooms, and the strength of curiosity in pursuing the issues they will inevitably encounter in the course of their lives.

(p. 11)

We, as educators, are trying to promote and develop lifelong learners. No, we cannot solve all the issues of society, but we can show we care, and we do understand. In today's society, we need educators to get involved, be concerned, and look toward the future

because the children are our future. My vision is to "Take responsibility for the next generation."

#### Conclusion

Upon entering the educational administration program at the University of Northern Iowa, I knew I wanted to become an administrator, but I did not have a complete understanding of what it took to be an effective administrator. Now, as I complete the Masters program, I feel the university has prepared me well for the difficult tasks and challenges of the administrative field.

As a future administrator, I do not have the answers to all the educational problems, but I do have a "vision." My vision involves having a school that is a caring community. A place where children enjoy going and learning; a home away from home. A school that promotes the development of all students regardless of race, creed, or thier socio-economic conditions. I want a faculty that addresses the complete development of students. Teachers that are not afraid to get involved outside the teaching profession. We, as educators, must begin to take responsibility for the next generation.

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