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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

The educational field has always been an important arena in my family. My Grandmother often related stories about her experiences in rural Iowa schools. My Mother also began her career in a one room school and worked very hard to finally earn her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1970. I remember both women discussing the teaching profession and realized the importance they placed on learning and educational success. I know that part of the reason that I entered teaching was to become part of the profession that was placed in such high regard in my family. Other reasons for entering teaching included a deep love of children, a belief in the ideals set by President John Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and a strong sense of moral responsibility for the future of the country and world.

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

**A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education**

**by
Patricia M. Powell
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Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Education.

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The educational field has always been an important arena in my family. My Grandmother often related stories about her experiences in rural Iowa schools. My Mother also began her career in a one room school and worked very hard to finally earn her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1970. I remember both women discussing the teaching profession and realized the importance they placed on learning and educational success. I know that part of the reason that I entered teaching was to become part of the profession that was placed in such high regard in my family. Other reasons for entering teaching included a deep love of children, a belief in the ideals set by President John Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and a strong sense of moral responsibility for the future of the country and world.

I graduated from Oregon State University in 1972 and began my teaching career in Missouri in the public school system. After two painful experiences with administrators, I returned to Iowa and was hired by the parochial system and

have remained in this system. I taught for fourteen years and worked with seven different administrators. These seven women and the previous three men in Missouri have definitely influenced my perception of administration and have given me a set of standards that I would like to be judged by. I have worked with highly trained professionals who were authoritative, autocratic and highly successful. I have worked with unskilled and unprofessional administrators who have been authoritative, autocratic and watched students and teacher struggling to just complete the school year. Other administrators that I have worked with have been sensitive, caring, and have encouraged leadership qualities in myself and others.

The parochial system has a program that has been in operation for many years entitled "Teacher as Leader". I became involved in the program for two years, beginning in 1987. This was my first experience in being responsible for total school projects and providing in-service to the faculty.

In this program, personality traits and discussions on leadership style and characteristics of quality leaders, helped the participants to identify personal traits that others had seen and develop a strong commitment to using those traits and qualities in administration opportunities. Several tools were used in this program that appeared again in the remaining course work at the University of Northern Iowa, including a thorough processing of information on leadership style and effectiveness. The "Strength Deployment Inventory" was a unique opportunity for me to analyse myself and to have some input as to what others saw as strength areas.

The information that this first inventory of self analysis was interesting in that I had never seen myself as a leader, nor had I any intentions of ever becoming an administrator. I saw myself as an average to above average teacher, and that I had been assigned certain types students because my personality and classroom style were suited to

students who needed structure and nurturing. I did not see that these particular qualities or personality traits could possibly lead to a change in career or focus in my educational field. I felt that others would see me as competent as a teacher and that I was able to undertake problems and solve them head-on. I had no idea that teachers saw me as a significant components of the structure of the school and that I was viewed as a powerful figure in the school structure.

In looking back to the beginning of my course work at the University of Northern Iowa, I feel that becoming aware of and tuning into high quality administrative publications was a turning point. The first class that required my exploration of "*Educational Leadership*" , "*Principal*", and "*Kappan*" was Introduction to Administration. I had confined my reading to teacher focused publications that aided in daily planning and ideas, not enrichment and researched focused articles. I was interested in reading the

publications because of the innovations and new ideas that seem to pack every publication. The sense of renewal I felt after reading these publications was rewarding. I have tried to make sure that some part of my day includes some type of journal reading. I've learned that as an administrator, I need time to envision new ideas and concepts in the educational field.

The first real theoretical concept that I encountered in the Introductions to Administration class was the Guba/Getzels (1957) model describing the idiographic and nomothetic components of an organization and the importance of an administrator in addressing the needs of both groups. The idea that an administrator must operate in the dimensions of a highly skilled leader in being able to give direction to an organization and also be capable of maintaining and managing an organization was a concept that I had not considered as a teacher. As I watched administrators closely during this period, I did focus on

strands of behavior that did include leadership and managerial components. Articles that I studied and analysed gave support to the ideas presented in the model, and a glimmer of understanding the model began. The idea of continuous progress in effective school administration became more clear.

The theoretical approach that Lewin (1983) addressed in his concept of change was another theory that I have encountered in many of the courses at the University. Lewin's theory on change focuses in on the idea that change for an organization must have consequences that need to be explored and that constant change and experimentation is just as ineffective as stagnation in an organization. The idea of looking for new and better ways to educate students seemed, to me, to be a logical and exciting process. I had not thought about change as being difficult in an organization, simply because to my style and personality, I am willing to adapt, integrate and synthesize. In studying

personality types and styles, I did have an understanding of Lewin' s message that the ideas of change is difficult for many and that paradigm shifts in education will be a long time in processing.

The exploration of the writings of various authors in Educational Psychology and Adolescent Psychology classes were confusing and exciting all at the same time. The idea that teachers use sound educational practices in order to help the student progress to higher levels of thinking and understanding seemed to be a very easy statement. I had not explored the conflicting theories about what those sound educational practices were. After questioning the articles that were presented and the solid research and experimentation behind these beliefs, I finally became convinced that sound educational practices are constantly being changed and challenged because human needs and society are in a constant state of change. No one educational theorist has all of the answers, but that a professional will

glean from the writings of these researchers, synthesize their findings and adapt the best ideas to the students that they are responsible for. No one educational theorist will be able to be pointed to as having the "right" approach because the educational process is just that, an on-going process of discovery, rediscovery and adaptation.

One of the articles that I found particularly interesting was written by Bruce R. Joyce (1987) who clarified four "families" of differing approaches to teaching. In the discussions in classes, I discovered that many of the ideas and approaches that I used in the classroom were combinations of a variety of models that ranged from memorization to concept teaching to problem solving. Each model discussed was a different idea and challenge to impart knowledge to students. I became convinced in my belief that each student, learning environment and learning style has a direct influence in how successful a teacher is. I also became convinced that a teacher's style and personality

have an enormous impact on the type of approach that they will find success with.

Johnson and Johnson (1987) , and Robert Slavin's (1987) articles on cooperative learning and motivation were basically new ideas, even though I had used several of their techniques in my classrooms before I knew the theory behind the practice. As an administrator, I feel that it is important for teachers to be able to utilize new and innovative techniques with students. The authors mentioned are convinced that today's educational system is not encouraging the best from students. In their approach, students are encouraged to practice and maintain "life" skills. I find this approach to be an exciting development in the educational process, even though one room school houses operated within this type of arena for many years.

In the fall of this year, I heard Dr. Lorraine Ozar (1991, August) speak on another "new" approach that is creating much investigation by educators, and has become a major

focus in the Archdiocesan system. The outcomes based learning approach is fast becoming a national phenomena. I am excited to see this trend, but if I have learned one thing in psychology classes, it is to look at all the ramifications of the program, look at all the possible complications and then fit the program to suit the particular needs of the students that you serve. In looking at all the possibilities and contingencies, an administrator is able to judge their own situation using the research and ideas of others. Any change in any system takes time and study. Any change in education needs to be right for students, accepted by staff and faculty and evaluated frequently. Peters and Waterman's (1988) discussion about sharing common goals and the implementation of these school goals and educational improvement are supported in the materials presented by Dr. Ozar.

Dr. Ozar's in-service dealt with outcomes based education and the evidences that this structure in curriculum

will increase student learning. She outlined her research findings and gave specific examples of implementing outcomes based education in the Archdiocesan system. I find that teachers are just now beginning to discuss this "new" approach in our schools even though administrators have been in-serviced on this approach for at least two years. I find that the Archdiocesan system has many qualities that I believe in and support.

Course work in the area of public relations was something that I had evidenced for a great deal of time. Private schools know the value of keeping the public informed and the necessity of parental and community support for a number of years. Throughout the course work, I was constantly amazed that public school teachers knew so little about the public relations process and why it is so vital. I was also amazed at the reaction to the first "in-basket" task. I remembered my first reaction to the incoming mail during my first week and the addition of the

complications of telephone crisis and parental upsets. I feel that this early "hands-on" activity was one that caught teachers totally off guard.

I also feel that the students in this class really had no idea as to the amount of time and energy the public relations aspect of administration can consume.

My introduction to technology at the graduate level was a mixed blessing. I did, during the course of the semester, conquer my fear of the dreaded "machine", but came at the most opportune time in that the very next semester, Macintosh computers were issued to every principal in the Archdiocese of Dubuque. I can truly say that not a day goes by when I have not had some type of "interface" with my computer. The groundwork that I covered during the technology class did aid in being able to use the technology offered rather quickly. I was surprised by the resistance that several administrators exhibited, but quickly remembered that it had taken me an entire semester to

acknowledge that the technology aspect in the educational field was too important to deny.

Thinking of the successes in the business world and using thoughts and ideas from top business leaders was an entirely new way of thinking about education. Elementary Administration caused me to think of the educational process in a business-like way. I discovered that several of the thinking styles and managerial techniques discussed were very helpful. Covey's (1989) exploration of goals and strategies that successful managers use has become an on-going struggle in attainment. I have found the suggestions and concepts that he discusses could be very helpful. Now, if I could just get all the strategies to work at the same time! I did enjoy the discussions and strategies presented in classes and found the information to be useful in many daily situations.

The "hand-on" approach in Elementary Administration was very beneficial. I discovered that I did possess a

number of skills that were practiced in using the "Development Dimensions International" materials. The situations that were examined in the simulations, were very useful and ones that administrators face daily. I was able to remember situations where I used a particular strategy and met success or failure, and analyse the situation with more clarity. Again, I was amazed and the teachers in the groups who were intimidated with the conflict resolution aspect of administration, but I too was very ignorant about several aspect of being able to deal with crisis until faced with the real situation.

Seminars have been the best way to share knowledge and practical experiences. Being able to discuss actual situation, gleaning expertise from University professionals, and feeling completely comfortable about this process has been the highlight of my course work. I know that being a practicing administrator, being able to feel free to contact anyone at the University if a problem arose that I needed a

"second opinion", I would not hesitate to call on any one of the professionals that I have had the privilege of studying with. Again, the "hands-on" experience of role playing a situation, dealing with an "in-basket" assignment, problem solving a situation from a case study, or analysis of materials is one that I have found to be of the greatest value. Until you have an idea of what you may encounter in the real world, these simulations are the best preparation that an administrator can have.

The role of an administrator as a supervisor and evaluator was probably the most difficult one for me to deal with. I find the responsibility one that is so important, that it is almost frightening. I have the skills and techniques for studying teachers, the tools necessary for evaluation, and the knowledge that this is one of the most important tasks that an administrator, and yet find the process difficult. Conflict resolution and leading people to self discovery are not easy tasks for me.

In reflecting on my own administration, I have experienced a formal evaluation by the Archdiocesan and have a very clear picture of the areas of strength and the areas that need attention in my becoming a professional administrator. This evaluation was conducted during my second year as an administrator and was completed during the semester that I took Elementary Administration. The evaluation process and the course work worked together very well and this particular course was very beneficial in the practical aspects of my performance as an administrator.

The first area that I find that I will need to become more proficient in is being able to identify and evaluate quality programming for kindergarten and preschool programs. I am personally convinced that children need to experience a preschool type of program, especially in the area of Waterloo that is being served by St. Mary's school. Last year, after much study, discussion and planning, the Board of Education did open a preschool at St. Mary's and has

been very pleased with the results of our first year in operation. I did work on supervision and evaluation during my summer semester, and I have felt very comfortable with the quality of instruction and program in our preschool. I do think that this area in my own personal knowledge will need to be enhanced by future study in curriculum.

Another area that I will need to continue to work on after completion of the degree program is to look at the financial aspect of school management. In the Archdiocesan system as it is run at the present time, the principal acts as an on site manager. I am in charge of a substantial amount of money in running the school, and at times am very frustrated as to what my role is. I have asked for in-service and help from the Archdiocese and have received some, however, I still feel inadequate in this area of responsibility. I would like to continue on in my study of finance at the University, even though this course is probably designed more for superintendents.

I have attended many workshops that deal with leadership skills, evaluation techniques and supervision skills. These three areas are truly important to me in that, I believe that it is my responsibility to cause growth and change in my staff. I am very proud of my faculty and have encouraged them to attend conferences, in-services and classes that will stretch them in the classroom. I have seen positive growth in classroom management techniques and teaching style. I have heard comments about feeling free to try new ideas and methods and have seen wonderful results in many teachers. Not all the staff is open to changes in education and that is something that I have had to learn to accept.

In the future, I see myself as continuing to become an administrator. In many of my discussions during classes, the theme that you never get "done" as an administrator has come up several times. The idea is one that challenges me and that is one of the reasons that I enjoy the role of an

administrator. There have never been two days exactly alike since I have taken my position. There have been days when I wanted to know what ever made me think that administration is what I want and other days when I knew that I am just where I need to be. I find that administration is similar to riding a roller-coster in that you never quite know what is ahead, but you can remember experiences that will help you deal with the unknown. I have developed a sense of confidence in myself that has never been with me before in that I know that I can handle difficult situations and be successful in handling them. I know that I can handle more than one crisis at a time and still maintain a sense of humor and poise. I know that I can turn to several professionals for advice and expertise and not feel that I am incompetent.

During my first year of being a principal, I have experienced a major construction project as the school installed an elevator along the side of the building,

termination of a custodian, a dress code change, several accusations of being racist and using biased materials, and received the dreaded "lawyer" letter on the final week of school. In that year, I was constantly in an internal struggle as to my intention to remain in the position of administrator. Throughout this time, I received encouragement, advice and sympathy from a number of professionals not only in the Archdiocesan system, but also at the University of Northern Iowa. I can honestly say that were it not for the support and concern of many, that first year could have done anyone in. I have instead developed a sense of the type of administrator that I want to be.

I do have areas that I am not satisfied with. I find that I spend far too much time in the office and not enough time in classroom with students. I know that this is a frustration for teachers, students and most of all myself. I must learn to delegate responsibility and not take on so much to do myself. I am working on this, but find it difficult to let

others do things that I feel I can do better. I have found that teachers are much more comfortable with an administrator who is a frequent rather than an infrequent visitor.

In these three years, I have also learned that being "super-woman" is not something that I do well. Having the responsibilities of a handicapped husband, an active eleven year old and a home does not leave me with a great deal of time for myself. I realize that I do indeed need to be good to myself and take time just for me. This is also a new awareness on my part. I need to be in the best possible frame of mind when I walk through the doors of my building in the morning, because over two hundred fifty people look to me for guidance and leadership. My attitude and feelings must be positive in order for teachers, students, parents and staff members to respond positively.

I am proud of the progress that has been made in the educational program at my school. Last year, as mentioned before, we put in a preschool program. Other programs that

have been added during my administration include a breakfast program which now serves about one fourth of the students, a School Aged Child Care Program which serves working parents as an affordable alternative to babysitting, establishing a parent organization which has been successful in getting parents into and involved in the school and establishing a Partnership in Excellence with the University of Northern Iowa Chemistry Department. These programs and services have increased our visibility in the neighborhood and community and will hopefully have an impact on the enrollment and growth of our school.

I see the role of an administrator as being one that is in a constant state of flux. I see the principalship as one where you must be able to wear several "hats" at one time and where you must choose the "battles" that you wish to engage in. I see myself as someone who is continually being challenged to do more, to be better and to instill in those I work with the same sense of responsibility for the future. I

see the role of an administrator as one that is never quite finished and rightly so. An administrator is someone who invites change, encourages excellence in performance and program, insists on evaluation and process, and focuses on the student and their needs. I see myself as someone who is working toward that aim, and as someone who has met success enough of the time to continue in my role as principal.

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