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

Linda S. Reysack  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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

### Abstract

Upon entering the educational administration graduate program, I held certain attitudes and beliefs as to what an administrator's responsibilities were. It appeared to me that a principal spent the majority of the day monitoring what was happening in the school . He visited classrooms, was visible in the hallways and at recess and spent a portion of the day in his office, available if he was needed. The coursework that I have taken, has forced me to re-examine the daily role that a principal plays in a building. It has also made me realize the vast amount of responsibility that is placed on an administrator's shoulders for the success of a school.

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

Linda S. Reysack

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
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James L. Doud

6-25-90  
Date Approved

[Signature]  
Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

6-26-90  
Date Received

[Signature]  
Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

6/26/90  
Date Received

[Signature]  
Head, Department of Educational  
Administration and Counseling

Upon entering the educational administration graduate program, I held certain attitudes and beliefs as to what an administrator's responsibilities were. It appeared to me that a principal spent the majority of the day monitoring what was happening in the school. He visited classrooms, was visible in the hallways and at recess and spent a portion of the day in his office, available if he was needed. The coursework that I have taken, has forced me to re-examine the daily role that a principal plays in a building. It has also made me realize the vast amount of responsibility that is placed on an administrator's shoulders for the success of a school.

At the beginning of the course Administration of the Elementary School, I was asked to list the two major factors which would direct my time and energy. At that time, I stated that much of my time would be spent on staff development. I felt then, and believe even more strongly now, that the principal and staff must be committed to becoming the best they can be by working toward common goals. A second factor was communicating with staff, students, colleagues, and the community. Reading articles, books, and hearing oral presentations has strengthened these beliefs, but opened my eyes to much more. It is apparent to me that there are basic characteristics and competencies that contribute toward being an effective administrator who produces positive results. I

have learned that the school principal's job is very complex and demanding. The job requires skills in staff development, communication, problem-solving, curriculum development, leadership skills, and management. These six areas of competency will be the focus of the rest of this paper.

The staff is the most important resource in a building. An effective principal realizes this and will focus energies on training, communicating, and motivating the staff to work toward common goals. I didn't spend much time reflecting on the importance of staff development until I read a chapter in the text written by Hughes and Ubben (1989). They stated that, "as individual staff members are helped to become more skilled, the organization can also be expected to become more responsive and better able to achieve stated goals" (p. 257). It is the role of the principal to ensure that all people involved in the running of the school including the secretaries, custodians, and teachers, know the direction the school is headed. Without this knowledge, the school doesn't run as a smooth, cohesive team. Staff development and the sharing of ideas, values, and goals tie people together and gives meaning and purpose to their day-to-day lives. Deal and Kennedy (1982) support this theory. Through staff development the values and goals become known and shared by all people in the school. It is the extensive sharing that makes them

so effective.

The principal who knows the importance of staff development and the role others play in the smooth functioning of a school will encourage others to expand and develop their skills. Deal and Kennedy (1982) agree that a principal must provide staff members opportunities to develop new skills through professional development workshops, inservice programs, video self-analysis, and teacher visits. Staff development builds and strengthens a staff through communication. Providing and encouraging staff development is one of the roles of a principal.

The second area in which an administrator must be outstanding is communication. The administrator must be able to effectively communicate with a diverse population on a wide range of topics. Researchers recognize that the ability to communicate with the external public, staff, and students is crucial at any level of education. Daniel Duke (1982) stated that public relations activities that foster a shared sense about the purpose of schools is one of the wisest investments a principal can make. By involving everyone in the school's goals or mission, there is a sense of shared involvement on the part of everyone involved. Muzella (1986) reiterated this idea, stating that principals must be able to communicate with personnel, students, and the community to further the academic and social growth of the person involved.

Communication and public relations are viewed as important by the university. Proof of that is a required course at the graduate level entitled School and Community Relations. My perception of the importance of communication and how to communicate changed throughout this course. At the beginning of the course, I felt a school newsletter was the primary source of communication between home and school, and its purpose was to inform. Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher (1984) wrote that schools should use not only newsletters to inform the public but news releases, radio and television programs, brochures, and person to person programs. There needs to be two-way communication rather than the one-way communication commonly used. Throughout the course, many ideas and examples of external communication were shared. Emphasis was placed on the idea that when you communicate with the public, do a quality job of representing yourself and your school.

All too often, a principal communicates with the staff through directives. A more effective means of communication is to listen while staff review and analyze accomplishments, problems, and what needs to be done (Blanchard and Johnson, 1983). Then together they plan strategies. The staff's views and ideas are an integral part of the communication cycle. Hall (1980) also agrees that working together enhances communication. I have discovered,



through listening to others, the importance of communicating to the staff what is happening. Nothing frustrates me more than hearing about decisions after the fact that were made that concerned me. As a principal, it is important to get input from others when the outcome will affect them. This sends the message that their ideas are valued. Asking questions to find more information is a useful tool in dealing with students or staff in any situation.

Finally, students need to be involved in the communication process. Gardner (1988) demonstrated understanding of the importance of communicating with students. He stated that, with respect to students, administrators need to know what builds their morale and what tears it down. In dealing with students, it is important that we don't tear down their moral or self-esteem. Communicate with them positively. I had first-hand experience with this during my practicum when I filled an administrator's shoes for 2 days. On more than one occasion I found myself asking the student why he was in the office, what he could do to avoid being in the office again, and finally what he thought should be done. Glasser (1978) uses a similar questioning technique in his reality therapy. The basic principle is to ask a student what he did, then ask him to make a value judgement about what he was doing, and then ask him to make a plan for improving. I always

tried to leave the student knowing the expectations for appropriate behavior and that I had confidence in him.

To sum up communication, Duke (1982) and Kindred, Bagin and Gallagher (1984) agree that the administrator is the key person in most efforts to see that communication is maintained between school personnel, the central office, and parents. Communication with others is sometimes like a three-legged race. It may be difficult, but by working together, it can be very successful.

The third competency a principal must have is problem-solving. As a principal faces parents, teachers, students, and colleagues, the ability to plan to solve problems is necessary. While there may be at least 50 different problem-solving strategies, research suggests that Carkhuff's (1973) problem-solving model is often demonstrated by effective administrators. During the course Introduction to Educational Administration, I was made aware of this problem-solving model. This model suggests administrators use the following steps when a problem arises: (a) diagnose and define the problem, (b) gather and analyze the facts, (c) develop alternatives, (d) evaluate the alternatives, (e) select the best alternative, (f) implement the decision, and (g) evaluate the decision. As a future principal, this model provides a guideline to follow for any situation. I believe evaluation is the most important step. By evaluating how the problem was

handled, the administrator can make a decision as to how to handle future problems that arise. Waddell (1981) developed a similar model for use in business administration. His model consists of eight steps, adding the need to shape the final decision prior to its implementation.

I gained insight into decision making and problem-solving when reading in NAESP's Principals for 21st Century Schools (1990). Many of the steps from various problem-solving models were discussed, but another perspective was presented. Much of the difference between principals who are effective and those who are not is failure of the less effective principals to move beyond current assumptions and explore each situation as though it were occurring for the first time. As a future administrator using the problem-solving model, it will be important to deal with each situation and arrive at a sound feasible decision.

A fourth area that a principal must be skilled in is curriculum development. They must assume their share of responsibility for the conditions that exist in varying degrees in the school. Part of that responsibility lies in the selection of the school curriculum. Effective principals know that curriculum development cannot fall on their shoulders alone; working with a variety of school personnel at varied levels will enhance the curriculum selection and implementation. Mendez (1983) and

Bradfield and Kraft (1980) agree that, while the principal is the key person in curriculum development, it is necessary to involve assistant principals, guidance personnel, department chairpersons, and other staff members. Since teachers are responsible for teaching the curriculum, it is important that they have input in its development. Educators are not likely to become motivated by an administrator who has excessive or total control over the school curriculum.

Studies produced evidence that active instructional leadership on the part of the elementary school principal not only aids the staff but also enhances student achievement (Cotton & Savard, 1981; Berliner & Rosenshine, 1977). Instructional leadership behaviors cited as promoting student achievement include: (a) observing frequently in classrooms, (b) communicating clearly with staff what is expected of them as facilitators of the instructional program, (c) making decisions about the instructional program, (d) coordinating the instructional program, (e) being actively involved in planning and evaluating the program, and (f) holding and communicating high expectations for the instructional program. Data reported indicate that elementary administrators who followed these behaviors had a positive effect on reading and mathematics achievement.

I have had the opportunity to serve on a curriculum

committee responsible for the selection of a new language arts textbook. I appreciated the fact that the principal sought advice from those who would be using the materials. It was beneficial to observe the behaviors and listen to the principal facilitate the meetings because his viewpoint differed from those of the teachers. His perspective examined how the texts would effectively meet the needs at all levels, but the teachers were concerned with how the text would meet their individual grade needs.

In order to get individuals and groups to share and work together effectively, administrators must possess outstanding leadership skills. During the course Administration of the Elementary School, oral reports on assigned readings consistently repeated information suggesting that effective leaders are people-oriented, set high expectations, desire to move the people in an organization to achieve the same goal, and are dedicated to its attainment (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Blanchard & Johnson, 1983; Ubben & Hughes, 1987).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (1986) supports my belief that an administrator's values, beliefs, attitudes, and conduct are the basis for a school's success. Raymond Lemley (1987) offered four pieces of advice about how principals can become polished leaders. First, all members of the

organization must understand their job and remain focused on what it is they are to do. Second, the principal should define the school's mission clearly and imbed that mission in everyone involved in the organization. Third, leaders should allow members of the organization to be involved in decision making. And finally, the principal needs to function as the coach for the members of the organization, applauding those who are working to achieve the set goals. Bennis and Nanus (1985) further stressed the importance of having a vision for the organization, communicating that vision, and involving everyone in achieving the vision.

I gained a wealth of knowledge by reading books on leadership. Prior to entering the graduate program, I did not recognize any relationship between business leaders and school administrators. Now the similarities between effective leadership in business and effective leadership in schools are clear. Susan Paddock (1987) summarizes the importance of leadership in this way:

It is strongly recommended through literature that effective principals must refine their leadership skills. Since elementary principals are the persons with a great deal of responsibility, it is only practical for them to use researched leadership skills to influence those around them.

(p. 67)

Effective administrators influence others not only through leadership but also through management skills. Effective management refers to the handling of the day-to-day business of school administration. Principals who practice good managerial skills know how to get people to produce valuable results, and ". . . to feel good about themselves, the organization, and the other people with whom they work" (Blanchard & Johnson, 1982, p. 10).

Management skills are crucial in any administrative position. In searching the extensive research in this area, I discovered that many skills and attributes are used to describe successful school administrators. NASSP's (1986) poll of principals lists these six abilities as important in the management of a school: (a) the ability to plan and organize work, (b) the ability to work with and lead others, (c) the ability to analyze problems and make decisions, (d) the ability to communicate orally and in writing, (e) the ability to perceive the needs and concerns of others, and (f) the ability to perform under pressure. The list results from extensive and intensive job and task analyses of what it is that principals do in order to manage effectively.

For school principals, part of the responsibility of working with a staff requires consistent and complete evaluation of staff

performance. Too often ineffective principals focus on catching a staff member doing something wrong. During the Supervision and Evaluation course I was reminded that the purpose of an evaluation is to improve performance. When both parties are clear about the purpose of the evaluation, the evaluation becomes a positive learning experience that will hopefully produce growth.

I had the opportunity to do some teacher evaluations during both the Supervision and Evaluation class and my practicum. At first, it was a conscious effort on my part to look for the positive rather than the negative. Now, after observing many teachers in the classroom, it is easier to look for the good aspects of the lesson.

Along with management skills, it is important for administrators to feel confident in times of adversity. Change can be considered an adversity for some principals if they are not clear about what and/or whom they want changed. Principals need to look at influences that have played a part in the past and to make positive efforts to shape a favorable environment for the present and future. A principal must also realize that change must be perceived as necessary by those involved and/or affected by the change. Bradfield and Kraft (1980) list six areas for administrators to be aware of as possible blocks to prevent change: (a) extreme desire to conform to an accepted pattern, (b)



too quick a judgment of the contemplated change, (c) fear of being ridiculed, (d) fear of criticism, (e) lack of belief in one's self and/or self confidence, and (f) failure to distinguish between cause and effect. A major challenge for all administrators is to understand the mechanics of change and to implement the change in a manner that will ensure success (Bradfield & Kraft, 1980; Fullan & Park, 1981).

As a future principal, it is necessary to realize that successful change requires involvement of others, commitment, time, and hard work. Complete or desired change may never occur exactly as wished because of a lack of commitment by others. To change human behavior is very complex. It is believed that establishing a positive climate and interpersonal relationships based on openness and trust will nurture the change process in a school.

According to Bradfield and Kraft (1980), understanding the change process provides a basis for implementing change. First, all people involved must realize that change is necessary. Second, because individual behavior patterns are difficult to alter, making change is arduous and slow. Third, it is hard to change habitual behavior. Fourth, people who are unaware of needed change may become obstacles unless the change is presented clearly. Fifth, persons involved must be informed of progress.

And sixth, working together for change contributes to better relations. During any change process, I believe that the administrator must indicate his support of the change and monitor all activities. He also needs to be involved in answering questions and helping work out any problem areas.

To conclude, effective administrators successfully work with and involve others in areas that promote growth and improvement. Effectiveness depends on the administrator's ability to get all personnel working toward a common mission and goals. I believe the six competency areas identified, while basic, are extremely relevant to effective elementary school principals. All the skills must mesh together to form a whole person who integrates many of these skills in countless situations.

An effective school is guided by a principal who is both a leader and a manager. Researchers have identified how children can best grow and learn. The principal's role is to ensure the application of this knowledge so that good things happen in a place called school. This is more likely to occur when the principal demonstrates effective skills in staff development, communication, management, problem solving, curriculum development, and leadership. Hughes and Ubben (1989) summarize this idea with a frequently stated quote from the late Ron Edmunds: "There may be some bad schools here and there with good

principals, but I have never seen a good school that had a bad principal" (p 3).

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