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1992

A concept of the secondary principal and the school: A reflective essay

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A concept of the secondary principal and the school: A reflective essay

Abstract

Having been a teacher for more than twenty years, I felt that I had a good understanding of the role of the principal as I began my educational administration program. Through my experiences the last several years, both in and out of my educational administration courses, I have found that what I knew was less than what I did not know. I have gained experience and understanding, and I welcome the opportunity to continue to learn as well as the opportunity to lead. This paper focuses on those elements of education and administration that either have been new to me or that have been strongly reinforced or renewed in my understanding.

A CONCEPT OF THE SECONDARY PRINCIPAL AND THE SCHOOL:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Richard W. Suchy

August 1992

This Research Paper by: Richard W. Suchy

Entitled: A CONCEPT OF THE SECONDARY PRINCIPAL AND THE SCHOOL:

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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6-12-92
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Having been a teacher for more than twenty years, I felt that I had a good understanding of the role of the principal as I began my educational administration program. Through my experiences the last several years, both in and out of my educational administration courses, I have found that what I knew was less than what I did not know. I have gained experience and understanding, and I welcome the opportunity to continue to learn as well as the opportunity to lead. This paper focuses on those elements of education and administration that either have been new to me or that have been strongly reinforced or renewed in my understanding.

The Student is the Focus of the School

The Student as the Image-Bearer of God

My fundamental belief about human beings is that they were created in the image of God. Every person deserves the recognition and respect that accompanies his or her likeness to the Creator of this universe. That recognition and respect should accompany our every effort to meet the educational needs of our students.

The Student as a Unique Individual

As educators, we have a moral responsibility to do everything within our capability to develop our students. It is extremely important that each teacher, each administrator, each parent, and even each student recognize that every student is capable of learning. The development of our students must not be

based solely upon achievement in academic areas, but must be focused on the whole person. We must recognize that each student is a unique individual. Because of the vast differences among students, education has always been a challenge. My participation in the administrative education program has greatly increased my awareness of the social and educational problems that face our students in this country.

By 1983, according to Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, and Usdan (1990, chap. 2), only forty-one percent of students had reached age eighteen in traditional two-parent families. Populations are shifting to urban centers. Student bodies are often segregated by socioeconomic characteristics. The conditions are right for the formation of at-risk students. All of this increases the importance of schools providing both individual and collective help for these students.

We must try to meet the needs and develop the capabilities of each student. I am increasingly aware of the necessity of knowing the characteristics of adolescents in general and the characteristics of our local population in particular. We must get to know each student well enough to have some idea of what his or her individual needs and capabilities are. A personal commitment to each student is required of the principal as well as the teacher. It has become clear to me that the principal must make the effort to interact with the students on a personal level.

Positive Self-Esteem Must Be Promoted

I have become aware that positive self-esteem is critical to the ability of any student to benefit from his or her education. We need to let students know that they are important to us, that we are concerned about them, and that we have confidence in them.

Students have a need for love and belonging. We need to make the effort to know our students well enough to know how to satisfy these needs. According to William Glasser, as quoted by Brandt (1988), most secondary schools would function better if they made an effort to increase the opportunities for students to feel that they can talk and work together in class. He pointed out that we are by nature interactive creatures who learn by inquiry and disagreement. He strongly suggested that we include more group work such as cooperative learning into our schools. He did point out that this involves teaching a team lesson where individual differences and learning styles can be addressed. In these situations, the teacher functions as a facilitator.

Also, according to Glasser, students have a need to feel important. In a classroom, many feel that they have no power. We should strive to satisfy their need for power by being willing to listen to them, letting them know that we care about what they think. When students make valid points, those points should be acknowledged. Occasionally we will recognize that a student has a better idea than we have. When this happens, we should be willing to openly acknowledge that fact.

The Role of the Principal

The Importance of Vision

The concept of vision on the part of the principal keeps recurring in the administration classes. A principal must have a vision of where his school should be headed. This vision must be flexible and realistic, but must have enough substance to guide the principal as he makes both short term and long term decisions. This vision must serve as a broad outline for what he hopes to accomplish and how he hopes to accomplish it. As with everything else in the school, the vision must center on the welfare of the student. It is important to understand that the vision of the principal is attainable only with the help of many other individuals, each with his or her own vision. The teachers and the community must be headed in generally the same direction as the administrator or else the vision of the principal will probably not be realized.

The Importance of Management

The most visible aspect of the principal is that of manager. Everyday chores have to be dealt with, and the principal is the one who is seen as having this responsibility. According to Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 4), school administrators are expected to procure, organize, and coordinate the people and materials necessary to meet the goals of the organization. Many of these tasks can be, and should be, delegated to subordinate administrators, teachers, secretaries,

other non-teaching staff members, and possibly even students.
Still the fact remains that part of being a principal is being a
manager. Day-to-day management cannot be and should not be
entirely avoided. Crisis situations will arise and need to be
handled. The problem with being a manager comes when too much
time is spent on the technical aspects of the school and not
enough attention is given to the learning environment.

Management can be a particular problem when the principal is
seen by others, especially faculty, as being only a manager.
Management skills are quite different from those required of an
educational leader. Rallis and Highsmith (1986) went so far as
to say that management skills are often opposite of those
required of an educational leader. They said that if a principal
is perceived as a manager, faculty may be unwilling to accept him
as an educational leader. I believe that the principal must
strive to manage effectively while actively demonstrating his
competence as an educational leader.

The Importance of Educational Leadership

Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 4) stated that most
administrators now consider their most important function to be
that of instructional leader. A difficulty arises in that it is
not commonly agreed upon as to precisely what an instructional
leader does. Such things as classroom observations, protecting
instructional time, coordinating curriculum, and monitoring
student progress are seen by some as part of this process. I

believe that the principal has the responsibility to know what is happening in his building and the effects or consequences of those happenings. He should be aware of a wide variety of educational practices and theories. The principal must be able to initiate, follow, and evaluate the programs in his building. He must be able to connect the mission and philosophy of his school with the actuality of what is happening in the school. He must be willing to consult and study and learn. Above all, he must put the welfare of the students first.

<div align="center">Curriculum Development</div>

Definition of Curriculum

During my course on the administration of the secondary curriculum, Dr. Huth and the students of the class developed a definition of curriculum. This definition states that curriculum is: "the structured teaching and learning activities that contribute to the mission and philosophy goals and objectives of the school and that can be measured."

Also during my curriculum course, the following steps were set forth for curriculum development: check for agreement with the mission statement and philosophy of the school, conduct a needs assessment study, develop goals and objectives for the content area, develop instructional objectives, organize instructional activities and resources, conduct a pilot program, and conduct an evaluation.

Mission Statement and Philosophy

According to Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 2), "A
school's mission should reflect the values guiding and
controlling the behavior of the people within and associated with
the school." The mission of a school must reflect back to the
mission of the district. The mission statement and philosophy of
the school is, in turn, going to determine the direction of
subsequent curriculum development.

Needs Assessment

According to Martin, Saif, and Thiel (1986), needs
assessment is a very important part of the curriculum development
process. They reported that most schools believe that
administrators, supervisors, teachers, students, the board of
education, parents, and community representatives should all be
involved in curriculum development, including the needs
assessment phase. They also reported that the greatest
involvement should be on the part of the experts in the field,
the teachers, and the curriculum directors. I believe that the
building principal should play an important part in initiating
and overseeing the needs assessment process.

Goals and Objectives for the Content Area

The school curriculum must be based on educational
objectives. According to Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 12),
if this is not done, curriculum is more likely to be based on
tradition or fad than on desired student learning outcomes. One

of the tasks of the principal is to be sure that curriculum

objectives are clearly stated and operationally defined.

Instructional Objectives

Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 12) make the point that,

in addition to overall school objectives, each area of the

curriculum should have its own specific objectives. These

objectives are to be based upon the general objectives of the

school, should be stated clearly, and should be operationally

defined. Their purpose is to provide guidance and direction to

both teachers and students.

As recorded by Posner and Rudnitsky (1989, chap. 6),

instructional objectives should be written in the cognitive,

affective, and psychomotor domains. Those written in the

cognitive domain should address various cognitive levels.

Although the principal is not primarily responsible for writing

these objectives, he should be able to determine if the

objectives are clear and if they address the various domains and

levels of students.

Instructional Activities and Resources

Curriculum materials should match the interest and ability

levels of the students (Gorton & Schneider, 1991, chap. 12). If

such materials are too easy or too difficult, learning, interest

levels, and attention spans can be adversely affected. The use

of a reading consultant in selecting materials can be helpful.

Because of a wide range of ability levels within many courses, it

may be necessary to choose materials at various levels for use with individual students. The principal will not have the primary responsibility for putting together the instructional activities and resources, but he should understand the process sufficiently well to facilitate the process.

Pilot Program

According to the survey conducted by Martin et al. (1986) nearly all schools rely upon the principal to ensure that a new curriculum is implemented. The authors urged that schools reexamine the potential of combined leadership in curriculum development and suggested that teachers be given a role in curriculum implementation. I agree with their recommendation. Teachers should be recognized as the experts in their fields and should be given a leading role in the various areas of curriculum development.

Evaluation

An extremely important point covered by Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 12) was that of evaluation of the curriculum. They point out that the task of evaluation is not entirely the task of administration, but administration can initiate the investigation and can organize the expertise of others. Methods of assessment mentioned by Gorton and Schneider included criterion-referenced tests, teacher-constructed tests, interviews, and questionnaires.

It seems obvious to me that evaluation is important only if we act upon what is learned. Once weak areas are pointed out in

the curriculum, efforts must be made to correct those weaknesses. This may mean returning to some former point in the curriculum development process and going through the steps again. It is important to realize that evaluation is not a one time event, but is an on-going process. The role of the principal is extremely important in assuring that the evaluation process continues.

Social Responsibilities of Education

Students Must Be Aware of Our Multi-Cultural Society

There has been much disagreement on how to achieve equal educational opportunity in the public schools for all students, as well as how to educate students to be aware of the various cultures in our society. Campbell et al. (1990, chap. 14) suggested that advocates of equal educational opportunity have generally agreed on goals such as more minority group faculty members, greater attention to minority group culture and contributions in the curriculum, and increased sensitivity to minority group student needs and interests by the schools. There also has been concern on the part of women's organizations concerning the role and influence of women as taught in American schools (Campbell et al. 1990, chap. 14). Any education that does not address the cultural aspects of our society is not complete education. Part of our responsibility is to try to instill within students an understanding and respect for others, regardless of race, culture, gender, or other factors.

Values Are an Important Part of Education

Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 12) stated that "The school does not operate in a vacuum." They made the point that, as an agent of society, the school should reflect social expectations and needs. They further stated that many people believe that schools should help develop attitudes and values. This is an issue with which there is not universal agreement, but I believe that values and ethics are an important part of the education of students. I believe that one must be careful to consider and respect the values and beliefs of the school community, but within this framework, I believe that the school has both the right and the responsibility to teach values.

Not only do I believe that it is proper for teachers to teach values, I believe that they cannot do otherwise. The values of staff members will, to a large extent, be made known to the students over a period of time. A teacher or a principal cannot teach one way and live another way without the students becoming aware of the contradiction. I believe that the principal has the responsibility to be aware of not only what is being taught in the classrooms, but of what is being modeled for the students.

The Relationship of the Principal with Others

The Superintendent

The principalship is a position of middle management. The principal is the representative of the superintendent and is

responsible to him or her. The principal is in the middle of at least four competing forces (Campbell et al. 1990, chap. 11), the superintendent, the teachers, the students, and the parents. Each of these four forces has varied expectations of the principal. Among other factors in dealing with these forces, the principal must determine how much autonomy he has been delegated. Is he just a messenger for the central office, or is he a leader in his own right? I believe that to be a principal in a situation where little autonomy was granted would be very frustrating. It seems that this would limit the role of the principal to primarily that of a manager and would not allow him to exercise instructional leadership to the degree that one would find rewarding.

Faculty

As noted by Holliday (1990), a very important part of any school is the maintenance of a positive school climate. A positive school climate involves many things, not the least of which is staff morale. As recorded by Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 9), Herzberg identified five satisfaction motivators of faculty. These are achievement, recognition, work itself, responsibility, and advancement. It behooves the principal to foster these elements to the best of his ability. Implied in at least some of these elements is the factor of communication. The principal has a responsibility to communicate as effectively as possible with each member of the faculty. This does not imply

that the principal should in any way reveal confidences or even transmit information that might be sensitive, but it does imply that all relevant information should be given to teachers.

Also in keeping with Herzberg's motivators, it seems apparent that faculty members should be regarded as experts in their field, that is, the field of teaching. The administrator should be willing to consult with faculty on matters involving the faculty. An atmosphere of openness should be fostered, and administrators and faculty together should be able to seek solutions to common problems.

An important role of the principal is that of evaluating instruction. Much of this is accomplished through teacher observations. The purpose of instructional supervision according to Cangelosi (1991, chap. 5) is to help teachers effectively instruct their students. According to Cangelosi, it should not be expected that the supervisor is more of an expert in all areas of teacher performance than is the teacher. It is, however, necessary for the supervisor to be able to recognize and evaluate the following teacher responsibilities: organizing for instruction, managing resources, managing time, developing curricula, determining learning goals, designing lessons, managing student behavior, conducting lessons and engaging students in learning activities, and assessing student achievement.

An item related to teacher observations and evaluations

which we covered in class was that of a professional improvement commitment (PIC). The PIC allows the principal and the teacher to cooperatively set goals and activities for the professional improvement of the teacher. I believe that this is an exciting concept which could be used with all teachers regardless of experience or capability.

At-Risk Teachers

One of the responsibilities of the principal is to work with at-risk teachers. When the teacher is determined to be at-risk, he or she must be given job improvement targets and given time to improve, usually a minimum of six months. The teacher is given help to improve and is given progress reports. An evaluation team of other teachers or consultants may be formed to increase the amount of information and reliability of the appraisal. Eventually the principal, with the help of the team, must decide whether the teacher has improved sufficiently to be taken off at-risk status, must be given more time, or whether his or her dismissal should be sought. As in other areas of education, the welfare of the student must be the primary concern. If dismissal of the teacher is sought, school policy and legal due process must be followed very closely.

Non-Teaching Staff

According to Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher (1990, chap. 7), non-teaching staff often do not receive the acknowledgment and praise for outstanding service that teachers receive. They may

be treated as inferiors by teachers and criticized in front of students. Conflicts with these personnel could be avoided almost entirely if they were given the recognition they deserve. It should be remembered that these persons are no less important than other individuals. They contribute to the overall educational process and they are often an important link between the school and the community.

Student Discipline

According to Bartosh and Barilla (1985), discipline is still at the top of the administrators list of problems. No matter how successful a school is in dealing with its students, the principal will occasionally, possibly often, have to deal with students who have transgressed against school policies. When this happens, it is necessary for the principal to conduct himself in a professional and systematic manner. The first rule the principal must follow is to record all the data (Bartosh & Barilla, 1985). It is also necessary for the principal to check the student files and look for patterns in the behavior of the student. If such patterns exist, it may well be easier for the principal, the student, and the parents to recognize the cause of the behavior and move toward correcting the behavior. It is important that the principal not take the behavior of the student personally. It is also important that the parents of the student be involved.

When holding conferences with the parents concerning the

behavior of a student, the principal should have all relevant
data concerning the incident. A current update of the student's
academic progress and classroom behavior should be obtained from
each of the student's teachers. Besides exchanging information
with the parents, this meeting should result in solving the
immediate problem as well as undertaking a long-range program
related to behavioral and academic progress. It should be
recognized that long-range goals will be met only if the
principal, the parents, and the student cooperate.

<div align="center">Parent School Relations</div>

I firmly believe that parents are ultimately responsible for
the education of their children. That does not mean that every
whim of every parent is to dictate our actions, but it does mean
that parents individually and as a whole must be kept informed of
what is going on with their children in school. It also means
that we should take each contact with parents seriously, whether
it be positive or negative. We must realize that parents
generally have a greater concern for, and stake in, the education
of their individual children. Anything we can do to foster two-
way communication will ultimately benefit the student.

Parent involvement with schools involves formal as well as
informal aspects (Holliday, 1990). When situations arise that
show the need for better informed parents, the school has the
responsibility to undertake a program to educate the parents.
Parents should be allowed and encouraged to serve as volunteers

in the school and to serve on advisory committees. Parents who feel that they are part of the process, even if only serving informally by filling out a survey, will add to the positive climate of the school.

According to Kindred et al. (1990, chap. 8), parents acquire valuable information from their contacts with teachers, information that is useful in living with their children at home. Parents are often unaware of what their children are like outside the home. A successful partnership of parents and school involves more than just exchange of information. It includes cooperative work on problems that affect children and advance the the cause of education.

School—Community Relations

Keeping the community informed about the school is mutually advantageous to the community and school. The community wants to know what is going on in the school, and is much more likely to support the school when they are aware of what it is doing and why (Holliday, 1990). Methods of communication might include newsletters, news media releases and programs, public forums, student and staff recognitions, brochures, exhibits, and opportunities for the public to participate in evaluations of the educational process.

The first step of an comprehensive public relations effort is to be sure the schools are doing an effective job. According to Kindred et al. (1990, chap. 1), no school relations program

can make a bad school look good for long. Confidence can be built in a good school by keeping everyone informed of what the school is doing. When there is a problem, the public must be kept informed of what measures are being taken to solve the problem. Concerns of the public must be taken seriously. Efforts must be made to involve all segments of the school, either directly or indirectly, in the public relations program. Citizens who have been in their schools for whatever reason consistently have more positive attitudes about those schools. It also must be remembered that communication is a two-way process. The public must be given opportunity for feedback. Since the school is part of the community, what affects one affects the other. Holliday (1990) suggests using visible forms of communication such as school-community partnerships. These would involve using community resources for the education of students and also using school resources within the community. Items such as student internships, community service, advisory committees, and adult education could result from such partnerships.

<p style="text-align:center;">School Law</p>

Importance of Policies

A foundation of formal school policies is important to the effective functioning of a school. Gorton and Schneider (1991 chap. 13) stated that policies should be written in clear, understandable language and presented in the appropriate

handbooks. The consequences of violating a rule or regulation should be made explicit and should be in keeping with the nature of the violation.

The area of school policy is one where my attitudes have changed considerably since I have been in the educational administration program. I always thought that policies got in the way of doing what needed to be done. I have discovered that lack of policy causes as many problems as too many policies.

Importance of Due Process

Few people would deny that students have rights, but the extent of those rights is not always easily determined. Rich (1989) reported on a study of the balance between students' rights and school safety. He specifically pointed out confidentiality, physical punishment and restraint, search and seizure, and suspension and expulsion as areas of conflict. Lincoln (1989) made the point that schools are not under the same restrictive guidelines as law officials in dealing with students, but that they still must be observant of students' rights. In particular, he said that searches and seizures by public school officials were allowed under specific conditions. Such a search must be "justified at its inception," that is, there must be reasonable grounds to expect the search to turn up evidence of law or rule violations. The search must also be reasonably related in scope to the circumstances which justified the interference. The search is not to be excessively intrusive in

light of the age and sex of the student and the nature of the infraction.

School officials must take care to protect the civil rights of students, and still must see that all students receive their right to education and safety. Balancing these rights is not always easy, but it is possible. The principal should be very familiar with both the policies of his/her school and with due process rights of students.

The School Budget

An increasingly important and difficult task facing administrators is that of budget management. This traditionally has been the role of upper level management such as the superintendent, but with much current emphasis on school-based management, the principal may have to deal with budget concerns more directly.

According to Gorton and Schneider (1991, chap. 6), a budget consists of three elements: a description of the total educational program to be provided by the school district, an estimate of the expenditures needed to carry out the desired program, and an estimate of the revenues which will be available to pay for the expenditures. The administrator's role is to develop the budget, administer the budget, and evaluate the budget. As with many other aspects of the administrator's job, the administrator will need the assistance of others in collecting information and making decisions concerning the

budget. And, as in other situations, the administrator must know enough about the process to make wise judgements and decisions.

Program Assessment

Every part of the total school program must be evaluated at regular intervals. Some of these evaluations may be informal in nature, but at some point there is a need for the formal evaluation of all aspects of the school. Kindred et al. (1990, chap. 15) made the point that effort cannot be equated with results. Hard work in and of itself does not guarantee that the results will be what you want them to be.

In particular, the educational process itself needs to be evaluated. There is increasing concern that students are not learning what they should be learning. As reported by O'Neil (1991), there is widespread belief that schools are held accountable for process, not outcomes. Many students are perceived as believing that they can do as little as they choose and still get by. There are a number of people in this country pushing for national standards that must be met by students. The disadvantage of this is that the standards may well drive the curriculum, giving local schools less control over curriculum and instruction. It would seem that one way to avoid national performance standards would be to set standards and evaluation procedures at the local level that would both satisfy the critics and provide a meaningful assessment of the school's programs.

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