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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

This reflective paper is my vision of the role of a forward looking Secondary Administrator who effectively uses educational research to impact school improvement in a positive fashion. It is, in effect, a snapshot that includes two sections. Some personal history, characteristics, and core values are in the first section. The final section is a composite reflection that synthesizes knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained through coursework and from experience into my professional vision for administrative practice. I think brain compatible computer-assisted learning can be a component of effective education and the research cited reflects that.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

Fredrick A. Johnson

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This reflective paper is my vision of the role of a forward looking Secondary Administrator who effectively uses educational research to impact school improvement in a positive fashion. It is, in effect, a snapshot that includes two sections in addition to this introduction. Some personal history, characteristics, and core values are in the next section. The final section is a composite reflection that synthesizes knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained through coursework and from experience into my professional vision for administrative practice. I think brain compatible computer-assisted learning can be a component of effective education and the research cited reflects that.

Personal History, Characteristics, and Core Values

The process of writing this paper provides the opportunity to reflect on my career in education. It comes after twenty years as a classroom teacher and coach, including good and not good times. I decided to be a teacher while in the fifth grade. Then as now, I feel that teachers have a powerful influence on students' lives. When reflecting on my career, my favorite part is the positive impact I have seen myself and colleagues have on students. Meeting the needs of students has been and is my driving force in education. As a classroom teacher, I had not considered that an administrator made as much of an impact on students until four years ago when I began the path to administration.

This paper reflects my path leading to that enlightened vision of Educational Administration. The result of this reflection is a clearer vision of

what we as educators are doing and how effective, or ineffective, we are. That vision is driven by the concept of school improvement to better meet student needs through effective educational practice.

I have always felt that I needed to be a better educator every year, so the quest for school improvement is familiar to me. I have also found that the idea of improvement does not fit all situations and all people. So, I have learned that to be an effective educational leader I need to moderate my enthusiasm and opinions. Personally, I consider people as people and all opinions are valuable. In a leadership role within a school, that notion strongly applies, as long as those opinions do not distract from meeting the needs of students.

Another reason I feel I can have a positive impact on more students as an administrator is that the quest for self improvement and personal growth through education is important to me. Staying the same, or maintaining the status quo, means short changing yourself and falling behind. Educators can model the behavior of a life long learner by taking college courses, practicing technological skills, or developing an area of personal interest such as collectibles. I see this as a key element to effective educational leadership and it is a safe wagon to hitch a ride with.

While preparing this reflective paper I referred to course notes, handouts, reports, and tests. The coursework is filled with both practical information and clever anecdotes that provide insight into creating an effective administrator. The

courses were effectively prepared and delivered and had a positive impact on my learning. One area that interested me was the post of Activity Director, for which there was no specific course. The evaluator role of the Activity Director was discussed in Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction and the administrative role was touched on in Practicum and Seminar. On reflection, I feel comfortable and willing to do the job based upon my own experience coupled with the instruction from the classes mentioned.

One assignment in particular, the reflective journal as assigned in Seminar, is a valuable and personal method for self evaluation and attitude adjustment. I began keeping my own reflective journal in 1991 at the suggestion of my martial arts instructor. I have continued this as a method of self-evaluation, sanity maintenance, and documentation because if you do not write it down, it did not happen. By all measures the daily schedule of a secondary administrator is busy. But, the time partitioned to keeping a reflective journal, on computer of course, will be a useful way to organize the events of a day, self assess, and move on.

A key theme throughout the coursework was the advice to exercise caution while interviewing for an administrative position. Total honesty with yourself is required to deal with the primary issue of an interview, which is to examine the compatibility between the candidates core values and those of the interview committee. The most important outcome of an interview is to compare

school goals, missions, and core values. A key to effective administration is to define as clearly as possible the primary strategic goals a school has. Then create a plan to address each of those goals in a measurable fashion. Assessment and evaluation follow and different methods are used to address old issues or new ones that will inevitably erupt. If there is no apparent match up neither side benefits. Do not let your first administrative job be your last one, true words that were echoed throughout the coursework at UNI.

Several courses advised that, when beginning any administrative job, caution should be exercised when employing new practice and to be careful what you emphasize. The wheels falling off your strategy could be the fatal error. I have worked with many administrators and teachers as well as parents and students. It appears that implementing sweeping policy changes can produce unwanted, or undesirable, results. An effective administrator has to know what changes can be made and when to make them.

The notion of do the right thing do not just do things right comes from School Laws. Keep in mind this is the people business. The dignity of individuals as well as the legal rights of students, staff, and patrons will be respected and due process followed. A healthy dose of common sense will go a long way.

School Laws also dealt with legal issues regarding student rights. Due process and existing school policy will have to be followed. Balancing student's rights with a school's legal obligation to provide a safe and orderly environment

can be a delicate matter, thus it is best to have a clear hardcopy of school policy.

A student discipline referral form will be included.

Punishment is temporary and often does not correct inappropriate behavior. Discipline includes consistent quality control, the development of intrinsic motivation, and modeling the behavior you as a principal expect.

Teacher compatible administration with flexibility in scheduling when needed and where possible is good. Seeing that staff is recognized for their effort is a key way to maintain the personal side of education. Embrace the notion to predate deadlines giving educators a safe zone or grace period, after all, people are busy.

Another useful anecdote, walk the walk and talk the talk, comes from Introduction to Educational Administration and Administration of a Secondary School. To me this is the ability to think on your feet and make good decisions while in the midst of chaos. It is a skill to be developed in order to survive. When dealing with numerous questions at a time, holding on to your core values will minimize the chance of making a fatal error. An effective administrator has to know their own limitations. Be solution oriented rather than problem centered.

Another key to effective administration comes from School and Community Relations. Make time available to listen to the concerns of various parties. Also, be prepared to be bombarded with complaints, questions, and answers. In Administration of a Secondary School, R. E. Decker (personal

communication, Spring, 1995), pointed out that some faculty will tell you far more about themselves and others than you wish to know. The strategy of detached concern also comes from that course and Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction. It means an administrator has to stay objective and logical when dealing with students, staff, and patrons. A clear separation of personal and professional life is maintained by a successful administrator.

Another basic concept for an administrator is the need to be a consensus builder, not just a vote counter. There will be concerns from students, veteran staff, and patrons regarding any if not all changes proposed and or implemented by a new principal. Developing an effective working atmosphere by positive interaction with these groups is a key component for building consensus toward school improvement strategies. Caring, yet firm and effective, written and verbal communication skills are a must for an effective administrator.

A Composite Reflection of My Professional Vision

School improvement is sort of a cliché, but the route to it continues to be built. This demands that a portion of an administrator's time be allotted to continue reading research, reflecting, and incorporating it into the existing overall school mission statement and strategic plan.

School improvement is an eternal issue. A central concept of School and Community Relations is how closely related it is to effective positive public relations. When the 1983 report on schools at risk was published, public attention

became focused on what schools were doing and how well they were doing it. As a whole, our nation's schools were not very effective.

One thing that happened was that increased media attention indicated, or raised, public concern regarding effective educational practice. Another thing was that schools reflected on their commitment to excellence in education. Then collaborative partnerships were formed and improving the effectiveness of schools, was, and is, the goal. This educational evolution is spinning faster each year.

A spin-off of that kind of thinking is a school's District Leadership Team. I served on the first one my school had and our initial goal was to analyze and reissue our school's strategic plan. That began four years ago and I am proud to say it is off and running. One point this experience drove home was the need to know when and who to go to for support on an issue. I suppose a common description of this would be politics as usual.

This experience clarified my vision of an effective educational leader as one who researches avenues directed at school improvement and provides effective education for all students. Schools should provide something, or some way, for all students to experience success. An effective administrator is the keeper of this vision.

The idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts means educators must use collaborative decision making in order to use available

resources effectively. This arms educators with diverse instructional strategies that are congruent with students' cognitive styles and aid student achievement. There are a number of online sources devoted to school improvement (see Appendix for a list of websites) (Keys, 1997, June).

Brain Compatible Instruction

Have you thought about thinking today? If you are involved with education in any way you probably have. Education is literally exploding with research that confirms that brain research provides educators with a clearer understanding of brain processes, especially cognitive styles and developmental learning. If applied effectively, this leads to matching instructional styles with students' learning styles, or brain compatible learning, and will result in improved student success.

The future of education is being shaped by this emerging research. Thus, the focus of my professional vision of an effective administrator is the application of that research toward school improvement. How the brain functions, thinking and memory in particular, and its connection with learning, carries powerful implications and awesome responsibilities for administrators.

Over the years people have analyzed and researched how and why we think and act as we do, as well as how we think and learn (Howard, 1994).

Howard's (1994) book draws useful connections between neuropsychological

research and practical applications. It provides a useful link for administrators to incorporate computer technology as they help teachers craft lesson design.

A broad generalization that can be drawn from many educational researchers, is that research points to the need for students to see true relevance in what they are being taught in order for learning to take place. This presents the notion that there are more reasons to teach than just to perpetuate society. It means that administrators must provide opportunities so that students can see meaning then learning can take place. Diverse instructional practice is needed. Brain compatible computer-assisted learning can be a way to help students find or generate meaning in their learning. Any strategic plan for school improvement has to include curriculum development that provides for effective education for all students.

Improvements in computer technology are largely responsible for this new frontier in educational research. Available computer technology can also be used to assist learning. More importantly, computer-assisted learning connects with what current brain research tells us about how thinking and learning takes place. This is grounded in the notion that computer-assisted learning is a method that can apply what current brain research tells us about cognitive styles. Results are effective education and overall school improvement. The administrative problem is to analyze how brain compatible computer-assisted learning helps match students' cognitive styles and improve academic success

Advancements in the medical use of technology provide us with a far better picture of what effects cognitive development. Various kinds of electronic imaging, like MRI or CAT scans, have been used to show brain activity. A newer scan, a PET, or positron emission tomography, scan, uses nuclear medicine to trace radioactive glucose injected into the blood stream. This scan is based on the fact that the brain uses 20 to 25 per cent of the nutrients carried in the blood. The flow of blood is traceable as various parts of the brain process and it illuminates exactly where the brain reacts to different stimuli. The PET scan shows the synapses firing and the connections made (Wolfe, 1997).

Knowing how and where the brain receives and processes information leads to a better understanding of what kind of instruction to provide and optimizes the opportunity for thinking and learning to take place.

The application of brain research to education is growing. The amount of research published within the past four or five years suggests that more administrators have turned to it. The following are studies that provide impetus for administrators to learn and employ diverse instructional and assessment methods to ensure that effective teaching results in effective learning. The need for diverse instructional methods that match cognitive styles opens the door for brain compatible computer-assisted learning.

Computer-assisted Instruction

Granted, education seems to repeat itself in all manner of instructional

methods have come, gone, or been recycled. Why should the use of computers be anything other than another passing fad? Film projectors, overhead projectors, and videotape have given teachers diversity and versatility in presenting lessons. Computers combine, or enhance, the best uses of these and provide an incredible amount of information. This promotes discovery learning from online sources and CD-ROM's. The incorporation of computers into the curriculum provides diverse learning experiences that match instruction with student's learning styles.

Research suggests that administrators realize that regardless of any teaching style employed, students may have different dominant cognitive styles in different curricular areas (Caine & Caine, 1991). The theory of multiple intelligences indicates at least seven, possibly nine, abilities or intelligences (Gardner, 1985). Both theories suggest that these cognitive styles or intelligences develop independently, and that individuals can hold promise in some areas while being average or below average in others. Computers can match cognitive styles.

Applying cognitive research to education enables schools to be effective learning centers. Hart's 1993 book is directed at the core problem faced by educators of how to bring about learning to meet the needs of today's students. This book may be considered a classic in the application of cognitive research to education. Administrators can use its models to enable schools to become effective learning centers that are grounded in technological, computer-assisted instruction, and academic rationale (Hart, 1993).

How learning takes place in relationship to short and long term memory have powerful implications for administrators (Wolfe & Sorgen, 1990). The authors include implications of research for the classroom and examples of brain-compatible instructional strategies. This research is the foundation for LLTC, described on page 18, and computer-assisted learning is a key component here.

Comparing the development and functions of the human brain to a jungle like ecosystem rather than to a computer may change our vision of learning. In 1993 Sylwester pointed out that the natural selection processes that shape a jungle ecosystem over a long period of time also shape our brain and it's neural networks throughout our lives. However, using computers is a fact of our lives and by not employing technology in learning, natural selection may weed us out (Sylwester, 1993).

Developing curriculum appropriate for adolescents should be based on similarities of human learning at different stages, as well as the uniqueness of the adolescent (Ross & Olsen, 1993). Their book highlights intelligence as a function of experience and the impact of personality.

Implementing these notions to create a brain compatible learning environment includes a meme, or meaning centered, curriculum. Integrating the curriculum is described in three stages, including creating a yearlong theme with monthly components and weekly topics. Five transition models are presented that include structures and advantages, as well as pitfalls and tips. Included are

several brain compatible tools for evaluating students that are consistent with goals of the authentic assessment movement, and that satisfy district needs for student and teacher assessment and accountability. Computers provide a multi-media approach to examine, record, and present developmentally appropriate information.

Six mismemes, or mistaken ideas, that have hindered educational reform, and seven new memes, or foundational premises, for education reform that are consistent with brain research and children's developmental characteristics are presented by Kovalik and Olsen in their 1994 book on Integrated Thematic Instruction, ITI (Kovalik & Olsen, 1994).

There are three principles of the ITI model: brain research must become the basis for decisions to improve education, teaching is an art and science that must implement brain research in the classroom, and curriculum development must occur at the classroom level. This notion is based on the classroom teacher's understanding of the learners and community, and is clearly presented. ITI is compatible with teaching reading, writing, and mathematics skills. Perhaps the best chapter, administratively, is devoted to the need for educators to undergo a personal transition if reform is to be accomplished.

Defining brain-compatible learning for students with, or without, identifiable developmental disabilities is defined as learning without threat (Lloyd, 1995). His eight elements of brain-compatible learning are trust, choices,

meaningful content, adequate time, enriched environment, immediate feedback, and mastery. These combine into an effective plan to incorporate brain research into learning programs. Computer-assisted learning is included in his elements of brain-compatible learning.

Caine and Caine's (1991) recommendations for adolescent age students include using Dynamic Gestalts like one of the various models of block scheduling, or integrating the curriculum by orchestrating it into thematic units. Getting students involved in real projects of personal interest that provide multi-sensory experiences, including telling stories and myths, are student centered and hands on. Computers can be the vehicles to meet these recommendations. Also, pairing students and cooperative groups lend themselves logistically to this practice which taps into the developmental changes adolescents undergo (Caine & Caine, 1991).

Brain compatible learning appears to lend itself to a constructivist approach toward improving curriculum. The notion of administrative leadership that facilitates constructionist reciprocal processes among participants in an educational community is the concept carried within The Constructivist Leader (Lambert, 1995). This book supports the idea of giving meaning to learning, which brain research tells us is vitally important, through increased parent, community, and student involvement. Providing the opportunity for faculty and staff to collaborate and generate ownership in strategic school improvement

should lead to more effective instructional practice and result in improved student achievement.

There are other supportive current references on brain compatible instruction and assessment. My research will continue in this rapidly expanding field and connect with ICN classrooms and computer network operations. I encourage all educators, whether teacher or administrator, to take advantage of the easy access to cutting edge educational research. The result will be effective brain compatible computer-assisted education.

Due to the newness of it, research on computer-assisted learning does not share the long history of researching cognitive styles, so most is fairly current. A variety of research does exist on the use of computers as a cognitive tool. In 1996 Reeves examined research that tracked the shift from technology as an instructional media to technology as a cognitive tool in teacher education (Reeves, 1996). Various print sources and World Wide Web sites are recommended by Reeves (1996) as entry points to information about innovative educational applications of technology.

Implementing Brain Compatible Computer-assisted Instruction

It must be clear to administrators that simply having the hardware, software, and online capabilities is not enough to ensure effective education. Looking at what is known to work when computers are used to support rather than supplant good instruction and curriculum development is important.

Good teachers find ways to use technology effectively. Many successful examples of computer in the classroom success stories share a common thread. Dedicated teachers use technology to help students master well defined skills and challenges. Citing studies from effective teaching journals, Panepinto and Muse in 1997 suggest that effective schools have several things in common. Among them are a community of other computer-using teachers, a school committed to teacher training, clear educational goals for using computers, and a demonstrated effectiveness as a teacher first, a technology-savvy teacher second (Panepinto & Muse, 1997).

In Waterloo, Iowa the Walnut Ridge Baptist Academy has begun a program that claims to provide brain compatible computer-assisted learning for students with learning difficulties. The Learning Efficiency Program uses computers to form skill drills to retrain the brain to process information correctly. The program is three years old and is limited to students with learning difficulties. However, this year the program was opened to all students including those from other schools. As such there is not a lot of hard data to show the effectiveness of the program, but student and parent responses have been favorable (Stanton, 1997). If this program proves to be effective perhaps it could very well serve as a model for computer-assisted learning for area schools.

There are a growing number of studies involving elementary, secondary, and post secondary students and computer-assisted learning. They all point to the

enormous possibilities for computer-assisted learning across the curriculum. As with anything new or different, caution needs to be applied.

An article that appeared in the September 1997 issue of Family PC reflects on what some schools are facing. There is a steady growth of technology in schools ranging from computers in labs and on teachers' desks to students with laptops. Schools are getting digital cameras, scanners, and converters that connect their computers with larger screen monitors. Classrooms connected by fiber optics will soon be added to this list.

Schools need a schematic map, a clear-cut path, before they incorporate brain compatible computer-assisted teaching and learning into their curriculum. This map has to include creative dialogue and the formation of collaborative partnerships with students, teachers, community members, parents, and administrators.

The problem is, there is not always a clear plan for implementation and teacher training and often not enough money has been budgeted for them. Several ways to remedy this budget issue are forming a PTA technology committee whose mission is to research budget needs and collaborate to map out a plan to incorporate technology into and across the curriculum. Holding a technology open house and building partnerships with local businesses and government agencies may produce surprising results in the way of hardware, software, or professional expertise (Panepinto & Muse, 1997). In short, form a

school and community technology committee. Technology may be the common element sought to connect schools with their own, and the world, community.

One way I know of doing this with teachers and administrators is Linking Learning and Teaching in the Curriculum, better known as LLTC, offered through AEA 7, Cedar Falls, Iowa. It is a multi year program that incorporates what emerging brain research suggests about developmental thinking and learning. A key portion is to deepen the understanding for educators of how computer technology has increased our understanding of how learning takes place. It also provides educators with diverse teaching strategies and therefore better meet student's needs.

The Des Moines Sunday Register on July 20, 1997 ran "Radical change urged for Iowa Schools" as their headline story. Marvin Pomerantz, head of the state education commission that studied Iowa schools, suggests nine areas to improve Iowa schools (Radical change, 1997). Four items connect with my reflection and vision. Reorganizing the school curriculum to allow students to progress as their abilities allow, tracking students through more testing, emphasizing reading, writing, mathematics, and science skills and improved teacher training can be addressed through computer-assisted brain based teaching and learning.

A powerful component of this approach to school improvement is alternative assessment and evaluation, or testing. It has been, and is, logistically

convenient to use traditional letter grades based upon paper and pencil tests to show student achievement. Brain compatible computer-assisted learning requires a change in that paradigm and will be a step toward more effective assessment practices.

Administrators need to encourage authentic assessment by encouraging and modeling assessment devices other than paper and pencil tests or evaluations. Portfolios, scored discussions, videotapes, computer presentations, or community projects based on a set of guidelines, like the evaluation instrument or rubric, offer ways to do this. Administrators need to model being self-directed life long learners in order to be able to assess and evaluate instructors and their practices. Instruments other than paper and pencil evaluations can be used as long as they comply with the Master Contract's evaluation procedure.

In the future, educators will need to assess with more precision students' achievement and more emphasis should be placed on students' self assessment. An effective, easy to use record keeping system would be a dual portfolio. Students keep course-related materials with their own reflective journal. Teachers would keep, a permanent portfolio on file that will accompany each student through grade levels and become the student's upon graduation. This would include examples of selected written entries, hard copies of written assessments, rubrics, computer discs, and videotapes of presentations or other visuals. At least once a semester student and teacher collaborate and decide what to keep in

this permanent portfolio. In order to fully experience the benefits of portfolios and journaling, both teachers and students will assess and evaluate. This calls for administrators to allocate time for training and practice, but keeping a more authentic profile of a student's progress contributes to overall accountability.

A diverse scope of learning experiences has to include assessment that connects with real world expectations and students evaluating opportunities for learning. This will provide students with a better chance to find learning that is meaningful to them. Students will apply reading, writing, math, and science skills as a matter of course, rather than because the teacher said to. This will not be the end of drill and practice, but offers other means of teaching and learning.

Getting the rest of academia and society to see the value of this will come with the transference of these types of assessments and evaluations to the familiar letter system. Thus the letter system will be based on a wider scope of student performance and more accurately reflect student progress.

My Professional Vision for Administrative Practice

We live in exiting times in education. Yes, there are critics, but there have always been. Money is, and will continue to be, an issue. Accountability for the cost effectiveness of any program will have to be carefully weighed.

My vision of the school of the future is one that embraces the many positive aspects of current schools. The administrative leaders of tomorrow will interpret and apply research and their experience with diverse instructional

systems and brain compatible computer-assisted learning, and better match educational styles with student learning styles. This also provides a clear path that tracks students and promotes educator accountability.

Tomorrow's educational leader, whether a teacher or administrator, can not be satisfied with the status quo. Continually seeking better ways to conduct business does not mean that existing practices are bad. It means that if we want students to be life long self-directed learners, then the educational leaders should be as well.

As with most things in life there needs to be a balance. The Asian concept of the true opposite forces of nature that are continually in conflict, Yin and Yang, illustrate this. From the friction caused by this conflict, new life, ideas, concepts, and visions are generated; educators have to be in the middle of this balance.

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Appendix

Online sources for school improvement information

Ask ERIC - Virtually a limitless resource for information of all types; includes a comprehensive search engine to help you navigate. ericir.syr.edu

EDWEB - A wonderful resource for teachers on topics ranging from school improvement to learning html. k12.cnidr.org:90/k12.html

Iowa Database - information about what is happening in Iowa schools.

www3.iptv.org/iowa_database/

NEA's Resource Room for Great Teaching - Includes information about the Association's school improvement activities and links to other resources.

www.nea.org/resource/index.html

New Iowa Schools Development Corporation - News and information about the nation's only non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging and supporting locally based school improvement activities. www.iptv.org/NISDC/default.html

Pathways to School Improvement - North Central Regional Educational Laboratory's (NCREL) comprehensive resource on school improvement, information from assessment to professional development.

www.ncrel.org/sdrs/pathways.htm