University of Northern Iowa

UNI ScholarWorks

1994

A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Denise M. Pape
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

When a colleague asked me what prompted my decision to pursue a degree in education, it was simple to answer. I have always had an educational career path in mind. Working with children has always been something that I enjoyed and I felt that I could put my talents to use in the teaching profession. It has turned out to be the right choice for me. Helping children to reach their full potential and watching them as they achieve success is such a rewarding experience. Knowing that I am making a difference in some child's life keeps me going when the day-to-day challenges arise. Getting my administrative certificate is another step toward making a difference in the lives of children.

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

Denise M. Pape

May 1994

This research paper by: Denise M. Pape

Entitiled: 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.

James L. Doud

_____
4/4/94

Date Approved   Advisor of Research Paper

Dave Else

_____
4-7-94

Date Approved   Second Reader of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

_____
4-13-94

Date Received   Head, Department of Educational
                              Administration and Counseling

When a colleague asked me what prompted my decision to pursue a degree in education, it was simple to answer. I have always had an educational career path in mind. Working with children has always been something that I enjoyed and I felt that I could put my talents to use in the teaching profession. It has turned out to be the right choice for me. Helping children to reach their full potential and watching them as they achieve success is such a rewarding experience. Knowing that I am making a difference in some child's life keeps me going when the day-to-day challenges arise. Getting my administrative certificate is another step toward making a difference in the lives of children.

Being an effective educational leader in today's society requires that the person possess many different proficiencies and have a basic belief system on which to base his/her actions. Throughout my studies I have had the opportunity to examine and to reflect on the role of leadership. In this paper I will share my beliefs about the qualities of an effective administrator. I will discuss the principal as a manager, instructional leader, visionary, culture

builder, communicator, leadership developer, and a caring individual. It is the purpose of this paper to reflect on these qualities, and to share my understanding of change and how change is led.

Qualities of an Effective Administrator

Throughout this program I have had to continually examine what I believe characterizes a good school. I have come to the conclusion that although there are many people who are vital to shaping the school's quality, the principal is the key individual. The work of Edmunds, Brookover, Lezotte, and others (cited in Hughes & Ubben, 1989) supported this conclusion by singling out the principal as "the most significant individual in the creation of an effective school" (p.5).

Role of Manager

Effective principals are those who are good managers. Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis (cited in Covey, 1989) perhaps said it best, "Management is doing things right: leadership is doing the right things" (p. 101). There will always be more things clamoring for my attention than I have time to manage. "The effective school executive organizes time so all the important things get done by those best suited by

disposition, training, interest, and availability"
(Hughes & Ubben, 1989, p. 435). I need to be sure to
organize and execute around my priorities. Effective
managers prioritize their activities based on their
personal values and goals. This is an area I need to
work on. I have developed the habit of taking time out
to reflect on what it is I have achieved and what I
still want to achieve. I have divided these into
personal and professional goals, but there are many
times when they do not get past the planning stage. I
am improving in this area, and as an effective manager
I will need to continue to prioritize and reflect upon
decisions so that I do not just react to the things
going on around me.

Being an effective manager means having access to
good information. Guthrie and Reed (1991) stated that
the knowledge of world events is no longer just a
desirable quality but imperative in today's society.
An effective manager will use the technology available
to him/her to find out what is happening in a matter of
minutes around the world. Computer technology is also
invaluable in the areas of student data, record
keeping, and budgets. I don't consider myself a

computer wizard, but I realize the importance of these
skills and am committed to encouraging the use of
technology in the school.

As a manager of information through networking,
technology, and participation in professional
organizations, it is evident that you can not be an
instructional leader in a void.

Role of Instructional Leader

In assuring that all students receive effective
instruction, I assume another whole host of
responsibilities. I must be able to articulate what
students are to learn as well as what teachers are to
teach. In order to do this I will need to know my
community so that I can apply the values and goals of
the community when supervising the development and
implementation of the curriculum.

Although I realize that the community plays a
major role in shaping curricular trends there are some
essential components that I need to be sure are
included in the curriculum. I would consider the
following offered by the National Association of
Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 1991), to be
essential: (a) "a strong foundation in the fundamental
skills of reading, writing and mathematics; and

acquiring basic knowledge and understanding in science,
social studies, fine arts, health, and physical
education" (p. 10); (b) an emphasis on communication:
listening, speaking, reading, writing, as well as the
use of technology; and (c) development of self-worth
and a respect and appreciation of the differences of
others.

I must ensure that curriculum and instruction are
developmentally appropriate by providing my staff with
the needed space and supplies in order to accomplish
this goal. The National Association for the Education
of Young Children (NAEYC) said:

Knowledge is not something that is given to
children as though they were empty vessels to be
filled. Children acquire knowledge about the
physical and social worlds in which they live
through playful interaction with objects and
people. (p. 81)

I must see to it that the curriculum for young children
will provide experiences through active exploration and
interaction with others. I should see to it that the
instruction that these young children receive is done

in small groups or individually when possible, and
involve concrete learning activities and materials
(NAEYC, 1986).

I will need to help teachers develop more
effective teaching practices. I will need to:

>...keep abreast of current developments in
>
>instructional research, reflect on what these
>
>developments imply for my school, and provide
>
>leadership and support for the implementation of
>
>instructional practices that effectively provide
>
>for diverse student needs. (NAESP, 1991, p. 11)

Well-planned staff development can help ensure that
teachers are developed to their fullest potential.
Fullen (1990) described staff development as "any
process intended to improve skills, attitudes,
understandings, or performance in present or future
roles" (p.3). As teachers improve skills and
attitudes, the needs of the students will be more
successfully met.

Going along with this I will need to assess how
well students are learning and teachers are teaching.
"The purpose of evaluation must be the improvement of
instruction" (Chirnside, 1984, p. 42). If I convey an
interest in the growth of my teachers, I believe that

this encouragement will result in an improved school
program.   Nolan and Francis (1992) shared that, through
goal setting and team input, principals need to
encourage teachers to be active participants in the
evaluation process.   My goal is to be received as a
collaborator in the teaching and learning processes.
When this happens, I am no longer a critic and the
teachers will be more willing to resolve problem areas.
Garmston (1987) found the following:

> Administrators want teachers to respond to
> feedback about their teaching, to strive for self-
> awareness, to monitor and evaluate their
> decisions, and to improve themselves
> professionally.   By modeling these behaviors
> themselves, administrators take a giant step
> toward supporting teacher attainment of these
> goals. (p. 26)

Donmoyer and Wagstaff (1990) supported this modeling
role by stating, "All principals are instructional
leaders, since all principals inevitably influence what
students have an opportunity to do in the classroom"
(p. 29).

True formative evaluation demands that both
principals and staff have a clear vision of what needs
to be achieved. Vision implies a sense of purpose.
Successful leaders possess a vision of what they want
their schools to be.

Role of Visionary

As I look at my own personal vision, I need to
think about what a school could and should be. When I
think about what it takes to make a good school, the
first thing I think about is the environment or the
climate of the school. There is a sense of caring,
belonging, and an overall positive feeling throughout
the building. All members of the learning community
routinely exhibit a sense of humor and you are able to
recognize it as you walk through the halls.
Differences are respected and celebrated. Through our
diversity, members of the school community are provided
abundant opportunities for learning. Both students and
adults are encouraged to be risk-takers. This will
allow for optimal learning to take place. The school
that I see in my future is one in which everyone,
including the principal, is teaching and learning.

Barth (1990) defined the principal as the head learner. "As we learn together and as we inquire together, we create the ties that enable us to become a learning community" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 167).

The elementary and middle schools Proficiencies for Principals published by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (1991), is a reflective tool for systematic evaluation of professional strengths and weaknesses. In addition it provides a basic structure for remediation and growth. Such a reflective process is essential if principals are to be the very best in the business. I recognize that it is unrealistic to expect all administrators to possess all of these proficiencies. Administrators must continually aim toward high levels of excellence. Max DePree (1989) stated, "We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are" (p. 87). It is essential that we assess our strengths and weaknesses and look for ways to improve. A principal cannot be satisfied to maintain the status quo of a system that must change to meet the needs of the 21st century learner. "The new principal must be a visionary and must work towards

making that vision a reality. Visionary leadership is what is now called for by our young people in our society" (Cunard, 1990, p. 34).

The vision that I possess is how I think my school should be and how I can make it happen. Joel Barker (1990) suggested that, "Vision is the result of dreams in action." I have already put Barker's statement into practice. I have been sharing my vision with my students and my coworkers for years, and together we have made our vision a reality.

This shared vision is one to which I want many people to be truly committed. We need to revisit this vision at every opportunity so that it may continue to be the center of our focus. My enthusiasm for this vision will encourage all members of the learning community--staff, students, families, etc., to take part in the shaping of what will be the school's mission. Once people have a personal stake in what is happening in the school they will become committed to what takes place there.

Important to the visionary is a clear understanding of the school's culture.

Role of Culture Builder

The specific culture of the school needs to be considered when making school improvements. As Terrance Deal (cited in Owens, 1991) pointed out,

At the heart of most...definitions of culture is the concept of a learned pattern of unconscious (or semiconscious) thought, reflected and reinforced by behavior, that silently and powerfully shapes the experiences of people. (p. 171)

This includes its history, its people, its way of doing business, its norms, and even its values.

Leon Lessinger (1971) pointed out that success should be measured, not by some fixed national norms, but rather by the results achieved in relation to the actual situation of a school and its set of students. The school has its own particular expertise, its own perceived state of where it wants to be, and its own character, but it still must function within the community. This view is supported by Robert Owens (1991), who suggested that each school district has an organizational culture as well as each individual school having its own culture.

I need to take a look at where the educational
staff, students, and parents of a particular school are
now, and slowly help them move in a direction of
improvement. In each of these cases I need to look at
the individuals involved and see what it is that they
need to ensure their greatest success. When this
happens the entire school will benefit. When all
involved have the opportunity to contribute ideas and
react to change, they become integral parts of the
school culture rather than "technical workers who are
only marginally engaged in the school's overaching
aspirations" (Bellon, 1988, p. 31). Rosabeth Kanter
(cited in Owens, 1991) referred to this as culture of
pride. People have an emotional and value commitment
and they cherish the contributions that they make in
order for the organization to be successful.

Once a principal has gathered and understands
crucial information about the school culture, he/she
must be able to articulate this information to the
informal and formal publics.

Role of Communicator

"Everything that an effective manager does is
based on communication" (Lundy, 1990, p. 47). The
effective leader is able to communicate in a variety of

formats and situations. In order to be an effective communicator you must not only be effective at giving information but also in receiving information. If you understand the intent of the message you are able to respond in a manner that indicates this understanding.

A principal needs to model effective communication. This will show in bulletins to the staff, parent newsletters, parent and/or student handbooks, and annual reports. In each of these situations it is important that the principal keep in mind the intended audience and use appropriate language. It is also important that the principal use effective verbal and nonverbal communication in his/her day to day interactions with others.

In being an effective communicator a principal must not overlook the external publics of a school system. Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher (1990) suggested an effective principal will identify key individuals in the community who would help inform the community about what is going on in school as well as find out how the public feels about important issues. Knowing who to contact and how to relate to that person helps keep the lines of communication open to and from school.

Schools are made of individuals with varying backgrounds and values. The quality of the communication between these people is largely dependent upon the principal's ability to demonstrate good communication skills and then to help others demonstrate these abilities as well. My goal as an educator is to model effective communication. I hope to "seek first to understand, then to be understood" (Covey, 1989, p. 237).

The intent behind communication needs to be trust. You cannot give lip service to good communication, it must be genuine.

Integrity

An effective leader possesses integrity, both personally and professionally. I think that by remembering why I chose a career in education I will be able to face the moral and ethical challenges of the administrative position. Thomas Green (1987) pointed out that ethics is an integral part of the profession, not something added. I believe that people who have a clear vision of what their tasks are will be more inclined to place the duty of their jobs over self-interest.

Hodgkinson (1991) suggested that values, morals, and ethics are the very essence of leadership and that administrators need to know where the values are and where the power lies. I think that the power to make the right decisions for kids lies within us and that we need to remember this so that we can better deal with the conflicts within our schools.

At the foundation of this sense of integrity, should be a genuine concern for all members of the learning community.

Caring

"Leadership is rational, analytical, and action oriented. However, it also has an emotional facet. Effective leaders care" (Guthrie & Reed, 1991, p. 17). In my opinion that is the bottom line. They care about what's best for children. They care about teachers and parents. They care about what the future holds and want to be change-agents. That is what ultimately made me decide to pursue my administrative certificate. I believe that I can make a difference!

In the past years there have been many changes occurring in our society resulting in role changes for the schools. We are seeing more single-parent families, children coming to school with improper

nutrition, children who have emotional problems, and I could go on and on. All of these societal factors make it crucial for schools to be providers for the physical health of the student and nurturers of his or her emotional well-being through the building of self-esteem.

The principal is in the key position to either strengthen or weaken the ethic of caring in a building due to the number of interactions he/she has with students, parents, and staff during the course of a day. Caring can be shown by simply being visible and accessible. Being seen in the lunchroom, halls, and classrooms reinforces the principal's commitment to being visible and accessible.

Listening is a big part of caring. This is an area that I need to work on. It means clearing away all the clutter in my mind and really listening to what is being said to me. Sharing my reactions honestly will let other people know I am truly interested in their well-being.

One of the most important tasks of the educational leader is to deal with change. Successful leaders understand how to bring about change.

Understanding/Leading Change

Making improvements within the schools is as
important as making personal improvements. There is a
great deal of pressure from society to make schools
more productive environments. This sounds very simple,
but in fact can be very difficult.

An Arab proverb states, "Everybody wants progress:
Nobody wants change." As I look at where schools have
been and where they are now, it seems the more things
change the more they remain the same. Despite our
efforts to implement change, schools and classrooms
remain basically unaltered. This is a challenge to my
work as both a practicing teacher and future
administrator.

Leading change begins with an understanding that
change is a very complex process and that it is
fragile.

Change as a process

Prestine's (1991) research suggested that, "What
appears to be an overwhelming conclusion across schools
is that change is fragile. Its tenuous existence is
dependent on careful attention, nurturing conditions,
and considerable efforts" (p. 174). In an environment
that encourages risk-taking, mistakes are an expected

part of the process. I feel that it is important to remove the threat that mistakes are bad. If we see something that isn't working, then let's work to correct it. I think often times in education we may try new techniques but we fail to go back and see if they are achieving the intended purpose. Whether these techniques meet the needs of our students or not, we sometimes continue to use them because we do not want to admit we made a mistake. That way of thinking shouldn't exist if we truly want to make some changes. Caslovka, Sims, and Staples (1992) pointed out that you need to understand that change is a struggle, but that this struggle also equals growth.

It is important that I set the stage for change and help others in the school analyze our population and the specific needs of our community of learners. I need to encourage dialogue and discussion among the stakeholders of our organization about possible transformation ideas. It is vital that I help members in our learning community realize that change is not an end in itself, but an evolutionary process. I need to constantly be monitoring the change process so that necessary readjustments can be made.

As a future administrator I need to realize that, whether teachers are involved in the beginning as initiators or later as implementors, they need to be active participants in the change process. I need to provide them with adequate resources, materials, and a climate that supports change if it is to become a reality. Successful administrators have realized that the "real power and excellence of teachers and teaching are maximized when leadership and decision making are shared" (Cunard, 1990, p.33). Doris Ray (1992) shared this belief when suggesting that schools must be more inclusive in defining who is a leader. Being more inclusive in one's definition of who is a leader involves improving everyone's leadership ability so that people will collaborate effectively.

Throughout my course work I have heard a great deal about site-based management. I feel the improvement of schools will definitely depend on the reallocation of some power within the educational system.

Site-Based Management

I think that site-based management and restructuring will be needed to bring about deep and lasting educational reforms. There is also a part of

me that wonders whether we get so caught up in the terminology that we lose sight of the real issue--how to improve schools.

The tough job of making changes in our public schools will not be accomplished by slogans or terminology. I think the only way change will be accomplished is through genuine alliances between administration and teachers at the district and site levels. Kessler (1992) pointed out that through open communication and an atmosphere where there is trust teachers, principals, and those at the district level can focus their attention on improvements in the schools.

The logical place where educators can come together and deal with the tough issues and the good ideas in the context of practice is in the schools. I think sometimes we forget that schools are not only places to teach critical thinking, but also places for thinking critically about teaching. When I think about where the ultimate power to change is, I come to only one conclusion. It is in the hands of those that work in our schools.

Today's education reformers (Caslovka, Sims &
Staples, 1992) agree:

> Reform efforts will be most successful and long-
> lasting if they are planned and carried out by
> practioners--classroom teachers who work every day
> with the real challenges of real students in real
> schools. (p. 24)

That is why site-based management really needs to be
considered. Bergman (1992) supported this idea,
suggesting that staff members who may have been
reluctant to assume responsibility will feel a part of
the process.

Successful leaders know how to motivate those
people with whom they work. As an effective leader I
need to involve my staff in planning, decision making,
and thus goal setting. "The effective leader
cultivates goal-oriented followers by rewarding--
psychologically as well as materially--goal-oriented
performance" (Lundy, 1990, p. 61). "The only way to
develop responsibility in people is to give them
responsibility" (Blanchard, Burrows, & Oncken, 1989, p.
73). As they begin to view their input as valuable
they will develop a new sense of commitment. The

principal also assumes a new level of involvement since he/she is seeing situations from the vantage point of others.

As a person who works in a district that is trying site-based management, I see some misconceptions that need to be cleared up before it can become a successful option for a district. It is not a top-down management model. It is not a system of making concessions, but rather one of inventing options. It is not a cut-and-dried option for all schools nor adopted to the same degree in all schools.

There are many principals that need to learn to involve teachers in making decisions. They have not had to do this in the past so they need help in learning how to foster an exchange of ideas and information. As the principal works his/her way through site-based management there will be times of frustration and confusion, but I think that the drawbacks will pale in comparison to the substantial benefits of the approach. On the other hand, if a principal's building level authority is expanded faster than he/she can manage it, his/her failure can do a great deal of damage to the success of site-based management. It is important that the needed training

be given to principals and staff members so that they will effectively deal with these changes. Site-based management requires a long-term commitment on the part of all participants.

I realize that change does not occur overnight, but unless we begin to rethink how we do things, we will still be in the same place years down the road. It is going to take the efforts of many people to make the needed changes. As an educational leader I must be a key player in making these changes a reality.

Conclusion

Being an educational leader in today's schools is not an easy task. Changes in our society have resulted in schools that are filled with at-risk students. The public is demanding that we raise literacy rates, provide stability for our children, stop crime, ensure future employment, provide day-care, and I could go on and on. The clincher is that all of this is to be done with little or no additional funds. "The solutions to many of the problems facing our society depend on long-range vision and planning" (Ray, 1991, p. 11).

When I think about this task, I wonder if I truly want to take on the challenge of being an administrator

in today's society. An optimist views "problems as
challenges and challenges as opportunities" (Heller,
1985, p. 46). I definitely view myself as an optimist.
While there are many things that I still want to
accomplish before taking on the role of principal, I
feel that I am doing my best to prepare for future
opportunities.

I have shared my vision of what makes an effective
administrator and the need to understand and lead
change. I realize that these are not going to be easy
tasks, but I also feel very strongly that as an
educational leader I must accept the challenges and be
a key player in making our educational system the best
that it can be.

References

Barker, J. A. (1990). Discovering the future: The power of vision [videocassette]. St. Paul: Chart House.

Barth, R. S. (1990). A personal vision of a good school. Phi Delta Kappan, 71, 512-516.

Bellon, J. J. (1988). The dimensions of leadership. Vocational Education Journal, 63(8), 29-32.

Bergman, A. B. (1992). Lessons for principals from site-based management. Educational Leadership, 50(1), 36-38.

Blanchard, K., Burrows, H., & Oncken, W. Jr. (1989). The one minute manager meets the monkey. New York: Morrow.

Caslovka, A., Sims, A., & Staples, B. (1992). Teachers tell the truth about school change. Instructor, 101(5), 24-27.

Chirnside, C. (1984). Ten commandments for successful teacher evaluation. NASSP Bulletin, 68(475), 42.

Covey, S. R. (1989). The seven habits of highly effective people. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Cunard, R. F. (1990). Sharing instructional leadership--a view to strengthening the principal's position. NASSP Bulletin, 74(525), 30-34.

DePree, M. (1989). Leadership is an art. New York: Doubleday.

Donmeyer, R., & Wagstaff, J. G. (1990). Principals can be effective managers and instructional leaders. NASSP Bulletin, 74(525), 20-29.

Fullen, M. G. (1990). Staff development, innovation, and institutional development. In B. Joyce (Ed.), Changing school culture through staff development [ASCD Yearbook 1990] (pp. 3-25). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Garmston, R. J. (1987). Team coaching: Staff development side by side. Educational Leadership, 44(5), 19-26.

Green, T. F. (1987). The conscience of leadership. In L. T. Shelve & M. B. Shoenheit (Eds.), Leadership: Examining the elusive (pp. 105-115). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Guthrie, J. W., & Reed, R. J. (1991). Educational administration and policy: Effective leadership for American education (2nd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Heller, M. (1985). Principals in high tech age are non-replacable leaders. NASSP Bulletin, 69(484), 43-46.

Hodgkinson, C. (1991). Educational leadership: The moral act. Albany: University of New York Press.

Hughes, L. W., & Ubben, G. C. (1989). The elementary principal's handbook: A guide to effective action. (3rd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Kessler, R. (1992). Shared decision making works. Educational Leadership, 50(1), 36-38.

Kindred, L. W., Bagin, D., & Gallagher, D. R. (1990). The school and community relations (4th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lessinger, L. M. (1971). Accountability in education. Worthington, OH: Jones Publishing Co.

Lundy, J. L. (1990). Lead, follow, or get out of the way. San Marcos, CA: Avant.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (1986). Position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in programs for 4-and 5-year olds. Young Children, 41(6), 80-87.

National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). (1991). Proficiencies for principals. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Nolan, J., & Francis, P. (1992). Changing perspectives in curriculum and instruction. In C. D. Glickman (Ed.), Supervision in transition [ASCD Yearbook 1992] (pp. 44-60). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Owens, R. G. (1991). Organizational behavior in education (4th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Prestine, N. A. (1991). Shared decision making in restructuring essential schools: The role of the principal. Planning and Changing, 22(3/4), 160-177.

Ray, D. (1991, March). Technology and restructuring part I: New educational directions. The Computing Teacher, pp. 9-20.

Ray, D. (1992). Removing barriers of social organization in schooling so technology can aid restructuring. Educational Digest, 57(5), 14-17.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1994). Building community in schools. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.