

THE SUPERVISOR LOOKS AT THE PRINCIPAL

LILLIAN I. MOSHER

Supervisor of Elementary Education
Portland Public Schools, Portland, Oregon

IN AMERICAN education exciting and challenging things are taking place. One of the most encouraging trends is the shift in focus to the elementary school.

This change of emphasis, the social and cultural revolutions, and the rapid technological advancements present important implications and complex demands for the elementary school principal.

Expectations Differ

In the analyses by theorists and researchers, there is limited agreement as to what the role of the elementary principal should be or how he should perform his role in dealing with the new demands.

Many provocative ideas have been proposed to define and to modify the changing role of the principal:

Erickson predicts "that the instructional supervision component of the principal's role will rather steadily lessen in importance as the principal's responsibility for strategic coordination is given increased emphasis."¹

Curtin and Gilbertson insist that the principal is not only an administrator but "that the elementary school principal is, and must remain for the foreseeable future, a leader in curriculum and instruction."²

Greig and Lee suggest that a transformation of the principalship is timely and propose cooperative administration as a means for the improvement of the principalship. They make the analogy that, "If cooperative effort by teachers improves the effectiveness of planning, teaching, and evaluation, then the effec-

¹ Donald A. Erickson. "Changes in the Principalship." *The National Elementary Principal* 44: 20; April 1965.

² James Curtin and Stanley Gilbertson. "The Principal and the Instructional Program." *The National Elementary Principal* 40: 53; April 1965.

tiveness of planning, supervision, and evaluation activities of principals might also be improved by collaboration."³

Applying the rationale behind team teaching, Anastasiow and Fischler propose "that the teaming of principals would be equally effective and help to meet some of the problems in elementary school administration."⁴

Cunningham considers the need to develop programs of continuing professional education crucial for the elementary principal and suggests that each state "create a commission on continuing education."⁵

Many and varied ideas have been suggested as future courses of action in view of ever-increasing demands. Some persons speak in fear that the public schools will not survive unless educational processes keep pace with the changing society; some perceive the role of the principal as a diminishing one. Some see increasing difficulty for the principal in maintaining status as an instructional leader; yet others see his future role as a challenging assignment.

How Fast Can the Principal Run?

What of today? We are living in what Kelley so aptly describes as a "moving, changing, becoming-but-never-arriving world. . . ."⁶

Since the beginning of public education, the schools have changed to meet the demands of the times. Similarly, as conditions required more effective leadership, the principal modified his leadership functions to meet the complexity of his role.

That the present requirements of the elementary principal are a source of frustration is of common agreement. To be a skilled administrator of a school requires myriad competencies. It is doubtful that any organization demands as many diversified tasks of an individual. In an effort to meet changing demands, the elementary principal appears to be in much the same situation as Alice in Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

Alice and the Queen had been running as fast as they could for some time. As they stopped to rest, Alice looked about in great surprise. She said, "Why, I do believe we've been under this tree the whole time! Everything's just as it was!"

"Of course it is," said the Queen. "What would you have it?"

"Well in 'our' country," said Alice, still panting a little, "you'd generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time as we've been doing."

"A slow sort of country!" said the Queen. "Now, here, you see, it takes all

³ James Greig and Robert R. Lee. "Cooperative Administration." *The National Elementary Principal* 44: 73; January 1965.

⁴ Nicholas J. Anastasiow and Abraham S. Fischler. "A Proposal for Teaming Principals." *The National Elementary Principal* 44: 60; November 1964.

⁵ Luvorn L. Cunningham. "Continuing Professional Education for Elementary Principals." *The National Elementary Principal* 44: 66; April 1965.

⁶ Earl C. Kelley. "The Fully Functioning Self." *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming*. Arthur W. Combs, editor. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1962. p. 10.

the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."

Who are those principals who "get somewhere"? What distinctive qualities do they possess?

Characteristics of a Good Principal

The effectiveness of the principal can be defined only in relation to the children, to the teachers, to others with whom he works, and to the community.

The following examples of effective leadership in the schools and in the community may serve to point up some traits of the participating principal.

In School A, many of the teachers are or have been involved in activities pertaining to curriculum improvement by serving on various curriculum committees with central office supervisors. The principal also serves on a curriculum committee. When asked how he promotes teacher participation, he replied:

I believe involvement, not involvement for involvement's sake, but participation for a purpose increases interest and enthusiasm. This helps change attitudes.

The hard work and extra hours I have spent on curriculum committees have resulted not only in a better understanding and greater knowledge, but I feel I'm a part of what is taking shape, I'm excited about it, and I want to share it.

I don't pressure teachers to get involved. When a teacher works on a committee, the staff here plans ways in which that teacher can pass on information to others in the building. Enthusiasm is contagious and perhaps it's this sharing that opens the door for others to venture. We have a good time exchanging ideas that may benefit Mary or Johnny or Susan.

School B is experimenting with ways to create a good attitude toward reading in which two teachers form a leadership team. They use supervisors and librarians in a number of ways. The principal reads a wide variety of books and is able to talk enthusiastically with children in any classroom about many books at their level. He "pops" in and out of classrooms frequently to show a new book he has discovered, to remark about a character in a book, to get responses about books from children. He is a constant reminder of the value of books. His office! He collects books, all kinds of books, and the collection overflows the capacity of his bookcases. Children delight in selecting a special book from the collection on the floor. Books are for *now*. It takes time to obtain a bookcase.

The principal in School C has been well liked by every school community to which he has been assigned. Why was this so? He answered a question about his success in this way:

Maybe you could call me selfish. I try to find out how my colleagues operate, and I "pick their brains" for specific techniques that I can use. I've found out that little details are important.

We are all interested in children or we wouldn't be in this work. This seems so obvious that too often we fail to give oral confirmation of it to parents. I suppose in the busy schedule of doing we take for granted that our daily actions convey this message.

Perhaps what success I may have with the school community is due, in part, to the mental notebook I keep. I try to make contact and really observe as many individual children as possible, and I file mental notes about each one. In this way I have a fund of information, and can share specifics of a positive nature with parents.

The teachers here are doing a fine job of careful observation. We feel this concentration on actions and reactions has given us insights for better ways to help each child.

If we observe closely enough, then, we can find more effective ways to promote learning. If we fail with one approach, we try another. We profit from our failures.

The focus is on the child. This approach is somewhat different, and we use all the resource help we can get. Parents are kept informed and are involved in a voluntary and unstructured way. Many are writing down observations they make at home, and these are used in the parent-teacher conferences and in the parent study groups.

A Creative Role

A close look at these examples reveals some common threads:

The principal's attitudes become the school's attitudes.

The principal's strengths are reflected in the strengths of the school.

The principal seeks and cooperates with other people in attaining goals.

What, then, are the characteristics of a good principal? From observations in many schools, the "good" principal seems best to fit the conclusions Kelley draws from the behavior of the fully functioning person:

The fully functioning personality thinks well of himself.

He thinks well of others.

He therefore sees his stake in others.

He sees himself as a part of a world in movement—in process of becoming.

The fully functioning personality, having accepted the ongoing nature of life and the dynamic of change, sees the value of mistakes.

The fully functioning self, seeing the importance of people, develops and holds human values.

He knows no other way to live except in keeping with his values.

Since life is ever-moving and ever-becoming, the fully functioning person is cast in a creative role.⁷

To the degree that leadership in the schools exemplifies these characteristics, to that same degree schools will become humanizing centers for learning. ☞

⁷ Earl C. Kelley. "The Fully Functioning Self." *Op. cit.*, p. 18-20.



Copyright © 1966 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.