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Reflective practitioner as the leader of learning : a reflective essay

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Reflective practitioner as the leader of learning : a reflective essay

Abstract

The role of the principal has changed significantly over the last twenty years. Today's principal is always multi-tasking, changing gears and changing roles over the course of a day. Leadership must come from the inside out instead of top down. To fulfill this role, an effective principal must adhere to their personal philosophy and belief of education as well as live and model with ethical consideration. Philosophy and ethics will guide specific qualities of leadership that will prove to be effective in the management of an effectively run school. The principal must be a reflective leader who can promote and implement change while maintaining instructional integrity. The principal must be willing to be a service leader who practices and models to their faculty and students a willingness to do what is necessary for all vested participants in a school. Sergiovanni (1984) calls it a "community of learners" where teachers, administrators, parents, students become collectively responsible for envisioning and implementing school reform. Creating shared leadership creates a culture that works together for a common vision and goal. A goal should be to make sure that students have an optimal opportunity to receive an education from knowledgeable and thoughtful teachers in a setting that safe and focused on student learning.

REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER AS THE LEADER OF LEARNING

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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The role of the principal has changed significantly over the last twenty years. Today's principal is always multi-tasking, changing gears and changing roles over the course of a day. Leadership must come from the inside out instead of top down. To fulfill this role, an effective principal must adhere to their personal philosophy and belief of education as well as live and model with ethical consideration. Philosophy and ethics will guide specific qualities of leadership that will prove to be effective in the management of an effectively run school. The principal must be a reflective leader who can promote and implement change while maintaining instructional integrity. The principal must be willing to be a service leader who practices and models to their faculty and students a willingness to do what is necessary for all vested participants in a school. Sergiovanni (1984) calls it a "community of learners" where teachers, administrators, parents, students become collectively responsible for envisioning and implementing school reform. Creating shared leadership creates a culture that works together for a common vision and goal. A goal should be to make sure that students have an optimal opportunity to receive an education from knowledgeable and thoughtful teachers in a setting that safe and focused on student learning.

My philosophy of education is rooted in the experiences I have had, people I have known and classes I have taken. As a teacher, my philosophy is that all

students can learn. And as a future administrator my philosophy has expanded to include how an instructional environment can be created that pays attention not only to students but teachers as well. This expanded philosophy was created while exploring the role of an effective administrator. An effective administrator is reflective practitioner, an instructional leader, a change agent, and a service learning leader.

Reflecting on the reasons of why I wanted to become an educator and now why I want to become an educational leader has been both enlightening and surprising to me. There are patterns of behavior that never occurred to me before. I truly was having a difficult time expressing why I wanted to become an administrator. My instincts knew, but I could not articulate the feelings into words. This exploration of thought has not only given me the explanation of why I wanted to become an educator, but also why I want to continue my journey into educational leadership.

My decision to become an educator was not a lifelong dream. In fact, growing up, teaching was the last thing in the world I wanted to do, in part because my young mind could only wrap itself around the concept of what I heard from my mother. My mother who is school social worker said, "Jobs in education paid little and the work is very demanding." I wanted a job that was going to pay me big bucks with small increments of work. But now, as I reflect back on the jobs I have had, all of them were related to teaching. They involved taking care of children, teaching children, and wanting to see success in the project I undertook.

My first paid jobs were babysitting. I remember counting how many clients I had when I was twelve years old. There were twenty-five different families I babysat for on a regular basis. Back then there were no videogames or even much on cable so I had to occupy them by playing board games and reading stories. I recall that was how I first learned to read upside down which we all know is an unmentioned, yet very necessary skill that they do not teach you in college. I also had to deal with the behaviors and disciplining of these children in accordance to parental wishes. Even then I remember thinking to myself, "I will never raise my kids this way!"

My first summer job, although unpaid and another clue to my future, was to assist in teaching swimming. I assisted for four summers and loved it so much I decided to go through Lifeguard training and Water Safety Instruction to teach lessons. I realized that I could take kids who did not know how to swim or who did not even like the water on the first day and by the 10th day I could watch them do bobs, blow bubbles, float, and most times swim a distance. There is satisfaction knowing that I was part of that process. Now when I go back to that pool with my own kids I see the lifeguards that I once taught when they were three or four years old and I know I had something to do with their success. This past summer it really paid off for me when one of my former students jumped in to rescue my struggling son.

During the school year I was a student trainer for football and basketball teams. I enjoyed taking care of people. It was again another moment of satisfaction when I got to see them recover from an injury and I knew I had a part

in their recovery. These jobs were the foundation as to why I wanted to become an educator. It is being part of a process where you know you can make a difference.

I believe education is about taking a person and giving them the skills to be successful, contributing, and unique members of society. From pre-school through 12th grade, we as educators are taking blank white boards and writing on them. The skills, thoughts, talents, and new ideas of our students are things that will help create who they are and who they could be in society.

I have decided to enter the educational leadership program because I want to make a difference for all students who have exceptional educational needs. I want to see them leave the special education programs knowing more skills that will make them successful in life then before they came to us. I want to know that I have made a positive difference in their lives beyond their four years in high school. I have high expectations for my students even though they have hearing impairments. I do not see any reason why they can not achieve on grade level reading, or why they should not be able to go to college, or why they can not be successful, contributing members of society. I have found ways to work smarter and not harder for my students' success. The skills I have learned I know can be transferred to other students who have disabilities. I have a passion and a vision for my profession. As a leader I want to see general education reform that includes more teacher preparation for students with special needs. This would include paradigm shifts for people who are uncomfortable or uneducated about

teaching students special needs. I want to help create more legislative reform so that no child is left behind.

The experiences I have had have educated me and validated my reasons for the need to see change occur in special education. I see my current position as Special Education Department Head being different than what it was prior to IDEA 1990 and 1997, and No Child Left Behind. Special Education is an entity in of itself. It has its own budgets, guidelines, employees, curriculums, extra-curricular activities, and issues. An area that I am working on to lead school improvement is analyzing data on our most recent standardized tests so as to help the teachers create materials and lessons that will improve our schools test scores. Inclusion of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities is also a charge I am leading in the name of student achievement. Additionally, my continual perusal of Special Education law will allow me to help my administration make decisions that are in the best interests of the students as well as being within the law. Compulsory education began in Vermont in 1867 (www.infoplease.com) because the government believed that a democratic society needed to have educated people. I still believe this is true. The more educated all people are, the better chance society has to be empowered, informed, and knowledgeable about issues that pertain to them.

As a teenager I never realized the jobs and classes I took were paving the road for my becoming an educator and a leader. Now, I am very glad I had the experiences I have had. My personal motivation for being in education is to see students and people grow and thrive through the process of acquiring knowledge.

Whether I do this in a classroom or as an administrator will make no difference to me. The gratification of knowing I can make a difference in someone's life is enough for me.

Reflecting on the pattern of jobs and events I have experienced in my life to help me understand the reasons I wanted to become an educator and an administrator has purpose. I was using the reflective framework that has been described by people like Donald Schon (1983) and Gillie Bolton (2000).

Previously, I really just thought that my deep reflective process was the brainchild of Dr. Phil and Oprah. It has been to my great pleasure to realize I have been already using a process that has proven to help people become more effective leaders.

Being a reflective practitioner means using the process of reflecting on behavior to make sense of experiences we have had. The purpose of reflecting is to use such feedback to learn and then modify behavior. When we reflect we begin to pull out the details of an experience, what it tells us about our own skills, perhaps why it happened, what we did well and a plan for what we might do differently in the future (Bolton, 2000). Reflecting is a process that can occur either by an individual or a team or individuals within a team. Reflection can happen anywhere and at any time. However, the biggest hurdle in becoming a reflective practitioner is time. Making the time commitment to look at the events that lead to a success or failure of a goal is what makes effective leaders become great leaders. Schon's Reflective Practitioner model (1983) suggests that, "The

capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning was one of the defining characteristics of professional practice.”

Schon (1983) considers two kinds of knowledge that professionals use in practice, technical rationality and tacit or intuitive knowledge. Technical rationality is where we apply the theory we have learned to solve practical day-to-day problems. But this rationality fails to help us in the “swampy lowland” of practice where situations are not as they were described in the textbooks and uncertainty and personal conflict may prevail. During these situations is when tacit or intuitive knowledge is used. It is during these times when reflection might help us to make sense of these complex and ambiguous situations. This “swampy lowland” may be an uncomfortable place for us to be in, but by asking ourselves reflective questions it allows us to study our own decision-making process, be constructively critical of our relationship with colleagues, analyze hesitations and skill and knowledge gaps, face problematic and painful episodes, and identify learning needs (Bolton, 2000).

How does a person become a reflective practitioner? Producing written documentation is a more powerful way of reflecting versus merely thinking about an experience. Writing helps us to construct a more in-depth analysis. It can act as a useful aide-memoir, maybe required as part of an appraisal or revalidation process and is a useful way to record your own progress. Boud and Walker (1998) say there are at least four elements that should be included into the writing. First describe concrete events. Second take a look at the description of the events and start to analyze it in order to uncover what this means and identify the

underlying principles of what it is that you are doing. Third, confront the assumptions that underlie what made you the way you are and how that affected your practices. Finally, take an active reflective stance about your own role as a leader and incorporate “learning about leading.”

As a novice administrator, this approach to “learning about leading” is a valuable tool. Often there are daily decisions that fit the category of technical rationality. The solutions to these kinds of problems are resolved quicker because of the sheer repetition in which they occur, school policy dictating the rules or a more experienced person has an understanding of the situation and is encouraged to share. As a less experienced administrator, I will have more “swampy lowland” situations. Not all situations are the same, however patterns may emerge that are similar. Describing events that took place during a reflection and then looking back to how it was solved given the particular pattern may help the learning process be more fluid. Finding these patterns may help me learn to accurately and expeditiously cope with a situation.

Being a reflective practitioner does require a time commitment. Infusing and incorporating this research into my practice as principal will take a conscience effort. And a leader is both involved in the reflective process with the team and as an individual. The leader must consider the larger process or context in which the team is involved and the leader and team must not only examine the task, but must also examine their motivation for reflecting on the task.

Standard two of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders says, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by

advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional programs conducive to student learning and staff professional development.” To determine the success, complacency or failure for students and staff, the administrator must reflect on the data and the decision made and ask some hard questions. The administrator must also encourage the teams of people he or she works with to adopt this methodology so as to also create a more successful endeavor. Whether it is while teams are analyzing the curriculum, looking at instructional strategies, evaluating student achievement or looking for a change, answering the hard questions could determine the future success of the students and staff, culture and climate. Answering these questions as an individual will also help administrators become more effective leaders. Ultimately, the purpose of reflecting on the processes, ideas and decision made by an individual or team is for the betterment of the students’ educational experience.

Without a competent caring individual in the principal’s position, the task of school reform is very difficult. Reform can be initiated from outside the school or stimulated from within. But in the end, it is the principal who implements and sustains the changes through the inevitable roller coaster of euphoria and setbacks. Louis Gerstner et al (1994, p.133)

In looking at how effective schools have successfully completed an educational reform, it has been abundantly clear as to what the leaders’ role was during this period. Effective schools run because of effective leaders. Change happens because effective leaders take the appropriate steps and incorporate the appropriate people. Due to the importance of effective leadership, the role of the leader in the educational setting over the years has transformed. The principal

once thought of as a manager of staff, buildings and budgets, is now an instructional leader who uses reflection as part of the daily routine. Research completed by DuFour (1998), Patterson (1997), The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), and Whitaker and Valentine (1993) indicates the best way to craft change is to create a shared vision among the majority of people involved in the change. But how does this change occur and who are the necessary participants involved for this change to occur?

The leader's role is no longer one of a top-down managerial position that uses an autocratic system. "Evidence is indicating that an effective principal is an instructional leader that leads from the center rather than the top." (Patterson, 1997). The principal is there to support the teachers and to create opportunities for them to grow and develop. Learning is the focus rather than teaching. It is important for the principal to create a school that is organized for both student and teacher success. How the principal affects change is what determines effectiveness.

Research as measured by the Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments instrument discovered three essential differences between effective and ineffective principals (Whitaker and Valentine, 1993). The first difference is that effective principals view themselves as more responsible for all aspects of their school. They use the solution focus model to lead the school improvement. Second, teachers and principals share the same perspectives of how much input teachers have in decision making within their school. Teachers in the schools with more effective principals view their leaders as effective communicators.

Principals were more able to predict how their teachers would answer questions as well as be more sensitive and perceptive to teachers' feelings and needs. Finally, effective principals identify key teachers and informally involve them in decision-making. They frequently use their informal leaders for input before seeking input from their formal committees. Identifying and using these "superstars" (Whitaker & Valentine, 1993) is instrumental to advancing changes that have been defined in the vision and mission statement. Having teacher leaders who promote the vision outside of faculty meetings will only help to promote the vision.

Patterson (1997) says that organizational change should be thought of in terms of three concentric circles. The inner circle represents systemic change. This is the affect of the norms, values, and power relationships throughout an organization; it is the vision and the mission. These changes only happen when people inside the school examine their fundamental beliefs and change their practices to fit their revised beliefs. Change will not happen if the people involved in the change do not subscribe to the vision that is trying to be created, hence, the importance of teacher leaders and a clear vision. Systemic change is where principals need to focus. The other layers do not bring about the same effects as systemic change. The second layer is program change. This level affects the norms and values of segments of the organization without having a major impact on the organization. The outer layer is event change. This level of change has no lasting impact on the norms, values, or power relationships in any part of the system. The major difference between systemic, program and event change is systemic change occurs when all people inside the school have critically

examined their fundamental organizational beliefs and changed their practices to fit their revised beliefs.

Dufour (1998) states that once the mission, vision, values and goals, and systemic change, has occurred, an effective principal must do specific things to create the conditions that enable schools to become effective. Principals must continue to lead through daily communication of the shared vision and values. They must involve faculty members in the school's decision-making processes and empower individuals to act. They must provide staff with the information, training, and parameters they need to make good decisions. They must focus on behaviors and not attitudes of resisters. They must establish credibility by modeling behavior that is congruent with the vision and values of their school. Finally, the principal must be results oriented.

Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 1996) and the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC, 2001) have adopted national performance standards for school leaders. Every school administrator is to serve as an educational leader who promotes the success of students by:

- Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
- Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
- Ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
- Collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
- Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
- Understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. (ISLLC, 1996)

With a grim outlook for the future of education, *A Nation at Risk*, (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) stated, "Both the school effectiveness research and the classroom effectiveness research identified principals as keys to schools' ability to implement the kinds of changes that would meet this need." It was recommended that Principals be trained to become skillful in creating change that has a lasting effect. Because of standards created by ISLLC and expectations of administrative leadership programs, it is believed that there will be more effective leaders skilled in creating change in our schools who will advance the expectation of increased student learning.

"A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development" (Wilmore, 2003, p.26). An administrator has countless numbers of responsibilities he must attend to everyday. One of the largest responsibilities for the administrator is the students' ability to show improvement in their learning on a yearly basis. The No Child Left Behind Act has mandated annual yearly progress in student learning and then holds the districts and administrators accountable for the progress. Effective administrators need to learn how to become instructional leaders or leaders for learning in order to promote and improve student achievement. How does an administrator's belief in being a life long learner for self and others help him become an instructional leader? How does becoming an instructional leader help the faculty and ultimately the students?

“In schools where achievement was high and where there was a clear sense of community, we found, invariably, that the principal made the difference.” (Boyer, 1983, p. 219). An instructional leader has knowledge and understanding of student growth and development. They must know about applied learning theories and motivational theories, curriculum design, implementation, evaluation, and refinement. Additionally, principles of effective instruction, measurement, evaluation and assessment strategies, plus the role of technology in promoting student learning and professional growth and school cultures and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development. Learning all of these components of instruction is invaluable to the principal’s position. The follow through of communicating this information to the teachers and promoting change is the main priority in the role of an effective instructional leader. “School reform cannot succeed unless it focuses on creating the conditions in which teachers can teach, and teach well” (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 1996, p. 6). The instructional leader’s responsibility is to encourage the staff to try new instructional methods that will benefit the students’ achievement. The instructional leader must provide professional development that will help the teachers become better at what they do so they can meet the needs of all students learning styles.

An instructional leader not only believes in being a life long learner for himself, he also believes that all students can learn. However, not all students learn the same way, after all, diversity benefits the school community. An

integral part of school improvement is professional development. Staff development needs to be approached so that it encourages teachers to involve themselves as learners. Teachers must be engaged in the active pursuit of learning goals and must be provided with opportunities to combine experiential learning with content knowledge. It must go beyond the mere acquisition of new skills and knowledge; teachers must deepen their understanding of the processes of teaching and learning. All teachers must have access to continuous high-quality learning opportunities and opportunities to have collaborative work with colleagues to plan and improve upon what they do. Teachers must also learn how to use assessment to develop curriculum and gauge student achievement. We know that what teachers know and can do is one of the most important influences on how much students learn.

A school should not be a place where only the students learn. Since school leaders are charged with leading the reform of enhancing student learning, it makes sense to teach the people that will be teaching the students. Students deserve highly qualified teachers and a vehicle to achieve specific academic goals and standards. Effective instructional leaders must provide the services that will make sure that the climate and culture of the school is such that everyone will learn.

Principals who are service leaders put others needs in front of their own. These others are students, teachers, parents and the community. Each of these groups has specific needs. The goal of meeting the needs of these groups is to achieve optimum student achievement through a culture and climate that

encourages communication and instruction for students and teachers. Sergiovanni (1984) promotes service, which means putting others before self in doing whatever it takes to help and assist people. It is all about the commitment to put the needs of others as a priority. People come first, not tasks.

First and foremost, students need a safe environment in which to learn. Students need not only to be safe from violence, but safe from the perspective of preserving their self worth and self esteem so they are more open to learning. Second and equally as important, students need teachers who will give them what they need in the classroom. Teachers and students need materials that are current and relevant. These materials must prepare them for what they will see, experience, and learn after high school. Third, students must have an opportunity to learn as much as they want and give them the help they need when they do not want to learn as much as they should. Providing these things to a student will improve their achievement in and out of the classroom.

Teachers must be provided with what they need to teach for everyday types of situations. In a Gallup Pole conducted of over 80,000 managers and over 400 in the book, *First Break All the Rules* (1999, p. 59) found that a manager who excelled at the "catalyst" role is a leader whose function is to:

...speed up the reaction between two substances, thus creating the desired end product. Specifically the manager creates performance in each employee by speeding up the reaction between the employee's talents and the company's goals, and between the employee's talents and the customers' needs.

Additionally, teachers needed staff development on instructional methods so as to support their teaching of students and they need feedback regarding their

instructional practices. The principal shares professional knowledge with teachers as well as models expected behavior for teachers. Principals must communicate a willingness to be open with teachers. In *Issues About Change* (SEDL, 1999, v. 7.2) one teacher explained the nurturing relationship between teacher and principal. "The principal strongly encourages the teacher to identify and try new things that they feel might be beneficial to the student. When she does this the teachers feel no threat of failing, because the principal gives them full support under any condition." This type of relationship is fundamental when the principal is implementing change. Principals are the managers of teachers and if principals want the best outcome for students' achievement they must educate, listen, and support their teachers.

Principals want what parents want. They want to provide parents with the security that their kids are safe while in their care. They want to provide them with the knowledge that their kids have the best teachers, materials, and equipment. Parents also want and need to be heard. They must be given opportunities to know what is going on in the school in a timely fashion. Many of the problems encountered in an urban school district have to do with the variety of cultures that make up a community. The principal has an obligation to learn about the community diversity by having open communication with the parents that make up the community.

The community needs a principal who is open to the idea of accessing the resources that are right under his or her nose. This could mean enhancing student learning by joining theory with experience and thought with action. The principal

could fill unmet needs in the community through direct service which is meaningful and necessary and this will enable students to help others, give of themselves, and enter into caring relationships with others.

The principal has a responsibility of service to the teachers, students, parents, and community. This responsibility falls upon the administration to meet the needs of these people because they make up the school culture and community. In our path to becoming an effective administrator, I have learned that a Principal and a Special Education Director must be an effective instructional leader that creates a culture and climate that promotes student and teacher learning. This job has many hats that include coach, mentor, cheerleader, PR director, social worker, police officer, diplomat, manager, psychologist change agent and teacher. It is daunting and scary to take on such a large responsibility and spotlight that follows a principal. But recalling that the purpose of this job is to provide the best education in the safest setting for students will help anyone push through the overwhelming days. My mother was right, being an educator is difficult. What I know now that I didn't know then is that the rewarding feeling of making a difference makes up for whatever monetary amount we feel we are worth. Maintaining a vision and mission and sense of humor is how I can plan to succeed.

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