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What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

Abstract

Exemplary educational leadership requires mastery of many essential skills. In order for a principal to be an effective instructional leader, one must support the success of all students by nurturing an environment based upon the school's developed vision. An instructional leader believes in, values, and is committed to the fact that all students have the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become successful adults. Each student is an individual with unique needs. An educational leader must be a proactive advocate for the needs of all children.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

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by

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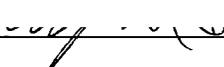
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Leadership and Education

The only profession I have ever dreamed of is that of becoming a teacher. I believe it to be one of the noblest of professions. As public school educators we trade the lure of financial gain for the opportunity to affect young people in a profound and positive manner. I have found true fulfillment in the world of elementary education, yet feel a calling to take a next step within the educational realm. Many children are in real need of an advocate, a guide, and a facilitator of knowledge about the outside world. We have the opportunity to open our students to a brand new world every day.

I believe education provides the gift of opportunity. If we as a society are to continue to progress, we must provide an adequate system in which our citizens gain the knowledge and skills necessary to make a positive impact on the world. A school's goal of creating good citizens for tomorrow's world relates to my underlying desire to make the world a better place.

I decided to enter the educational leadership program to become a principal because I possess a desire to further develop my leadership skills. In both my personal and professional lives I have gravitated toward leadership positions. I am currently at a place in my life where I wish to explore the professional possibilities these qualities may open for me.

Personal Reflection

One of my strongest professional and personal characteristics is my emotional intelligence. I possess an ability to work with others in a pleasant, positive, and energetic manner while striving to gain a greater awareness for others' perspectives. These skills will aid me as a collaborative leader who gains a solid grasp of the perspectives of others in order for open and respectful discussions to take place. My natural organizational skills allow me to easily break a large topic or project into smaller pieces that are easier to digest. I foresee these skills as assisting me in the process of making the vision of a school a reality within the school walls. Sound decision-making skills are an area in which I believe I am becoming increasingly adept and would be an essential skill for me to become an effective administrator.

Exemplary educational leadership requires mastery of many essential skills. In order for a principal to be an effective instructional leader, one must support the success of all students by nurturing an environment based upon the school's developed vision. An instructional leader believes in, values, and is committed to the fact that all students have the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become successful adults. Each student is an individual with unique needs. An educational leader must be a proactive advocate for the needs of all children. If the role of public education is to provide quality education for all students in a democratic and economically productive society, then an educational

leader must possess an awareness of how events outside of the school walls relate to and shape both the school and community. Stakeholders, including a student's parents and family, all school personnel, and various community agencies, have a role to play in the success of the children in our charge.

I believe my motivation to lead stems from my desire to make a difference in the world, no matter how big or small. Throughout my teaching career, I have initiated continual elementary general music curriculum development. I am an advocate for my students and their right to a high quality education inclusive of music. If I truly believe that I can make a difference in a cause, I cannot simply sit on the sidelines. At the very least I have to make a valiant effort to assist in alleviating the issue in some way. While I do not base my self-worth upon my accomplishments, I do acquire a feeling of pride for the contributions I have made throughout my career.

Critical Elements

There are certain critical elements essential for exemplary education leadership. A wonderful vision does nothing for the school if the leader cannot effectively transform those philosophical words on paper into reality within the school walls. Continuous internal and external communication is a key factor in operation of a school, and is especially important during times of change. Sound decision-making skills are another essential skill of an effective administrator. An organizational leader is a risk taker who believes in making informed decisions

that enhance learning and teaching and yet accepts responsibility when those decisions do not result in desired outcomes. An exemplary leader sets high expectations for him/herself, exemplifying the qualities of integrity and fairness, and expects the same from all stakeholders, as expressed in ISSL standard 5.

Vision

My personal vision for an administrator involves a leader as a catalyst of change and a steward of the vision of the organization. As a facilitator of the school's stakeholders, the principal plays an instrumental role in leading the quest toward a school's future. Keeping the end-goals at the forefront, an effective principal aligns the school's goals and activities with the over reaching vision.

School leadership is a calling. The possibility of making a true impact on the lives of students excites me. I believe a principal has the opportunity to have a tremendous impact on the educational environment of students under their charge. The task before all stakeholders in the school is to create the most effective learning environment possible for students and the principal is the key player in the effort. Students deserve nothing less.

Leader of Culture

A positive school culture envelopes every aspect of a school. For those within the school it can be an evasive term to define, yet the culture of a school can also be quite obvious to any visitor who steps within the walls of the school building. Students, teachers, and parents may not be able to articulate a definition

of the culture of their building, yet they will know what is important and what is expected in their school.

An operational definition of culture could be

a pattern of basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its

problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has

worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore to be

taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and

feel in relation to problems (Barnett & McCormick, 2004, p. 409).

Culture is built over time and encompasses the unwritten expectations of how the school operates. A set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories are created which reflect the uniqueness of the school community (Peterson, 2002).

Culture is extremely powerful. The culture of a school affects the attitudes and subsequent behaviors of all who work within its walls. It dictates how the school operates on a daily basis. The atmosphere of a school can encourage the status quo or inspire its inhabitants to attain goals set to the highest standards. In accordance with ISSL standard 2, "Evidence has suggested that principals are in a unique position to influence school culture" (Barnett & McCormick, 2004, p. 407).

Shared Vision

A principal shapes the school's learning culture by developing a sense of what the school should become in the future. A positive school culture will possess a shared sense of purpose and values. As an educational leader, I will strive to effectively communicate the vision and mission of the school to staff, parents, students, and community members through the use of symbols, ceremonies, stories, and day-to-day life.

By utilizing the resources at their disposal, an educational leader possesses the ability to create an organization that fully supports the learning process through the pursuit of the shared vision. One has a responsibility to objectively view, accurately access, and actively change the culture of the school for the better of all students.

School Learning Culture

"The leadership practices of a school principal influence student learning outcomes through the indirect path of school learning culture (Barnett & McCormick, 2004, p. 410). An educational leader advocates, nurtures, and sustains a school culture conducive to learning. In a school with a positive learning culture, high expectations will abound for both students and teachers. A vision of high standards of continuous learning and improvement for staff members is promoted through the provision of the necessary supports by the school.

An administrator has a responsibility to maintain a direct connection to the learning environment. Goals must encourage students to value learning by placing an emphasis on understanding schoolwork. As an educational leader, an administrator has a duty to cultivate aspects of teaching and learning that support the meaning and significance of the curriculum. The intrinsic value of learning must be imbedded within each lesson as we assist every student on their journey of discovery of self and the world.

Trust

"Positive school cultures are associated with higher student motivation and achievement, improved teacher collaboration, and improved attitudes of teachers toward their jobs" (Barnett & McCormick, 2004, p.407). The morale of the school relies upon the trust and confidence people hold in one another, the importance of which is communicated through the ISSL standard 4. The collaborative nature of a learning community is based upon a foundation of trust and a culture of honest and open communication, built through the cultivation of one-to-one relationships with the individual teachers.

"Educational leaders must ensure that the structures and procedures that support and channel the learning process reflect a concern for justice and fairness for all students, while providing room for creativity and imagination" (Starratt, 2005, p. 127). An administrator has an inherent responsibility as to treat all people with dignity. My actions in both my personal and professional life reflect

my belief that every human being has the innate right to be treated with care and compassion.

Valued Contributions

In a positive school culture, students and staff feel valued and important. Everyone, including the principal, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community is viewed as a learner. In a culture of high expectations, the responsibilities, contributions, and accomplishments of each individual are acknowledged and celebrated.

The principal is the essential key in the pathway to change. As an educational leader I will be charged with unlocking the code for the creation of and the subsequent fostering of an environment conducive to both student learning and staff professional development. A different combination will have to be found for the code within each individual school.

Leader of Change

Change is an unavoidable facet of life and is also an inevitable aspect of the school. "Effective leadership means more than simply knowing what to do. It's knowing when, how, and why to do it" (Waters, Marzano, & NcNulty, 2003, p.2). Leading a school through these inevitable changes effectively is somewhat of a balancing act. One must "balance pushing for change while at the same time, protecting aspects of culture, values, and norms worth preserving" (Waters, Marzano, & NcNulty, 2003, p.2).

Vision

In accordance with Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) standard 1, an effective school administrator possesses a clear vision promoting the success of all students. Educational change will challenge me as a principal to give life to the printed words of my vision through my daily actions. As stated by Fawcett (2004), "the current educational landscape makes it imperative that a vision statement become more than a fine-sounding statement that is laminated, hung on the wall, and quickly forgotten" (p. 114).

As a leader of change, I must nourish, maintain, and communicate my ideals about schooling. I hold strong professional ideals and beliefs about schooling, teaching, and learning. The task set before me is to share these ideals and beliefs about schooling, teaching, and learning with teachers, staff, and parents (Waters & Grubb, 2004). Leading a vision will require the organization and the members within to experience change to various degrees.

Change Agent

An agent of change challenges the status quo and possesses a willingness to forge ahead with initiatives even when the outcomes may be uncertain. An effective leader of change consistently and systematically considers new and better ways of doing things, consciously challenging the status quo. Leading change requires the ability to make a commitment and systematically consider new and better ways of doing things for the benefit of our students.

Possessing the flexibility to adapt my leadership style to the needs of specific situations is important. In a study commissioned by the National Governor's Association (NGA), Richard Elmore concluded that "having the right focus of change is a key to improving schools and increasing student achievement" (Waters, Marzano, & NcNulty, 2003, p. 5).

Leaders of change make the discussion of current theories and practice a regular occurrence within the school's culture. Staying informed about current research and theory regarding effective schooling and continually exposing teachers and staff to cutting-edge ideas about how to be effective is a valuable approach when initiating change within a school (Waters & Grubb, 2004). There will be dissenters with every initiative, and those who may disagree should be encouraged to express opinions which may be contrary to those held by individuals in positions of authority.

I strive to be a person within the school who inspires others as a leader of new innovations. According to Fullan (2005), a major responsibility required for sustaining effective school leadership is developing others as leaders (Cotter & Buchanan, 2003). By portraying a positive attitude about the ability of others to accomplish substantial goals, I dream to inspire teachers, staff, and students to reach toward accomplishments that may initially seem beyond their grasp.

Magnitude of Change

Strong leadership skills are not enough. One must chose the correct focus and accurately estimate the magnitude of change for the differing pockets of stakeholders. A principal must "know how to gauge the magnitude of change they are calling for and how to tailor their leadership strategies accordingly" (Waters, Marzano, & NcNulty, 2003, p.2). Waters and Grubb's (2004) research emphasized the importance of a principal keeping in mind "not all changes have the same implications for each individual or stakeholder group" (p.3). As a leader I must tailor my leadership practice in accordance with the magnitude of change I am striving toward.

The magnitude of change is dictated by the stakeholders' perception of the change. As a leader in the school, it is important to recognize the degree to which staff, students, and parents perceive the change. This recognition "enhances the likelihood of sustainable initiatives and a positive impact on achievement" (Waters & Grubb, 2004, p.4).

The level of change an individual experiences can be categorized into first order and second order changes. First order changes are viewed as appropriate responses to perceived educational issues. Consistent with values and norms, these types of changes are readily implemented with existing knowledge and resources and seen as a natural part of school improvement efforts. Conversely, second order changes are seen as a dramatic shift from past practice and severely

conflict with personal values and organizational norms. The change will be resisted by those who are unclear of benefits and/or are required to master new knowledge, practices, or approaches to implement the change (Waters & Grubb, 2004).

No one set formula exists for the multitude of changes a principal will confront in a school year. A leader of change must investigate the situation and evaluate how this change will affect the many stakeholders in the school. Through this investigation one can gain an understanding of the values held by the people in the organization – "know when, how and why to create learning environments that support people, connect them with one another, and provide the knowledge skills, and resources they need to succeed" (Waters, Marzano, & NcNulty, 2003, p.2).

<div align="center">Leader of Instruction</div>

Student achievement is the heart of education. Principals are required to fulfill a variety of roles, yet one's primary responsibility is to facilitate effective teaching and learning with the overall mission of enhancing student achievement (O'Donnell & White, 2005). As instructional leaders principals are a visible presence and advocate for the school. "Principals who strive to be instructional leaders are committed to meeting the needs of their schools by serving stakeholders and pursuing shared purposes" (O'Donnell & White, 2005, p.2).

Wilma Smith and Richard Andrews (1989) identify four dimensions of an effective instructional leader. These dimensions include resource provider, insuring that teachers have the resources necessary to adequately perform their responsibilities; instructional resource, supporting desired behaviors, participating in professional development, and consistently granting priority to instructional concerns; communicator, setting clear goals for the school; and visible presence, frequenting classrooms and maintaining accessibility to faculty and staff (Marzano, Watters, & McNulty, 2005). These dimensions directly correlate with several ISSL standards and I believe they will be instrumental in my success as a future building principal.

Student Achievement

Instructional leaders must possess a myriad of knowledge, skills, strategies and tools in order to make a positive impact upon student achievement. "Over time, instructional leadership provided by the principal has been identified as a contributing factor to higher student achievement" (O'Donnell & White, 2005, p.1). I believe it to be essential for the building principal to be an advocate for excellence in student performance while simultaneously fostering a positive environment where all students can learn. A school that strives for academic excellence accepts no excuses, involves parents and community in the learning process and challenges all its students through effective implementation of a viable curriculum.

Continuous Professional Learning

In order for substantial impact to be made upon student achievement, the transformation needs to originate from those who are facilitating the instruction, namely the teachers in the classrooms. As a leader of learners, the principal's role extends beyond the students in the classroom to the adults who assist students on their educational journey. A principal is responsible for the intellectual growth of faculty and staff by fostering an awareness of current theories and practices and keeping the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture (Marzano, 2003).

Principals are charged with the task of creating a community of learners that is open to addressing the challenges that come with analyzing student achievement data. Real transformation occurs when a school honestly confronts the student achievement data and works collectively to improve results rather than make excuses (DuFour, 2004). Within an atmosphere of mutual respect, learning communities possess the power to unify the staff and send a consistent message of expectations to students and parents regarding academic achievement (Marzano, 2003).

A dedicated principal must use a variety of strategies to support teachers as they broaden teaching strategies and guide students to higher achievement levels. In order to achieve such an environment, an instructional leader must be "attentive to the concerns of teachers, easily accessible, and should engage in

collaborative decision making and problem solving with teachers" (Marzano, 2003, p.176).

Culture of Instructional Improvement

An instructional leader fosters a shared belief and sense of community within the school. Through the establishment of procedures and routines for students and staff the principal provides the structure for the efficient running of the school. Marzano (2003) cited research indicating the strongest school-level factor tied to student achievement is the opportunity to learn. Districts must give "clear guidance to teachers regarding the content to be addressed in specific courses and at specific grade levels" (Marzano, 2003, p.24). In prioritizing resources, an instructional leader must analyze the affect of schedules and school procedures on classroom instruction with all efforts taken to protect instructional time.

The principal is charged with keeping the school on course through their actions as a leader and allocation of resources. Principals must be advocates for achievement, an essential goal for all students. Working together, the entire learning community has the power to improve student achievement.

Leader of Service

As a head of a school the principal has a myriad of roles to play. Arnold and Harris (2000) created an analogy of the principalship to that of a song.

In order for it to be fully appreciated it must include all aspects

working in harmony. When a song is sung with harmony one can

hear how the different parts work together to make a whole. While

each part is distinctive in its own right, when put together the

sound is full and complete (p. 12).

I see the role of the principal as involving the manipulation of complex harmonies

or skills toward a final cadence, the school's vision for the students.

Servant Leadership

Inspiring others to grow as individuals, yet work together to serve a

common purpose is my vision of a leader of service. As an educational leader one

must possess not only a desire to be a servant to the students, but to all those

within the realm of education. Greenleaf (1970) was a pioneer of this aspect of

leadership and set forth a definition for servant leadership the following:

It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve

first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The

difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to

make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being

served (Stueber, 2000, p.54).

Meeting others needs is central to servant leadership. Personal skills such

as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization,

foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building

community become essential elements in a leader (Schafer, 2005). Marzano, R., Waters, T. & McNulty, B. (2005) melded these characteristics into five critical skills of servant leadership. These characteristics include: (a) understanding the personal needs of the members within the organization, (b) healing wounds caused by conflict from within, (c) being a steward of the resources, (d) developing the skills of those within the organization, and (e) being an effective listener.

Principal as a Servant Leader

The first steps of an effective leader of service involve careful observation of the school environment while employing active listening skills. Through the study of the school a principal can gain an overall awareness of strengths and weaknesses of school and effective educational practices currently in use. By gaining a deeper understanding of teachers and staff members beyond the positions they hold, I believe I can deepen my understanding of an individual's strengths and needs. This understanding would provide a clearer picture of the role in which myself as principal could and should play in each individual's growth.

One who serves others consistently treats others with dignity and respect by demonstrating care and concern for others. Building a positive community of learners involves building trust and confidence among colleagues. One must empower the staff, developing the concept that everyone has something they can

offer the school's vision. Dynamics amongst staff can empower members to accomplishment or become roadblocks to productivity. A principal may need to play a role in assisting the rebuilding of professional relationships that may be hindering performance.

"A servant leader must first meet the needs of others before they can lead them to achieve goals" (Arnold & Harris, 2000, p.14). Providing the essential resources to teachers is a critical aspect of servant leadership. Once acquired, the principal has the responsibility of being an effective manager of those resources (Stueber, 2000). Finding a balance between the meeting of individual's needs and living within the means of the limited resources provided can be a complex accomplishment.

Personal Vision

As a leader of service, the role of the principal is to empower teachers to lead through collegial relationships (Stueber, 2000). I believe this empowerment is the key to educational progress. A true leader will "strengthen people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support" (Schafer, 2005, p.232). As a principal I would see myself as one amongst equals. A principal is first and foremost a staff member whose position is to help the teachers and students meet the goals of the school by building upon the strengths of individuals and fostering growth in others. In order to provide the best educational environment possible a principal must provide the

most conducive environment possible to assist teachers in getting their work done by removing obstacles that may stand in the way of success.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Greenleaf (1977) identifies a servant leader as one who first serves others and then gradually chooses to lead the staff into change. As an educator I utilize my developing skills to serve my students, fellow faculty members, and greater community in diverse ways. After a decade in the classroom, I increasingly find myself gravitating toward positions where I am presented with opportunities to lead others toward change.

I feel the principalship has become a calling for me to utilize my gifts and acquired skills to serve others in a new capacity within the educational framework. I would be humbled by the responsibility to serve a school in this manner. With expectancy, I look upon the challenge presented by this position as an opportunity to play a critical role in the shaping of tomorrow's leaders.

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