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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**

There are many issues facing today's educators and educational leaders. These issues are exactly why I decided to return to education after a career in law enforcement. I would like to tell you why I became an educator. I will also analyze the importance of using reflective practice as a principal or teacher. I will examine the current research pertaining to the role of the leader in terms of educational change, adult and student learning, and service.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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by

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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There are many issues facing today's educators and educational leaders. These issues are exactly why I decided to return to education after a career in law enforcement. I would like to tell you why I became an educator. I will also analyze the importance of using reflective practice as a principal or teacher. I will examine the current research pertaining to the role of the leader in terms of educational change, adult and student learning, and service.

I knew at a very early age that I would be an educator. In the summers when I was a child, I attended the Davenport School District's summer school baseball program. This program was lead by Mike Wiley, who was a teacher and coach in the district. His passion for teaching and the game of baseball was infectious.

I would not see Mr. Wiley much during the school year because he taught in a building across town, but when I saw him the first day of summer school it was like a breath of fresh air. The man was tough, but also compassionate. He had a knack for making you feel important. He will probably never know how much he influenced me as a youngster. Eventually I became Mr. Wiley's assistant and was teaching kids while I was still a kid. After Mr. Wiley retired, I took over the program. It was never the same without coach, and the program was eventually dropped.

During my time working with Mr. Wiley I discovered that teaching was very satisfying. It is very hard to describe, but each day when I went home I felt like I had accomplished something. It felt so good to have kids listening to me. It was

an even better feeling when I saw a student achieve something. Education is all about seeing the light "come on" in your students. To me that light is what education is all about. The education field allows you to see that light several times a day, everyday, all year long. There is no other profession that allows a person that kind of frequent feedback. The great thing about it is that you do not need to have a student ever tell you "thanks" or "I understand." That is because you can see it in their eyes. The eyes let me know if a student understands or not. The eyes are the key for me.

During my studies to become a principal, I have discovered that self-reflection can be a great learning tool. Research indicates that all good principals use, and promote reflective practice.

## Reflective Practice

Effective educational leaders develop expertise through their reflective skills and abilities. Expertise develops as the result of "reflective skills," the ability to think more deeply about a problem, and the ability to take action or make adjustments accordingly (Brown, et al., 2005).

An educational leader that has developed their reflective skills is a leader that is able to learn from their everyday experiences. Through these reflective skills they can assess their daily performance and make adjustments based on what occurred during each event, and what decisions they made. "How effective you

are as a leader is determined to a great extent by how aware you are of what lies within you" (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p. 13).

A leader that uses their reflective skills has a high degree of self-awareness, which allows them to identify their strengths and weaknesses based on their performance. "Reflection provides a way for people to assess the more complete story that they bring with them to their performances. It builds expertise by tapping experience and simultaneously recognizing the limits of its application" (Brown, et al., 2005).

All great school administrators utilize the knowledge that they have learned concerning reflection. Good teachers and administrators use reflective practice on a weekly if not daily basis. Effective teachers and administrators use different strategies to help themselves reflect on their performances. Some educators use journals to help them record their thoughts. The journals entries help document what went well or what did not go well. This information can be used to make performance adjustments in the future.

Most great coaches have strong reflective skills. Coaches are constantly assessing each practice session and game. They study new techniques to determine if they need to incorporate them into their programs. The key to being a reflective practitioner is to understand that learning never ends, and that learning starts by having an awareness of your own performance, good or bad.

One of the most important abilities a principal can have is the ability to admit

when they make a mistake. Such admissions can help build trust with the staff. "We may be better served by focusing on increasing the level of trust we have with those in our organization" (Lumpa, D., Whitaker, B., & Whitaker, T., 2000, p. 9).

Most good principals use reflective skills so they can learn and grow as educational leaders. Reflective thinking is characterized by a view that knowledge is not given, but instead must be actively constructed within a specific context, and that individuals reasoning at these stages understand that conclusions must be grounded in relevant data and remain open to re-evaluation (King & Kitchner, 1994). Reflective administrators base their decisions on current data. Prior experiences should provide an educational leader with examples of good and bad decisions. An effective educational leader learns for both the good and the bad.

Reflection is learning to analyze prior experiences in order to better understand how they shape future courses of action; it is thinking about how actions are connected to cultural norms, to initial experiences growing up, institutional histories, and on-the-job experience (Brown, et al., 2005, p. 106).

Most people feel that the skill of reflection is an important skill to have when you are an educational leader. The knowledge that is gained through ones past experience is very powerful. "People learn to become better leaders by developing their self-knowledge" (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p. 19). Migdalia

Maldonado-Torres, a former principal and current Director of Center for

Leadership Development in District 4 of the New York City Public Schools

believes that leaders must have self-awareness, courage to change, and be willing

to learn from all situations and create situations for themselves so that they are

constantly learning and evaluating (Knudsen, G., 2007).

Excellent reflection skills are critical to the success of an educational

leader. These skills allow a leader to learn from past experiences, and improve

their future performance. Strong reflective skills will also allow an administrator

to make changes in their buildings when they need to. A great administrator must

be able to manage change in the educational setting.

Leader of Change

The importance of the role of an educational leader during educational change

cannot be under estimated. If a leader wants to sustain a change initiative long

term, the leader must be well educated in all facets of the change process. The

change process is very complex. However, if the leader understands the variables

that almost always follow change, they will increase their chances for success.

"Successful leaders initiate and manage change" (Brown, et al., 2005, p. 94).

"The wise leader must fully understand the change process and choose

his/her change efforts wisely. Most people fear and/or resist change. Change

causes disequilibrium in individuals, and they seek the balance of the past"

(Brown, et al., 2005, p. 95). "Change is a process, not an event" (Hall & Hord,

2006, p. 4). One of the most critical things a leader must understand is that resistance is inevitable. The key is to manage the resistance and realize that it is a natural part of the process. The first role of the leader when dealing with resistance is to try and determine the reason for the resistance. "Often what appears to be resistance is really working through the sense of loss for having to stop doing something that was comfortable" (Hall & Hord, 2006, p. 13). Once the reason for the resistance has been identified it can be addressed, and hopefully minimized.

The educational leader must be well educated in the change process if they are going to be successful. In their book, Implementing Change, *Patterns, Principles, and Potholes* (2006), Hall & Hord identify twelve Change Principles. A leader should be familiar with these principles. Principle 7 is very important for the leader to understand. It states that administrator leadership is essential to long-term change success. The principle points out that teachers can have some short-term success during a change initiative without sustained administrative support. However, long-term change will rarely occur if the leader does not actively support the initiative.

Another critical role of the educational leader is to realize that the organization will not change until the individuals in the organization change. "As individuals struggle to make the change work, they go through the valley, or dip, of difficulties before they reach the top and emerge at a higher level" (Hall & Hord,

2006, p. 4). These individuals also will be at various stages of concern about the innovation. The educational leader must understand these different stages so they can address, and evaluate the individuals in the organization.

The research pertaining to the leaders' role during educational change is very valuable to the beginning school administrator. Schools are constantly going through changes, so having knowledge about the change process will be very important. A leader must recognize that there are different change facilitator styles. This recognition will help them when identifying their own leadership style.

There are three distinct Change Facilitator Styles (CF Styles), Initiator, Manager, and Responder. Each style has advantages and disadvantages. A strong educational leader will take bits and pieces from each style and use them to create their own style. When an individual establishes a style they generally stay with it. "From all we know, a person's CF Style is quite stable. It does not change from day to day or from innovation to innovation" (Hall & Hord, 2006, p. 225). An administrator is more likely to sustain change if he understands what motivates others to learn. "Once you have an understanding of how and why people make the choices they do you have a better chance of influencing them to change" (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p. 100).

The role of the leader during the change process is extremely important. It is their job to promote the change and then manage the issues that arise from the

dynamics of the change. An effective administrator must understand the dynamics of the change process so they can effectively manage the change. A leader will have a better chance of facilitating change if they also understand the keys to adult and student learning. A principal must be a strong instructional leader if they are going to be successful in education today.

Great teachers expect their principals to be instructional leaders. For a school building to be successful, the principal must be an effective instructional leader. "There is no question that the relationship between an effective instructional leader, i.e., the principal, and an effective school is a significant one" (Lumpa, et al., 2000, p. 17). Most effective instructional leaders have the ability to identify and utilize key informal teacher leaders. The principal is able to share information with these leaders and receive feedback from them about teacher climate and perspectives. "In effective schools, teachers and principals share the same perspectives of how much input teachers have in decision-making within their schools" (Whitaker & Valentine, 1993, p. 22).

An effective instructional leader uses the evaluation process, both formal and informal, to develop his or her staff. It is important that the evaluation process is a positive experience for the teachers. This lessens teacher anxiety, and builds trust between the principal and the teachers. An effective instructional leader allows teachers to self-reflect during the evaluation process. Adults will be more likely to accept suggestions for improvement if they feel that they have had an

active part in identifying areas that need work. "There is potentially a fine line between giving someone a suggestion for improvement and damaging the person's psyche. One way to find the balance is to help people dialogue through the process using self-reflection" (Lumpa, et al., 2000 p.132).

MetLife/NASSP National Middle Level Principal of the Year Ellen Minette says that, "The difference I make in successful student learning comes from my direct and sustained contact with classroom teachers" (Knudsen, G., 2007, p. 41). Increases in student achievement are directly related to how well the instructional leader knows their staff, what is being taught, and how it is being taught. The instructional leader needs to make sure that teachers are setting goals, considering the needs of the learners, using multiple strategies during instruction, and using effective forms of evaluation. "Concern for students must be the foundation of all instructional planning" (Estes, T., Gunter, M., & Schwab, J., 2003, p. 3).

A strong instructional leader understands the importance of student growth and development. They realize that a variety of teaching strategies and motivational theories must be utilized, so all students can learn. An effective instructional leader knows what good instruction looks like.

Another key issue to being a strong leader of learners' is the importance of building positive relationships. Ultimately, the building administrator is responsible for the performance of their school. A good administrator builds positive relationships with their students and staff members. Success is more

likely to occur if the relationships in the building are based on trust and mutual respect. Positive relationships are the foundation for building trust and a feeling of community. Without trust, an administrator will not be successful.

There are many facets to being an effective instructional leader. It all starts with building positive relationships and trust. An administrator may be the smartest person in the world, but if they are unable to build trust in their building, they will not be successful. An educational leader should be friendly, courteous, and professional at all times.

Leader of Service

An effective school administrator understands adult and student learning, but they must also understand how to service their teachers and students. They must be visible in the community, and be able to tap into the many resources that the community can provide the school. There are several agencies and service organizations that are willing to provide assistance to schools. A good administrator understands how to tap into these community resources for the betterment of their school.

An effective school administrator should be willing to service their teachers and students by utilizing all of the resources that are available to them in the community. A principal must establish and cultivate relationships with community members that can have a positive impact on the school.

As important as it is to build support for change within the school, a

principal must take the lead in communicating the school's strengths and achievements in order to build and sustain external support for improvement efforts as well as to mobilize community resources (Davis, G. & Jackson, A., 2000, p. 159).

"Through such communication, a principal is able to build productive alliances with diverse groups in the larger community and to be responsive to the varied interests and needs of the local community" (Fullan, 1997, p. 41).

In addition to identifying and maximizing community resources, an effective school administrator will encourage and promote parental involvement in the educational process. "It is no mystery that parents' participation in the life of the school and in their children's schoolwork has a positive impact on student outcomes" (Henderson, A. & Berla, N., 1994, p.1). More recently, Mapp (1997) concludes that, "studies conducted over the last 30 years have identified a relationship between parental involvement and increased student achievement, enhanced self-esteem, improved behavior, and better student attendance" (p. 1).

Just as strong parental involvement can have a positive affect on a child, the absence of parental involvement can have a negative impact on the child. Lawrence Steinberg and his collegues (Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996) indicate that adolescents whose parents have "checked out" (that is, significantly reduced monitoring of their children's behavior and schoolwork) are less self-reliant, have lower self-esteem and social competence, and are less engaged and

less successful in school. This research is important because it indicates how important community support and parental involvement are in terms of increasing individual student achievement and helping schools improve. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislations has forced all teachers and administrators to take a serious look at student achievement data. A building administrator has to make sure that they are doing everything they can to help students in their buildings achieve. A great principal provides their students with as much access and exposure to community resources as they can.

Research indicates that there is a strong connection between student achievement and parental involvement. An effective school administrator encourages as much parental involvement as possible. Often times getting parents involved is easier said than done. There can be several obstacles that inhibit parents from becoming involved at school. Often times a parent may be intimidated by the school setting because of their own bad experiences as a student. A good administrator has to realize this and make the school as welcoming as possible. Other issues might be employment, lack of transportation, child care, or lack of interest. In many instances the only communication that some parents have with the school is negative. They are constantly being told how terrible their child is by teachers and administrators. It is not that hard to understand why some of these people do not want to come to school, or get involved in their child's education. A good administrator has to

recognize and acknowledge these hurdles, and be able implement some strategies to overcome them. It all starts with communication. Every child in a school deserves at least one positive communication from a staff member per semester. This would go a long way towards encouraging parental involvement.

An administrator must remain current on communal issues that affect school and students. They have to build relationships with different community members and organizations so that their students can benefit from the community resources. An effective administrator is sensitive to diversity issues, and views the community's diversity as a positive. A building principal should promote the school's achievements and successes in the community. This should help enhance the support of the school.

The administrator needs to be visible in the community and join different organizations. Efforts can be focused on organizations that are in close proximity to the school. A strong "neighborhood feeling" would be beneficial. Local businesses and churches can be great resources for the school.

An effective school administrator understands what community resources are available to them to help service their teachers and students. They are aware of emerging issues and trends that can have an impact on their school. They believe in collaborating with families and community members on behalf of kids. They have knowledge of political, social, cultural, and economic issues that impact

schools. Ongoing dialogue occurs with representatives of diverse community groups, and with decision makers outside the school community.

## Conclusion

An effective school administrator must be willing to wear many hats these days. They need to focus on student achievement, and do everything they can to help their teachers become great educators. Principals must be motivators, communicators, listeners, innovators, and change facilitators. They have to be resourceful and creative when leading their buildings. The best administrators understand adult and student learning. They also have to be willing to be visible in the community, and be able to identify, organize, and utilize community resources. There are many challenges that face today's educators and educational leaders. A great administrator embraces these challenges and attacks them with passion, desire, and a strong work ethic.

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