Philosophical perspective on educational leadership: a reflective essay

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Philosophical perspective on educational leadership: a reflective essay

Abstract
Leadership calls for creating a compelling vision of the future and developing farsighted strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision. To be compelling for followers, the vision needs to be one they can relate to, understand, and share. Leadership focuses on getting everyone lined up in the same direction. Visionary leaders concern themselves with communicating their vision and developing a shared culture and set of core values. This can lead to an ambitious, desired future for the organization or team. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development; articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

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PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
And Postsecondary Education
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Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

By
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Introduction

School administration is like an old master’s painting. It captures the school’s essence, and yet, a closer look reveals interesting details. The more you study school administration, the more you see, as viewing a painting. It is truly difficult to create a painting that is declared a masterpiece due to the distinguished and honorable artist of the past. Therefore, one must be a visionary leader in the art world as well. Being an administrator that is an innovator, one needs to set the bar high and endlessly strive for that eternal place to be among the finest leaders in the world. The innovators of the world famous Pike Place Fish market in Seattle are excellent examples of these traits. They were change agents, and visionaries, as they implemented their own organizational philosophy, "Choose your attitude, play, make their day and be present." Lundin, Paul, & Christensen (p.70) The fish market became world famous.

People are attracted to a leader’s vision and their future personal and professional goals. Realizing the value that through him or her, they and the organization can become permanently better. A school administrator must be a visionary leader. Grady and LeSourd (1988) identifies a leader with vision has having five dominant qualities. They found that leaders with vision are guided and motivated by personal values. They also established that these leaders have an intense commitment to the achievement of goals, which they have identified as important for the organization. Additionally, visionary leaders strive to develop a
common sense of purpose and direction among all members of their organization. Grady and LeSourd (1988) also found that visionary leaders are organizational innovators. Finally, these leaders consistently project and attest to a future that represents something better. Looking at setting the bar high for school administrators to achieve mastery levels, one must have standards. Furthermore, the school administrator needs to possess the appropriate tools; common knowledge, dispositions and performances that will help link leadership more forcefully to productive schools and enhanced educational outcomes. As one becomes more immersed in the work whether it is painting or school administration we discover that the dispositions often occupied center stage. That is, because “dispositions are the proclivities that lead us in one direction rather than another within the freedom of action that we have” (Perkins, 1995, p.275), in many fundamental ways they nourish and give meaning to performance. Knowing that these elements—knowledge, dispositions, and performances do belong together brings us to agree with Perkins (1995) that “dispositions are the soul of intelligence, without which the understanding and know-how do little good” (p.278). These standards are researched and referenced as the common building blocks of school leaders. The following paragraphs that focus on the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards will guide me in my role as a school leader.
Vision

Leadership calls for creating a compelling vision of the future and developing farsighted strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision. A vision is compelling for followers, the vision needs to be one they can relate to, understand, and share. Leadership focuses on getting everyone lined up in the same direction. A visionary leader concerns itself with communicating their vision and developing a shared culture and set of core values. This can lead to an ambitious, desired future for the organization or team. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development; articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

School staff must understand from the beginning that major elements of change are internal rather than external, requiring a transformation of all individuals’ thinking about school, students, teaching, and learning. Schools must also acknowledge and reinforce that fact that a new way of thinking, communicating, and budgeting time is required of all individuals. New mental models developed with facts, data, and research must replace old agendas and assumptions. Needs of students and different approaches to teaching must be studied as if both were totally unknown. A true collegial school must be one in which students are the focus; where staff communicate effectively and continuously about student learning; and, where staff work together, developing a continuum of leaning for students as their first priority. (Bernhardt 1999, p.3)

School administrators must facilitate leadership roles through their students, teachers, staff, parents, and community that will make a difference in the lives of children. Referring, reinforcing, and implementing standards, one will
enable a school to rise above the mediocrity of some of our schools today. The words of John W. Gardner embrace this theory. "The idea for which this nation stands will not survive if the highest goal free man can set themselves is an amiable mediocrity.... Striving for the highest standards in every phase of life." (Davis 1992, p. 325)

By instilling learning goals, strategic planning, data collection and analysis this will ensure that students have the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become a successful adult. Therefore, having those core beliefs of the school's vision and effectively communicating to all stakeholders strengthens our communities which in turn establishes and clearly articulates our mission. Vision is a word that has become popular in the literature since the publication of Leaders: The strategies for taking charge (Bennis & Nanus, 19985). In it the authors, "argued forcefully that an important characteristic of leaders is that they have a vision for their organizations. In our two national studies that emphasis was on developing a shared vision, one that was common to teacher, members of the school community, and the school leader." (p. 46) Embedded in a school's vision is a collection of values and beliefs. A school administrator must be willing to continuously examine one's own assumptions, beliefs, and practices and by doing the work required for high levels of mastery in personal and organizational performances. Short, (2002) writes:
Values and beliefs remain often unspoken and unexamined unless a skillful group facilitator helps the group to explore the subtleties of a particular set of values. The process of revealing the beliefs undergirding a proposed course of action helps participants to build a high level of commitment to the new program or effort, even though this process may be personally painful.  

When looking back on the lessons, values, and morals my family bestowed upon me, I now realize the impact it has made on my profession and everyday life. Referencing to the explanation of vision by Short (2002) one would say that I would facilitate an organization with my vision. Understanding that a well-defined goal, effectively shared with others and sparked with enthusiasm, will succeed even when the odds are stacked against you. Empowering my staff to believe that they have the skills and knowledge to act on a situation and improve it. Therefore, creating opportunities within the empowered school to develop and display competency. To reach that mastery level for an administrator and their organization, they must constantly keep monitoring, evaluating, and revising their vision to ensure ongoing growth for all.

Instructional Leader

The school leader is no longer the sole instructional leader. They facilitate this type of leadership within the school by allowing teachers the freedom to use their instructional expertise. By allowing shared instructional leadership to cultivate within an organization, the school administrator and teachers work together with access to information and resources critical for student learning. A school administrator is an educational leader. They will foster the success of all
students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. The highest priority is that students will always come first. A school administrator needs the knowledge, experiences and the understanding that student growth and development is imperative in the survival of the organization. Today there are grueling demands on school districts to test and measurement to show student achievement. One must believe that all students can learn and back their words up by superior research, variety of assessment tools, and evaluation. This coupled by a professional developed teaching staff will promote a focus on student learning that is consistent with the school vision and goals. Being an instructional leader sets a firm foundation for academia in an organization, along with being a strong advocate for student, teacher instruction. Helping teachers to plan for instruction as well as helping teachers to present instructional materials, and helping provide assessment tools for teachers to evaluate instruction.

Goldhammer, Anderson, and Drajewski (1980) defined this activity as:

That phase of instructional supervision which draws its data from first-hand observations of actual teaching events, and involves face-to-face (and other associated) interaction between the supervisor and teacher in the analysis of teaching behavior and activities for instructional improvement. (pp. 19-20)

Clinical supervision is vital in a style of leadership as a principal because it entails so many “hands on” and “face to face” activities, and elements in this area often are learned in teaching. “Responsibilities in instructional supervision
provide the strongest arguments for the requirement that principals obtain experience as classroom teachers prior to receiving an administrative license.” (Kowalski and Reitzug, p. 65) My past experiences in teaching will be an asset to my organization due to my field of practice as a teacher. I have involved myself within cross curriculums and have taught all existing grades in the school system.

As an administrator I would recognize the different traditions, beliefs, policies, and norms that define our organization. This would allow the security needed for my team, from internal and external forces. Without the existence of a strong culture and climate, they can expect a lonely and sometimes difficult future. Wilkens (1989) noted and described organizational character as having the following components:

Shared Vision (A common understanding of organizational purpose and identity; a sense of "who we are.") Motivational Faith in Fairness (of leaders and others). Motivational Faith in Ability (personal and organizational). Distinctive Skills (the tacit customs, the networks of experts, and the technology that add up to collective organizational competence.) (p. 3)

Kowalski & Reitzug adds that, “Culture (i.e., shared values, beliefs, and norms) shapes both the character and the climate of an organization.” The shaping, maintenance, and enhancement of a school’s culture and climate are the primary responsibilities of the school leader. I believe if one is a quality educator than this will breed leadership. The administrator establishes a teacher relationship with his or her subordinates that is one of inspiration, motivation, and influence.
The above paragraphs lend a solid conclusion to an example and point my college professor alluded to on a building’s leadership style. He mentioned that a person could tell what kind of leadership style the administration follows by walking in a building unannounced. This is so true. From the school’s overall facilities, restrooms, water fountains, gymnasiums, faculty, students, to the atmosphere of the school, I believe one can tell if it is a good place to be or not. Having experienced many coaching clinics, one of the finest clinics that come to mind is the University of Notre Dame.

Lou Holtz was opening the clinic by speaking about the Notre Dame football building. There was a segment in his speech that addressed recruiting players that were good people from the start. Mr. Holtz mentioned that he could tell what kind of a football programs the schools had by walking in the front door. If the student athletes were disciplined, academically sound and good citizens, he could tell by his first impression of the hallway. If there were ripped posters, garbage in the hallway, no awards posted or incased, this would be a true giveaway as to the condition of the program and the school.

As an administrator, creating culture and climate within a school is not simple. The administrator will have to introduce his or her own values and beliefs with the ones that are held common by educators in a given school already. Plus, one must coincide with practices that have been proven to be effective in other school districts. It will be evident to judge that no long-term practices deserve to
be preserved. As existing research explains, organizations should be advised to implement a simple philosophy that is effective to get subordinates to commit to do past things better. While the organization tries to implement new things; it is inevitable with the administrator's leadership that the organization will become an adaptable, always-improving-moving-changing success story.

Management

A school manager is a person who organizes the structure to accomplish the plan. The manager staffs the structure with subordinates. The manager will develop policies, procedures, and operations to direct their subordinates. This will ensure a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. Draft (2002) compares management to leadership in five areas crucial to organizational performance, therefore providing the organization with direction, hiring and dismissing subordinates (aligning), focusing on building relationships, personal qualities, and the leader outcomes. Referring back to the previous paragraphs school administrators must be a visionary leader, instructional leader, and now a manager. Balancing the leadership qualities in the administration role is critical for the existence of a thriving successful organization. By balancing the organization while implementing the management element to the masterpiece creates stability in the school.

The manager deals with having the knowledge of learning, teaching, and student development while making appropriate management decisions based on
the criteria. Operational procedures are designed and managed to maximize opportunities for all stakeholders. School administration has to plan and budget financially for the organization while keeping a close eye on the bottom line. The school administrator has a larger impact if he or she would have direct involvement in organizing, directing and aligning of the staff in the presence of enhancing learning and teaching. The school leader must realize to develop an organization that will produce, sell, and service all of the stakeholders, he or she must run the organization as a business. Keeping in the highest priority that one will assure the customer of the appropriate equipment; and the support systems to operate safely, efficiently, and effectively. The administrator must use all his or her resources to obtain a safe environment as well as facility that is conducive to student learning. As a school administrator one must recognize the obstacles, and find productive, resourceful, and financial ways to overcome those obstacles. This must occur in timely manner that can maximize the attainment of the organizational goals.

Community Leader

The school administrator must lead by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. This means that we as administrators must be tuned in to the current trends, research, and issues that potentially impact the school community relations. We must promote, celebrate, and value the dynamics...
and diversity that the school and community has to offer. One of my professors explained the concept that the school administrators can no longer do it alone. Truly stated correctly as former first lady Hillary Clinton said that something to the words that it takes a village to raise a child. Well said and taken from the heart. The leader first and foremost must collaborate, establish positive relations, and gain the support of the stakeholders, which I believe is vital to an administrator’s success.

Schools should foster learning not only for students, but also for all adults in the community—teachers, staff, principal, parents, and others—creating a community of learners. Building a learning community is the most important and demanding responsibility of the principalship. A principal should not be just a school keeper but must develop a community of learners within the school environment. Creating a school that serves all learners cannot be accomplished by the solitary actions of a principal. It results form a systematic building of collegiality and community through an atmosphere of ongoing learning for all members of the school community. Providing and increasing learning for all students requires the determined collaboration of the key figures in each student’s life. (Speck 1999, p. 5)

To strive and thrive as a school administrator today one needs to bring to the table a sense of creativity, marketing strategies, newfound resources, diversity and productive communication skills to educate all stakeholders.

Leader

I pride myself on living my life in an ethical manner, and with integrity, loyalty and fairness. I strongly believe that these are critical traits for a leader in any organization. Lou Holtz is a very successful person in our society today. He has implemented his philosophy in many different, diverse places around the
country and has proved it to be successful. Mr. Holtz promotes these fundamental concepts to his family, football staff and players in one particular video. "Do right! Do your best, Treat people like you would like to be treated!" (Holtz, 1990). As a school administrator a person will be tested many times in many different ways and it will always come back to the same question and answer. Who are you? What are your building blocks for which ground you stand on?

I believe one of the top priorities in school leadership is being a role model for all. The statement stands true about a person that can walk the walk and talks the talk. Aronson, (1999) explains about social learning and modeling: "It is not only what students do, it is important what we teachers do (not what we preach, but what we practice).” (p. 171) As an administrator one must deal with and understand the Code of Ethics document for the State of Iowa. Having knowledge of this can be a vital part to the development of the humanitarian framework of leadership. I believe that in any profession that is dealing with human relations, values and ethics should be the foundation that we stand on first. Having good ethics is the sole definition that defines a professional individual. The purpose of the Code of Ethics is to aid, deal with, define, and understand the ethical part of our profession. Also, by this document, educators determine the propriety of their conduct in their relationships with everyone they come in contact with.
There are five "Canons of Ethical Practice" in the State of Iowa Board of Educational Examiners Manuel. The first canon deals with an educator should always strive to improve the educational system. A defining moment that everyone in the organization needs to maintain an effective educational relationship with all students and colleagues. Which means that a subordinate of an organization possesses expertise knowledge, best practices, and teaches in such a professional manner that will enhance the opportunities for all students in the educational system? It is an administrator's duty and obligation to put the students first.

Canon two deals with improving professional growth, which in turn helps the organization. It is the leaders' responsibility to use a Constructivism approach to motivate and encourage their subordinates to be life long learners. There should be an on going dialogue between leader and subordinate about the essentials of enrolling in advanced studies to assure educational progression. Hiring good people is not the battle but keeping them in your organization is. I once read in a book that referenced about how it is more cost effective to train, invest, and enhance the old employee than it is to keep hiring new ones. The school leader must embrace this concept and strive to develop his or her people to become the best. While assuring that all the essentials are present to keep those employees satisfied to stay with the organization.
Canon three of "Ethical Practice", represents the issues that come up in the operation of a subordinate's day. As an agent of the state school leaders are bound ethically to create an effective educational relationship with all students and to never jeopardize this relationship in any way. What some individuals tend to forget is that using a professional title in an inappropriate way to produce an intimidating, abusive, manipulative and destructive environment where learning is obsolete. One needs to look at the bigger picture; educational leaders are representing education as a whole. School leaders must realize that they are the ones that are the largest advocates for justification of education in positive reference. To commit a fatal error in an unprofessional manner would not just affect the school leader personally, but would astronomically affect the educational institution.

An effective school administrator must build an educational relationship with staff and students for an essential productive learning environment. In addition, must develop and maintain this relationship through sound educational practices and exemplary conduct. The organization must provide a climate in which learning can take place for all. This lends to the example of a school leader that is obligated when walking by a disorderly classroom, to assist the teacher in anyway to restore a productive learning environment. Meanwhile, the school administrator will check for, and reassure understanding of the organization goals, policies, and procedures.
Safety is a critical issue facing all schools and administrators across this great land. Administrators must have guidelines, procedures, and policies in place in case of a crisis situation. If we do not have these lines of communications in place, we will be doing an injustice to the stakeholders and the productivity of the organization. The school leader must use all possible resources to create, monitor, and evaluate a crisis prevention intervention system. The system may have in place many different elements from training subordinates to be first responders, i.e. (CPR, child abuse reporting, blood-born pathogen training,) to contacting outside resources (police, fire department, poison control center). By implementing a solid plan of attack, the school leader can ensure the safety, confidence, and the well being, of all stakeholders. This alludes to the fact that prevention is the best medicine to any problem.

Canon four of Ethical Practice is in direct relationship to giving accurate, truthful and complete information about hiring, licensure transactions or satisfaction of college or university credits or staff’s development.

Lastly, canon five of Ethical Practice can be implemented successfully if you as an administrator use your resources. The school administrator must realize the power in networking. Encouraging, developing, and maintaining open lines of communication with outside resources will enhance the learning organization and its own capabilities. New information technology plays a significant role in keeping people connected locally, nationally, and globally. With this in mind the
school leader can openly share information with other organizations or allow them to visit and observe their “best practices”. The school leader that understands and believes in the power of networking will keep his or her organization competitive through mutual sharing of ideas. We as school administrators will enter a fraternity and sorority of individuals that have the same ambitions, goals, want and needs. So pick up the telephone and start networking to build that resourceful information center.

Political Leader

A political leader is knowledgeable of the intra-workings of government, understands, and works within the framework of political policy, laws, and regulations enacted by local, state, and federal authorities that will shape and provide quality education for all students. Open lines of communication are established with the key players in the school community while recognizing a variety of ideas, values, and cultures within.

Conclusion

Building that perfect masterpiece (school administration) is a detailed process that will entail appraising, empowering, envisioning building trust and communicating. The principal as a leader helps the members of the learning community design a school that reflects common values and beliefs while always working toward improved student achievement.
The principal must carry out the educator role by being a continual learner. Collaboratively developing the climate and culture within a learning environment causes the principal to be a vision-builder, moving from "my" vision to "our" vision. Understanding students' characteristics and needs aligned with curriculum, instruction, and assessment is a key job of the principal as educator. (Speck 1999, p.44)

As leaders need to reflect so do mastery artists. We are molded and constructed by our past experiences, which in turn helps us in the future to learn and be educated. Many people have inspired me; I credit their influence in the development of my capacity to lead. Family, friends, teachers and coaches all have played a vital role in my life. As I exit the University of Northern Iowa Educational Leadership Program I will always reflect on the many experiences that I have had.

Cohen reveals yet another way to lead in his book, The New Art of the Leader, "Make others feel important. Promote your vision. Treat others as you would be treated yourself. Take responsibility for your actions and those of your group." (p. 67) He then goes on to comment on three additional ingredients that a leader must acknowledge attracting followers. These qualities may require a readjustment of the way school leaders approach a situation; A leader must praise in public, and criticize in private. Secondly, the leader needs to see and be seen. Lastly, the leader must have a clear understanding of "who" his or her people really are.
Whether a master painter or a school administrator, one must reach that eternal place by having faith, being a visionary, and living each day like it is their last. In addition to being a lifelong learner, take nothing for granted, set goals, revisit those goals, and believe that you were given a gift to make a positive impact on the lives of children and people. The product and process of good leadership should appear as masterful as looking at a painting through the eyes of Vincent van Gogh.
Reference


