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Reflections on culture, change, and service in educational leadership

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Reflections on culture, change, and service in educational leadership

Abstract

Educating a child is an overwhelming job that is impossible to do alone. School leaders must develop and nurture a well-articulated vision of success, demonstrate outstanding collaboration with all stakeholders, and model heroically ethical behavior to students and staff. School leaders use reflective practice to become change agents and to create a culture of learning for students and staff.

REFLECTIONS ON CULTURE, CHANGE, AND SERVICE IN EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP

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Throughout the UEN 2004 Cohort program, I have developed a more sophisticated view of the “Big Picture” of educational leadership. I have made immeasurable growth both as a school leader and as a human being. In the past nineteen months, my focus has shifted from teaching students to leading teachers, from success for “my” students to success for all students. The extraordinary time commitment to this program has been worthwhile, and my vision and passion for education is more focused than ever.

As an eighth grade special education teacher, my purpose was to give students the academic and behavioral skills they need for high school and survival skills needed for life. As a future principal, I see the purpose of education as teaching, reinforcing, advocating, and modeling the behaviors and habits our students need to achieve their highest potential. We prepare students to be independent, thoughtful, productive, and ethical citizens and human beings. With the challenges that face today’s urban youth, the “Three R’s” simply won’t cut it. Our students need to be prepared to enter an increasingly diverse and global society with the skills they need to be intellectually and morally upright.

Educating a child is an overwhelming job that is impossible to do alone. School leaders must develop and nurture a well-articulated vision of success, demonstrate outstanding collaboration with all stakeholders, and model heroically ethical behavior to students and staff. School leaders use reflective practice to become change agents and to create a culture of learning for students and staff.

What I Believe About Leadership In Education

In my five years of experience as an 8th grade special needs teacher, I had seen several diverse leadership styles, and started to form my own opinions on what it means to be an effective educational leader. Through my coursework in the UEN cohort group, study of ISSL standards, research of educational leadership, and my internship experiences, I have developed a clear picture of what I believe about leadership in education. Educational leaders must promote the success of all students by being constructive, progressive, and standards-driven. These three components are crucial traits of an effective and efficient administrator.

Educational leaders need to be constructive in their approach to others and in their handling of the school. Good leaders start every initiative with the end goal of student achievement in mind. Principals must always be educational, and must always be leaders. To me, this means putting the personal success of all students as top priority. From my leadership experiences, I realize that I'm strong in the constructive styles of leadership. I believe that the only way someone can be successful is if they know they can succeed. As teacher, I have looked for and found strengths and talents in some of the lowest-functioning kids in my school. I've seen what a difference it can make to let students know that I'm watching, that I have faith in their abilities, and that their success is important to me. As

principal, I will hold all students and staff to those high expectations, and let them know that I believe in them. This to me is what it means to be “educational” in being an educational leader. I look forward to bringing that kind of positive, humanistic, success-building attitude into an educational leadership position.

Principals must serve as positive role models for staff and students alike. Principals need to seek out the best in people, and help people realize their potential. Principals are the leaders of our educational communities, and as such must have the skills and inclination to lead others. A school cannot be effective when its leaders are controlling and tyrannical. Nor can it be effective with weak, unstructured leadership. Principals need to promote the success not just of all students, but of all stakeholders in the school. They need to be optimistic and cooperative, and to be cognizant of everyone’s best interests. Educational leaders are most effective when collaborating with the staff, recognizing their needs, and leading in a constructive manner.

Along with being constructive in leadership styles, good educational leaders are always forward-thinking. They look for the most efficient and effective way to promote achievement. Someone once said that if we do what we’ve always done, we’ll get what we’ve always gotten. A principal’s job is to promote student achievement and advancement, not to maintain the status quo. Since principals are the educational leaders of the building, they need to

continually seek out ways to improve the educational system. They need to use data-driven decision making to evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs. Principals also need to be willing to take risks and try out new ideas. The collaboration of which I have spoken is one way to foster this growth. With a trusting and supportive staff behind them, educational leaders are more easily able to take the risks needed to improve student achievement.

Being progressive also means to be data-driven and well-researched in the latest educational initiatives. While studying theater and film as an undergraduate, I learned that everything done in a film or play is done for a deliberate reason, which is to support the director's vision. In much the same way, principals base all school decisions on solid data to support their vision of the school. Everything must be done with the vision in mind, and nothing should be bothered with that doesn't support the vision. Principals need to know what the latest research says about learning and teaching, where to find such information, and how to apply it to their own building vision. They need to gather data about the school community, district policies, and the latest research and then base all decisions on this data. Decisions in the building need to be based on concrete data that supports the decision, rather than personal bias or opinion.

Merely being constructive and forward-thinking doesn't make for good educational leadership. If effective administrators constantly evaluate school policies and programs, they must first continually evaluate themselves. The ISSL Standards are an excellent tool for measuring the effectiveness of any school administrator. Though I recognize the need for all seven standards, I feel that some of them deserve more in-depth examination for a thorough reflection of what I feel educational leadership is all about. In my opinion, educational leadership is fundamentally about being a visionary, collaborative, and ethical leader.

Every justification of educational leadership I've given has been based on a collaboratively developed and clearly articulated school vision. If we don't know where we're going, there is no way to know when we get there. The school vision sets up the purpose of the school, helps determine how the school's success will be measured, and coalesces what's important to all stakeholders. The principals are the collaborative developers and personal stewards of the vision. They must establish and verbalize the vision in order for the school to be effective. Being a visionary leader means having clear goals in mind for the school, developing the resources needed to meet those goals, and being able to evaluate and reshape the vision to best fit the needs of the school community.

Running an effective school is the most collaborative effort that I can think of. It takes the cooperation and input of hundreds of people to make the school a success, and principals are responsible for ensuring that every voice is heard. This requires excellent communication skills and active involvement with all stakeholders. Principals need to work with an incredibly diverse group of people with equally diverse needs, talents, and challenges. Principals need to understand the different interest and needs of everyone involved in the school. Collaborative leaders are able to bring disparate groups together in order to achieve the school's vision. Collaboration is both the means and the end to student achievement, and the principal needs to make it possible.

Most importantly, principals need to be ethical leaders. I have already spoken of principals being role models for students and staff, and being ethical is the most crucial aspect of this. Leaders need to model morality and ethics if they expect others to behave in an ethical manner. Our society can be overwhelmingly unethical at times, as can the families from which our students come to school. Principals need to demonstrate a willingness to do what is right for the common good. They need to have high standards of behavior for themselves, and hold themselves accountable for ethical behavior above all else. An ethical leader bases all actions and decisions on integrity, trustworthiness, and a concern for the common good of the whole community.

Educational leadership is a dynamic and challenging field. Today's principals need to be constructive and supportive of the success of all students. They need to be forward thinking, holding everyone to high standards and expectations. The ISSL standards help to crystallize what an effective administrator should know, believe in, and do. I look forward to practicing my skills in being a visionary, collaborative, and ethical leader. I've seen examples of both effective and ineffective administrators, and I feel I'm more aware of what makes an effective, efficient leader. Through my experiences in the UEN cohort, I have developed the skills and dispositions I need to become that leader. I look forward to a future in which I can make an impact on student success in a broader capacity.

Reflective Practices in Leadership

Reflecting on and reexamining practices can make the difference between good educational leaders and great ones. Reflective leaders ensure that everything happening is aligned with the vision, and that the school is making progress toward its goals. Research shows that reflection allows a school to grow, focus on effectiveness, and build a collaborative interconnectedness among school staff. My experiences in the UEN program have allowed me to put many reflective habits into regular practice. I have developed an ongoing plan for my personal continued reflection as I enter the principalship.

Reflection allows leaders to reassess successes and challenges, and to reexamine the immediate and long-term needs of the school. Developing a plan for reflection can allow principals to become more aware and proactive in their approach, rather than merely “reacting to the unintended consequences of your own or your district’s decisions” (Scott, 2004, 22). School leaders in Lincoln, Nebraska created a program, Developing Thoughtful Leaders, to focus and facilitate reflection and communication between its school leaders.

The Developing Thoughtful Leaders group met monthly to collaboratively reflect on leadership issues affecting their schools. The group developed a thorough list of agenda issues including thoughtful questioning, discussion of professional readings, cognitive development in systems analysis, dialogue and professional sharing, and round-table goal setting for applied learning. The results of these meetings changed competition between schools to cooperation, increased individual skills in collaboration, and reduced the participants’ sense of loneliness or isolation in their position. “Systems thinking has provided structure and tools that participants can use to reflect deeply on personal and organizational issues to gain the inspiration to be courageous leaders” (25).

This group reveals the need for principals to maintain positive relationships with colleagues, but also to take the time to reflect on the profession, the building, and specific situations. By engaging in reflective dialogue, principals are able to focus on various strategies for problem solving, become

exposed to innovative research and best practices, and implement a plan for continual application of their own learning. All three of these attributes are essential for effective leadership, and can effectively be addressed through reflective collaboration.

The Developing Thoughtful Leaders group shows the importance of continual reflection and a focus on progress. A research study by David McGeough (2003) affirms the importance of reflection as well as the development of strong relationships on a principal's perspective. In the study, all of the 23 participants cited professional reflection as a critical component to their professional perspectives. Upon reflection, "each participant came to identify some aspect of his or her early career that had served as a springboard for leaping out of a typical classroom teacher's appropriately limited perspective and into a "big picture" perspective" (McGeough, 2003, 460). Reflection and discussion also allowed these principals to address the challenges of urban educational leadership. Building-wide reflection allowed one school to become more effective by changing the way they looked at the challenges they believed were posed by their students' race, class, and economic status. The principal led his staff in reframing their perspectives on the reason for their students' difficulties.

Solving it, ultimately, involves working with teachers and other staff members to enhance their repertoire of framing strategies as a means of

increasing student acceptance of the schooling experience as currently established. These beliefs are bolstered by readings, reflections, and experience, but their origination came through personally rewarding and caring relationships with school personnel throughout his life and the ideas of one particular mentor, the educational theorist (McGeough, 2003, 468).

While reflection is essential for bringing about improvement, this study illuminates the need for increased positive professional relationships among staff and students. Reflection can identify problems and solutions, but ultimately it is the relationships built among leaders, teachers, and students that determine the school's effectiveness.

Montgomery High School in San Diego, California is another school which has achieved a "culture of greatness" by valuing relationships and committing to continuous reflection and improvement. A majority of Montgomery's students live in non-English speaking homes, and 30% of the students have limited English proficiency. Despite these challenges, Montgomery has seen results by way of increased graduate enrollment in college, an increase in enrollment of Advanced Placement courses, and consistent academic improvement. Staff members at Montgomery take personal responsibility for improving student achievement and for shaping the school's culture.

Montgomery achieved these strides by a shift in culture to emphasize progress, shared leadership, and strategic planning. Four principles guide Montgomery's mission: "common vision and focus... shared leadership and responsibility... valuing results and relationships... continuous reflection and improvement" (Janney et al., 2005, 9). Principal Karen Janney helped the staff to focus on these principles through weekly staff newsletters, professional dialogues about current research, sharing professional articles, modeling the school's vision, and holding teachers accountable by requiring minutes or agendas to be submitted from department meetings.

Janney helped to form reflective habits through these practices, as well as through "regular administrative classroom "walk-throughs" accompanied by a corresponding reflective question" (10). The principal led the school in continuous improvement by modeling the importance of reflection as well as by providing time and resources for teachers to reflect on their own practices.

This individual reflection is carried over into a strategic plan in a school-wide decision making process which encourages reflection and promotes strong professional relationships through shared leadership and decision-making. First, a thought-provoking question is posed which addresses the issue while supporting the school vision and mission. Staff collectively discuss, examine, investigate, and brainstorm related data, which is then presented to leadership groups. These groups are responsible for focusing the options, refining the concepts, and

bringing recommendations back to the whole staff for discussion and, if approved, adoption of the policy.

Along with their model for decision making, reflection helps guide improvement in peer observations and an academic coaching program. Coaches engage in dialogue with teachers to help them reflect on their own practices in order to “reinforce the schoolwide commitment to continuous improvement through shared responsibility and accountability” (Janney, 2005, 11). This type of reflective leadership helps to guide the staff at Montgomery in connecting with the vision, contributing the culture, and enhancing student achievement.

The practices at Montgomery have inspired me to adopt them for my personal use in the principalship. I’m impressed by the staff’s focus on the vision of the school, and the effectiveness of their reflective practices on student achievement. Shared leadership teams can help the staff become more aligned with the vision of the school, and Montgomery’s system is an excellent example of this. The importance of reflection and valued relationships shown by Montgomery, the Developing Thoughtful Leaders group, and McGeough’s are experiences I have become familiar with during my personal leadership experiences.

Two of my leadership experiences helped me to refine my reflective skills and to see the impact reflective leadership can make. In 2005 I was part of the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan Committee at Central Middle School

in Waterloo, IA. Later that summer I took part in a collaboration and co-teaching training opportunity which helped to change many of my beliefs about education. Both of these experiences helped me to become a more effective reflective leader.

As 8th Grade Alpha Team leader, I was responsible for guiding reflection and discussion among my colleagues regarding Central's CSIP. Through scheduled team meetings and informal conversations, I helped my team to reflect on issues that were essential to our vision of success at Central. After discussion among my team, I took our ideas to the building-wide CSIP team to help draft our strategic plan for school improvement.

The experience was eye-opening for me, in that I gained a firsthand awareness of a variety of personal agendas held by teachers in the building. Through many hours of professional dialogue and personal reflection, my team was able to develop a clear vision for our students. We focused on more meaningful family involvement, higher teacher engagement, and a shared curricular goal of increased student writing proficiency. With our needs articulated, I was able to take them to the building-wide CSIP team.

Helping to draft the CSIP was an exciting process for me, and an exercise in reflection, communication, and collaboration. Over the course of a month we were able to refine our building's vision and mission, identify specific areas for schoolwide improvement, articulate strategic steps to increase student achievement. During this process I examined the impact that individual reflection

has on effective teaching practices. I also received first hand experience in reflective leadership for enhancing student growth. It was an experience which gave me practical application for my visionary, collaborative, and organizational leadership skills, and I won't forget it.

One of my most profound changes in the UEN program has come through hours of personal reflection, independent study, and collaborative training. As a result, I've experienced a paradigm shift in my beliefs about education. Before the UEN program, I had a very narrow view of education, focusing on my own Special Education classroom rather than the achievement for all students. Through my experiences, I've developed a more sophisticated view of the big picture of education, and have become an advocate for Universal Design for Learning.

I first heard of UDL during a collaboration and co-teaching training, and it was later discussed during my coursework in the UEN program. UDL presents a holistic view of education which strives for high curricular achievement for all students. Inspired by universal design in architecture, UDL "helps us to see that inflexible curricular materials and methods are barriers to diverse learners just as inflexible buildings with stairs as the only entry option are barriers to people with physical disabilities" (Hitchcock et al., 2002, 9). Buildings designed with ease of access for the disabled have made them more accessible to all people. In the same

way, UDL focuses materials, methods, and assessment to help all learners make progress.

I've always believed in the need to differentiate instruction, and my personal reflection about UDL has given me a model for framing conversations about teaching. UDL focuses on addressing the diversity of learners at a curricular level, rather than taking a "one size fits all" approach to learning. With UDL, students have a goal-oriented framework with multiple means of learning and assessment.

My skills in reflective leadership have become more sophisticated throughout the UEN program. Through the examples I've researched and my own experiences, I've seen the need for and impact of reflective leadership in education. By reflecting on my own practice, I've gained a vision for education of all students, rather than education of my students. Through my experiences my paradigm has shifted from a teacher's view to a principal's viewpoint, and I look forward to practicing my skills as a reflective leader.

The Principal's Role as Change Agent

School leaders are under escalating pressure to improve student achievement and increase teacher accountability. Our educational, business, and political communities recognize the need for change. While no progress can occur without change, this change is rarely easy to accomplish. Pressures from districts and communities to improve, resistant faculty, and the immense effort

needed for change to be successful can cause great stress for principals. As Nancy Protheroe wrote in 2005,

Accountability pressures and ambitious goals have placed both districts and schools in positions requiring rapid and often significant change. Principals are at the center of this speeded-up process, and their leadership is the key to successfully navigating change (54).

Since principals are the leaders of their school, responsibility for improvement ultimately lies on their shoulders.

Principals' perception of the need for change is closely tied to their effectiveness as a change agent and therefore as a principal. School leaders have a moral imperative to lead productive change in their schools. Research indicates that productive leadership must be transformational, rather than reactive and transactional. My research and experiences in the UEN cohort have given me skills to identify which changes are needed, to collaborate and share leadership in problem solving, and to implement and nourish productive change in schools.

A research study by Klecker and Loadman reveals that a strong correlation exists between a principal's recognition of positive change and their willingness to lead the change. In other words, "no matter how much we dislike the school restructuring changes, we recognize that the changes will be good for the schools and we will take action to facilitate the changes" (220). Once principals see the

need for change, they show a willingness to lead change. However, “traditional” leadership is not enough. Principals need to become transformational leaders.

Too often in education it seems that the ignorant are leading the blind. Formerly strong teachers can become complacent; approaches which were once innovative can stagnate. When stakeholders don’t recognize a needed change, it’s important for transformational leadership to recognize the ethical imperative which should guide the change. “The moral imperative means that everyone has a responsibility for changing the larger education context for the better” (Fullan, et al., 2004, 43). Leaders need to maintain a morally righteous goal for positive change, and can’t be swayed by oppositional forces. All educational professionals have a responsibility to improve student achievement, and this improvement is the focus for a transformational leader.

Another style, transactional leadership, involves a reactive rather than proactive approach to problem-solving. In a transactional relationship, parties practice a give-and-take approach that isn’t always equitable, and can lead to animosity or oppositional attitudes. Transactional leaders might solve immediate problems, but this could create new problems as a result. Transformational leaders seek to avoid an “I win, you lose” situation by finding ways for parties to agree on a common goal and achieve it.

In her research of a three-year study following one urban principal involved in the change process, Judith Zimmerman identifies four effects of transformational leadership on a school.

- Stimulates others to view their work from new perspectives
- Creates awareness of the organization's mission or vision
- Develops other's abilities to higher levels of performance
- Motivates others beyond self interests toward the benefit of the group or organization (33).

This focus on visionary goal setting, innovative practice, and collaborative decision-making is the essence of transformational leadership.

Zimmerman presents four additional criteria which guide the moral imperative needed for transformational leadership. First, all students and teachers must benefit from mutually desirable goals. This is a rejection of the “win/lose” approach held by transactional leaders. Next, “the gap between high and low performers becomes less as the bar for all is raised” (34). This addresses the needs of all learners. Transformational leaders need also to seek out deeper and more meaningful educational goals for the school. Finally, the school culture needs to reflect continuous improvement and progress toward these goals. These criteria form a solid foundation for change. However, strategic steps must be taken to achieve this climate.

In his book *The Leadership Assignment: Creating Change*, Calabrese introduces a four-step process for principals to create an environment conducive to change. The first step involves examining all facts dealing with the change. This includes not only direct benefits and challenges of the goal, but also the indirect effects. Consideration has to be made so that the best interests of the majority are served, while the rights and voice of the opposing groups are sensitively considered. This examination of facts provides support for the change agent's position, and is used to gain cooperation of the group members.

With the second step, negotiations begin with opponents to change. It's crucial to recognize the goals of both parties to agree upon a solution for everybody. This involves maintaining an objective stance rather than, for example, letting conversations degenerate to personal attacks. All parties need to empathize with the others and try to see every viewpoint. Leaders need to come up with a situation wherein all sides benefit, rather than simply compromise their interests. This is the real difference between transactional and transformational leadership. While transformational leadership seeks a synergy of viewpoints to benefit everyone, transactional leadership relies on a give-and-take approach to conflict, putting out small fires but ignoring the smoldering embers beneath the surface. Transformational leadership must ultimately hold true to fairness, justice, and equity for all members.

After fact-collection and negotiation comes self-examination and reflection to discover their personal motivations for change. Leaders must first know themselves and have a more focused vision. In this stage, options are narrowed but reflection, personal review, and consultation prepare the leader for the challenges ahead. Leaders' acknowledgement of their personal beliefs allows them to become more sensitive to the needs and motivations of others. This heightened awareness allows for a more objective focus during the change process, which can be difficult and confrontational.

With other avenues of collaborative problem solving exhausted, the leader must move to direct action. Calabrese provides four procedures in direct action:

1. Choose a straightforward, achievable goal
2. Act in proportion to the context and people.
3. Sustain action.
4. Modify actions to sustain movement (97).

These procedures helpful guidelines for leading any change, and allow the leader to focus on problems and issues rather than individuals. This focus on transformational leadership has guided many of my experiences in my graduate studies.

Throughout the UEN cohort program, many leadership experiences have given me the skills needed to be a transformational leader. During my internship I was able to participate in collaborative decision making to identify specific

changes needed in my building. I helped to develop a culture on my 8th grade team conducive to teacher innovation and experimentation, while maintaining a focus on research-based practice and higher student achievement.

One of my most meaningful experiences as a change agent was helping my team of five other teachers develop a transition plan and team-wide procedures for the 2005-2006 school year. In the past, we had few common routines besides hallway supervision and lunch procedures. After a survey showed that our students would benefit from more structure, we decided to develop common practices for increased consistency, improved family involvement, and more meaningful student/teacher relationships. We found that all three of these factors help contribute to student achievement, and we felt that these three areas would be practical to plan a shared structure.

Our first focus was to develop procedures to increase student engagement time, reduce time spent correcting disruptive behaviors, and to improve consistency across the team. After a one-hour meeting, we agreed on a definition of “tardy,” consequences for being late to class, and an agreed upon procedure for handling tardy students. Our objective was to increase student instructional time and to reduce hallway disruptions at the start of class. One teacher was reluctant to agree. Rather than making a “deal” (i.e. transactional leadership), I practiced my skills as a transformational leader. By focusing on the interests rather than

individuals, looking at her point of view, and maintaining a focus on what's best for kids, we were able to come to a mutually beneficial solution.

With shared procedures in place, we developed and agreed to a plan for increasing positive relationships between staff and students. In the past, many meetings had focused on negative issues of classroom management, and often resulted in unproductive complaining. To emphasize the positive, I proposed having quarterly celebrations for honor roll students. This required increased teacher planning and supervision, but helped teachers focus on positive student achievement rather than disruptive behaviors. Teachers also agreed to write at least two "positive referrals" to the principal for students each month. This made teachers become better focused on seeing the positive rather than dwell on negativity.

One aspect of more meaningful positive relationships was fostering a good relationship with our students' families. As team leader, I released teachers from team meetings in order to call each of their homeroom students' families before school started. By the end of the first week, every family had been contacted by phone or in writing to welcome them to the school year. Teachers were also encouraged and given time to make weekly positive phone calls home. Teachers provided phone logs to me, and these were collected in a database. I was able to look at students, find those with few contacts, and make sure that no child was

forgotten or missed. As a result, our family attendance at parent teacher conferences in November 2005 increased by almost 20 percent.

Several times during team meetings I thought about how easy it would be to use the transactional leadership approach and find quick fixes to problematic symptoms, rather than transform our team climate to facilitate growth and change. I had seen many examples of this kind of leadership in the past, which might explain why the problems had not changed in the six years I had been teaching at Central. By maintaining the moral imperative for transformational leadership, I was able to accomplish many goals that I had helped my team delineate. Focusing on improving student achievement saved time, reduced arguments, and fostered more positive professional relationships among my colleagues. I was able to see firsthand the impact of transformational leadership on a school's culture, and its benefit to staff and students.

Change and leadership are inextricably linked. With no change, there is no need for a leader. Conversely, how can a leader truly lead without any change? Change, of course, is not always positive. The principalship requires leaders to become a progressive and transformative change agent, and to be personally responsible for improving their schools. Principals no longer answer only to their superintendent; they now are accountable to their students, staff, and student families, as well as to educational, business, and political communities. By becoming effective transformational leaders, maintaining the moral imperative

to enhance student achievement, and following strategic steps toward change, principals will be able to lead schools through the changes needed to appropriately educate tomorrow's youth. My experiences in the UEN cohort have introduced and sharpened the skills I will need to face those challenges and to "lead from the side, not the center" (McEnery, 2005, 43).

Reflections on Instructional Leadership

As instructional leader, the principal is the steward of the school and is responsible for meeting student needs. In addition, principals are responsible for guiding professional development in order to improve learning for adults as well as students. Instructional leadership, as defined by ISSL Standard 2, involves "advocating, nurturing, and sustaining as school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development." In order to improve learning, the principal needs to focus on both culture and pedagogy.

In their article "Pedagogic Leadership: Refocusing on Learning and Teaching" (MacNeill, et al., 2005) the authors warn against an improper framing of the idea of instructional leadership. "The real focus of education is student learning, not instruction" (4). To improve learning, principals need to maintain a focus on students, not just teachers and their methods of instruction. Principals are responsible for creating a culture to support learning, developing and nurturing data-driven goals for the instructional program, and guiding professional development to continue learning in all staff members.

The importance of supporting a school culture is discussed at the driving force behind instructional leadership by Elaine Wilmore (2002). As steward of the school culture, the principal “becomes a nurturer of the entire school community, the shepherd of the flock, the person who provides the sustaining lifeblood and passion to the school” (34). Culture really involves everything that happens in the school. Making sure that the culture supports the vision is a fundamental job for the principal. The school setting must have a direct impact on the instructional program. Obviously, if the school culture is in opposition to the vision, the goals will be all the more difficult to accomplish. However, when the principal helps to sustain a culture that supports the vision, it makes the instruction more efficient, effective, meaningful, and relevant to everyone involved.

In order to foster this climate, instructional leaders need to nourish environments “where trust is felt and taking a risk can occur with high levels of comfort” (O’Donnell & White, 2005, 70). A climate of respect and openness needs to be established, with positive relationships inherent among all staff, students, and leaders. Just as wellsprings of innovation help foster cultures of change, so do they create rich cultures of learning.

The instructional programs are the backbone of the school setting, and are the most obvious direct contributor to student success. The instructional programs must have specific goals aligned with the vision, and must use data-

driven decision making to ensure that progress is made toward the vision.

Instructional goals shouldn't relate only to specific curricula, but to every aspect of what goes on in the school. More specific goals tie in to general goals, and the general goals must always support the vision. If a goal doesn't support the vision, it's not worth implementing. All goals implemented, therefore, must support the overarching vision.

A recent study of middle school teachers and principals (O'Donnell & White, 2005) found a link between instructional program goals and the school climate. The researchers identified dozens of behaviors which contribute both to a culture of learning and to the instructional program. At the fundamental level, there are five basic qualities practiced in a variety of ways by instructional leaders.

Principals need to maintain high visibility in the school. This helps to remind students and staff that the principal is their instructional leader, and the principal's presence in classrooms, hallways, and extracurricular events helps to model desired behaviors of learning to all members of the school community.

Principals are responsible for providing incentives for learning to students. High achievement in academics, positive behavior, or good school citizenship should be honored regularly. Principals can foster a climate of learning by providing formal awards, communicating with parents, and supporting teachers who recognize or award student performance.

Principals also need to provide incentives to teachers. This needs to be meaningful and professional in order to be effective. These incentives can be in the form of private compliments, public recognition of achievements, positive memos in personnel files, or increased opportunities for teachers' professional growth and leadership in the school.

In addition to educating students, principals need to be leaders in providing professional development opportunities to staff members. These need to be meaningful to teachers, and learning should be supported and regularly reinforced. Success in applied knowledge should be celebrated and shared with the teachers' peers. In order to provide a collaborative climate of professional learning, principals need to allow time during faculty meetings for teachers to discuss and share their personal learning with each other. Finally, the most important staff development should be attended by all staff.

The culture and instructional program must also prove conducive to student learning. The culture must be a safe and welcoming environment, yet must encourage risk taking and meet the students' personal needs. Students need to see school as meaningful and relevant in order to be more successful. The instructional program must also address differentiated instruction toward students with a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles. As a special needs teacher, I'm acutely aware of the need to differentiate instruction and address a variety of learning styles. All students can learn, but not always the

same thing at the same time, in the same place or in the same manner. In order to ensure the success of all students, the instructional program needs to find how to best work with the students' diversity. It's the difference between teaching content, and teaching kids.

Teachers must encourage students to maximize their potential, and principals must do the same for staff. This is why I think Wilmore's comment on "what gets recognized gets reinforced" (39) is so important. A principal encourages staff development not just through pursuing personal degrees or certifications, but through daily acknowledgement of what works. Principals should encourage innovative teaching strategies that effectively support the school vision. They should also seek out strategies that promote student achievement towards the instructional goals and implement the strategies building-wide. This proactive quest towards nurturing a culture of learning and improving school instructional goals is the heart of instructional leadership.

The Purpose Is Service

The concept of leaders of service, or servant leadership, seems paradoxical. In education, however, leaders need to remember that they are first and foremost servants to and advocates for students. Merriam-Webster defines service as work, duties, or assistance to another (2005). In this context, principals are true leaders of service helping to lead their staff in the intellectual, cognitive, behavioral, and moral growth of students.

An article by Herman and Marlowe (2005) discusses the need for educators to be servants of students first, in order to change from orderly but impersonal classrooms to communities of caring. In urban schools especially, many students have serious emotional difficulties and need a caring, nurturing environment. Herman and Marlowe describe the role of schools in this area as two sides of the same coin. On one side, teachers feel the need to provide a safe, caring environment and to help students in need. On the other side, these acts of service help lead to self actualization and give our lives a greater meaning. By fostering a culture of caring and respect, principals are able to serve both goals and create a safe, caring, and intellectually stimulating environment.

Effective leaders recognize the need for service, and most place student achievement above their own personal interests. A study by John Schuh reveals that leaders feel the most effective when their staff and students are successful; “they were doing a good job when their staff were successful, and they did not worry about who got the credit as long as students were served well” (Schuh, 2002, 211). All principals in the study valued their relationships with staff and students. This service to students and to the school is a core principle for effective schools.

Servant leaders must be able to “meet the needs of others before they can lead them to achieve goals” (Arnold & Harris, 2000, p.14). Building and district goals can only be accomplished if the staff works collaboratively to identify

problems, implement strategies to solve them, and celebrate successes. The goal of the servant leader is to ensure that all individuals grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially to become better people.

In *The Serving Leader* (Jennings et al., 2004), the authors delineate five principles of productive servant leaders. First, servant leaders have a personal desire to serve others first. They lead through example and inspiration rather than control and hierarchy. They also hold high standards and expectations for staff and students, driving the school to a “great purpose” (2004, 100). Great servant leaders build on others’ strengths, rather than overcome weaknesses. Finally, service leaders place their staff and students’ success before their own. Service leadership involves elevating people to a higher station not by reaching down, but by helping them rise up.

Throughout the program I have identified with the importance of servant leadership. Before I knew the term, I saw positive role models for servant leaders in my parents. Their lessons while raising me were inspirational in my desire to serve children as teacher, and as principal. As a principal, I look forward to celebrating others’ successes rather than flaunting my own. I have no interest in personal glory or status. Rather, as a servant leader I will maintain focus on helping kids improve, and helping my staff to become better servants themselves.

Conclusion

As I've progressed in the UEN program, my vision has expanded beyond the walls of my classroom and school, and has developed a desire to serve students in a greater capacity. I have gained a greater breadth and depth in my philosophy of education and leadership, and have taken steps to play a larger role in helping kids.

I've come to understand the importance and interconnectedness of important leadership concepts. Reflective practices help to focus my vision for success and evaluate progress. A deeper understanding of the principal as change agent will let me make needed improvements for success. As a principal, I am responsible not only for the instruction of students, but for the learning of adults. Most importantly, listening to the call to serve students and teachers will make me an effective ethical leader.

The UEN program has taught me the importance of leadership skills, and has given me tools to develop them in myself. With the knowledge I've gained, challenges I've faced, and beliefs I've developed in the program, I have the opportunity to advance student achievement on a larger scale as a principal. I look forward to helping teachers develop essential relationships with kids and to hold high standards of student achievement. I hope that my impact as a future principal will lead to success for all students.

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