A reflective essay about philosophy of education

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A reflective essay about philosophy of education

Abstract
People are the essence of education. In the education and athletic professions people were and are the source of my ideas about leadership qualities. Educational leadership is significant to the organization of schools as well as school districts. This writing will reflect on qualities of leaders and my philosophy of leadership.
This Research paper by: Jim Dostal

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Personal Characteristics

My philosophy of educational leadership stems from general life experiences. People are the essence of education. In the education and athletic professions people were and are the source of my ideas about leadership qualities. Educational leadership is significant to the organization of schools as well as school districts. This writing will reflect on qualities of leaders and my philosophy of leadership.

Leadership

When a person is noted for leadership abilities it is normally very easy to see why that leader is recognized as the leader. When determining the qualities of leadership it becomes more difficult to assess specific individual qualities or traits necessary for effective and efficient leadership. Webster’s dictionary defines a leader as, “one to go ahead so as to show the way.” The impact of the “one” who shows the way cannot and should not be understated in any leadership role with respect to all professions. Leaders aspire to lead, very rarely does a leadership role just happen to an individual. How does the “one” become the leader who will show the way? What are the necessary leadership traits indispensable for a person to assume a positive leadership position in a respected organization?

I have examined certain characteristics that coincide with the Marine Corps Institute Leadership class. Some of the necessary ingredients of a leader are appearance, bearing, courage, decisiveness, dependability, endurance, enthusiasm, initiative, integrity, judgment, justice, knowledge, loyalty, tact, and unselfishness
(Marine Leadership, 1995). These traits are not only important and significant to leadership in the Marine Corps but also transfer directly to any other leadership position in our society.

The leader must possess a wide knowledge base and understand the technical aspects of the organization with the ability to direct the organization. In addition, the leader must administrate the instructions to the organization and develop management skills of personnel within the organization. The leader must understand the respected working knowledge of specific duties and responsibilities (Walton, 1992).

One of the best personal examples of leadership qualities stemmed from my appointment to take a football team to Australia in 1992. The reason why I point to this time was that we tried to get as prepared as we could as a coaching staff, but obviously we didn’t have any experiences in Australia. We were going into a situation that was literally, totally foreign. As the coach I did not have the knowledge of specific duties and responsibilities until they were presented to the team in Woolongong, Australia. The ability to direct the organization was transferred from my classroom leadership and other coaching leadership positions that pulled us through some unusual situations. A lesson gained from the Australian experience concerning leadership is that leadership is the ability to transfer previous experiences into current situations and making accurate, effective decisions (Marine Leadership, 1995).

Leadership styles are significant based on the situation. Every leader in every organization will be challenged with a situation of change, the correct style can
lead to more effective and efficient goal attainment under specific situations. The goals of education should not be compromised because of leadership style. The types of styles are normally defined as autocratic versus democratic leadership styles. The autocratic leader makes the decision and then announces the decision to the organization. The opposite of the autocratic leader is the democratic leadership style. The democratic leader defines the limits and permits followers to make a decision. Obviously there are depths to each leadership style (Kowalski, 1993).

The leadership position in all organizations is dictated by the spectrum of opinion in the decision-making capacity. Key decisions are being made internally from all individuals based directly on specific communication that is being presented to them whether it is formal or informal (Sveiby, 1997). The interesting component about leadership style is that different leadership styles work successfully for different organizations. In my personal experience through the different organizations that I have worked, the leader or leaders normally knows what outcome that they want the group to conclude. The leadership component then makes a determined effort of using more of a participating role in getting the specific outcome of what they want and what they think is good for the group. For example, the Jefferson High School faculty was introduced to change from a six period day to a seven period day in 1993 during a faculty meeting. The faculty was told that they would vote on the issue of changing from a six period day to a seven period day, if the vote was in favor of the seven period day then the school would try it for a year. At the end of the trial year the faculty would vote
on it again. The staff voted on ballots and put them into the ballot box at the faculty meeting. Three days later the outcome of the vote affirmed the adoption of the seven period day. Eight years later, the staff is still waiting for the next vote on the seven period day. Surely the decision was made before the initial staff meeting, in evaluating the leadership style it is apparent that a democratic leadership style was initially used with a mixture of an autocratic tactic for the "correct" outcome.

Athletics represent another area of our society where leadership styles of the leaders are examined by different researchers on how these coaches can be effective. Different coaches or managers use various leadership styles with diverse personal and also with distinct characteristics of respected teams. The leaders actually change their leadership styles based on age and circumstance of the organization.

One reason why athletics intrigues me is the fact that there is a concrete outcome; there is a win or a loss. Accordingly, a timeline is established that the organization is competing against as well as an opponent. Some of the best examples of leadership that I can give are derived from my days in athletics and the people that I was fortunate enough to come in contact with, such as Hayden Fry, Barry Alvarez, and Don Shula.

As a player I was fortunate to play for a short time at the University of Iowa under past Head Coach Hayden Fry. I still remember the first team meeting and how Coach Fry addressed the Iowa football team. He stated he had minimal rules, but he did expect us to follow them. He then said the team could make any
additional rules. Coach Fry was using a mixture of autocratic and democratic leadership styles all in one setting and almost in the same sentence. His rules for us were rather simplistic, but very clear:

1. Be at practice on time.
2. Do what you are asked to do at the highest level you can every time.
3. Follow all NCAA rules.

These were the rules for the University of Iowa football squad from an autocratic style. Coach Fry then asked the captains of the team to address the team and see if any other team rules were to be self-established. He warned us that the more rules we have the more enforcement would have to come and to make sure the rules are clear, consistent, and enforceable. The team came up with one rule, no public drinking during the season.

As a player and a high school coach I was always impressed with Coach Fry because of his rather simplistic approach to people and problems, yet knowingly he was very sophisticated as a leader. Later in my coaching career I was fortunate to be able to work as a guest coach when the Japanese Mycal Bears Football team came to the University of Iowa from Osaka, Japan, to learn more about football. I was fortunate to see Coach Fry in a different leadership position, one more of a consultant, and very democratic with almost a complete absence of an autocratic leadership style. This change in leadership style can be attributed to objectives of the organization, age of the leader, age of the organization, experience between organization members, synergy of the organization, and the urgency of the organization.
The interesting ingredient about the leadership component of any organization is our society seems to respect, admire, and model three types of leaders; leaders that are directly responsible for military organizations, leaders that are responsible for sport organizations, and leaders that represent companies that are monetarily successful. Leaders of sport, military, and business have a style of leadership that is rather autocratic in nature, especially towards the main objective of their organization while the education profession has a difficult time modeling after any one of these on a large scale.

As an educator the democratic systems seems to be what is in place based around the site-based management concept. Very few school districts have total quality management from curriculum to hiring of their employees. A possible explanation for this situation exists because of the multiple special interest groups and the needs and wants of society through the school. The educational goal is constantly changing based on the demands of society. There is a need for the education organization to have a sharp focus on the mission of educating all students. In contrast when examining professional sports, military, and business leadership these examples reflect a pure total quality management situation. Total quality management comes only from an aspect of knowing what is the objective (Peters, 1997). Educational leadership is currently in a mode that is so non-committal that long-term change might not be possible based on the definition of total quality management.
The key concept to defend this statement is from the book entitled, "The Circle of Innovation" written by Tom Peters (pp. 141-142, 1997), he writes,

"Many/most genuinely significant accomplishments—such as the civil rights movement—that have happened in this century have been sparked by people with little/no formal 'org-chart' authority.... King, Mandela, Havel, and Ghandi: Each had a mission, a vision, extraordinary integrity, and persistence. Very tough hides. And absent those fancy calling-cards (in all four cases) came profound, global change... which made our world a better place."

Philosophy of Education

My philosophy of education is straightforward regarding our mission. Our mission is to teach all students to have the fundamentals of reading, writing, arithmetic, and analytical thinking skills. We as educators will use whatever methods that work for success of all students. With these basics most individuals will be able to excel in the "changing" world. There is no way our schools can teach for the total life expectancy of our students. It is the responsibility of the education industry to teach people the skills that will be adapted to the world of five, ten, and a multitude of years down the road once the student exits the school setting.

The education sector needs to address the fact that schools were made for students, not faculty to sit down for thirty years and teach out of the same set of values and lesson plans. Yet, the education profession is finding it difficult to attract outstanding people as teachers and administrators due to a variety of reasons. Some of the reasons for this lack of quality people are due to monetarily concerns and intensity of the educational profession. The characteristics of the educational administrator are diverse and sometimes overwhelming. "People
skills” are paramount, thus the reason for a lack of potential educational administrators and teachers based on other recruiting industrial sectors.

An outstanding educational administrator will understand that teachers have personal values, social values, economic values, political values, and religious values as well as their student population with similar values. There will be one key ingredient that is paramount of any educational leader and that will be character. The character of the educational leader must possess source credibility. If the message is unclear or not perceived as legitimate and honest, the group will not function towards the goal set forth by the situation (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, Beckhard, 1996).

Educational Leadership

My philosophy of educational leadership is very simplistic, allow teachers to do what they feel is needed to complete the mission set forth by the local school district within the framework of the law. Good people make good schools, it will be my job to recruit and retain the best people possible to teach our students. It is extremely important to hire the best educators that help students. The hiring practice is the key. The hiring practice creates loyalty for a limited amount of time and then the trust factor has to come in to play with respect to the staff and the administration of the building.

The key components of a successful school are in some ways not directly controlled by teachers, principals, or even school boards. There are factors in society that are controlled by other leadership organizations in society that have a major impact onto a school and school district. Students are products of their
parents, their friends, and their environment, at the secondary level the foundation of the student as a “learning” member has been established by past practices that has lead up to the entrance of this student into the school. Once that student enters the doors of the high school then the organization has a chance to be the priority learning component in the students’ life. The student will be overwhelmed with a new school climate, probably a new size of population surrounding them, new teachers, new friends and in some cases new adversaries. It will be the initial process of the school to make the school a psychologically safe place to enter, when a student feels good or at least not threatened about their physical and mental safety in school, then the mission of the school can proceed. As a principal the four areas of emphasis that I will focus on to improve will be parents, the student (with emphasis on environmental fit and aptitude interaction), the size and climate of the school, and the teacher (Santrock, 2001).

As an administrator there will be problems presented throughout the days and months. As an administrator there will be times when “change” will be the buzz word. Changes that take place in schools are normally cosmetic, positive self-image enhancement in comparison to substantial change (Cunningham, 1997). I’ll guard against this by asking one simple question, “Will this impact student learning in a positive way?” The answer will be determined by the goal of the educational organization and asking if the answer coincides with the mission of the organization.

The problems that we face in education today, specifically secondary education are more serious than ever before in the history of education. The latest
outbreaks in school violence (i.e., Columbine High School), the eroding of values, and the social pressures to deliver all services and all programs to every student has in some ways reduced the effectiveness of the mission of a school. As a future practicing administrator it is obvious these demands will weigh heavily on the focus of the organization and will take valuable time away from the intent of the school.

Current and Future Demands of a Practicing Administrator

A special concern is increasing parent involvement in high school student's lives. It is a commonly held belief that parent involvement is important in the student’s schooling but parents play a smaller role in their child’s education as they progress through high school. In one study, teachers listed parental involvement as the number one priority in improving education (Chira, 1993). One example of a possible solution to the disassociation of children to parents with regard to educational outcomes would be a school-family partnership involving the New York City School System and the Children’s Aid Society. The school’s resource center is open for families between 8:30 A.M. to 8:30 P.M. The resource center’s objective is to offer adult education programs for family situations (i.e., neither parent has a job), drug-abuse prevention education for students and families, English-as-a-second-language program, and recreational activities (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). Recently I visited Las Vegas Valley High School with a population of 2700 students and 140 faculty members. The practicing administrators and faculty are being successful with a very diverse population based on ethnic differences to economic
differences. Clark County Community School District has decided to make Valley High School the hub for solving community problems.

The philosophy that is and should be established in this type of school setting is that first and foremost families have an obligation to provide for the safety and health of their adolescents. Many parents are unaware of the changes that their son or daughter are going through that are normal for high school students. Schools can offer family education on this subject and others just as important such as depression, sexually transmitted diseases, drugs, eating disorders, and juvenile delinquency (Santrock, 2001). These problems are existence throughout every high school in every community of the United States.

Family involvement in the student's learning activities at home needs to be encouraged daily. The problem with high schools and parents involvement in the curricular areas of their students is that in many cases the parents are not skilled in the specific area. In helping to address this situation schools should provide adult education training. Examples of school and parent involvement are being done at select high schools across the country, there are practicing schools that have family math night and family science night (Polilaitis & Montoya, 2002).

This is an interesting idea because currently at Prairie High School during the football season there is family football night where parents are welcome to come every Tuesday night to watch the video tape of the previous game and ask any questions that they would like about the team or football in general. There are normally 10 to 25 parents present at this Tuesday night football event. Why can't we have Wednesday night Chemistry night? The one drawback with this is the
need for a change in faculty mindsets. The need for the faculty of the high school to understand that to really teach high school students to their maximum potential there are many times where the need to teach the community is more paramount to succeed in the long term goals of our school. Parental involvement at school needs to be increased and just as important schools have a basic obligation to communicate with families about school programs and the individual progress of their students. In the age of information we forget sometimes that not everyone has a handle on the communication methodologies that are varied throughout our society, so schools are having to multiple their communication methods to reach everyone. From the most technological forward thinking families to the families that have yet to purchase a computer, schools have all types of communication methods they have to use.

Programs are needed to facilitate more direct and personalized parent-teacher communication (Debryn, 2001). College Community School District in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, does an excellent job of student-lead parent teacher conferences in the middle school but seem to lose this type of communication for their high school students. For the high school students parent-teacher conferences are held in a gym where the parent can meet all the teachers. However, the open forum provides little privacy.

Parents need to be increasingly involved in the decision-making process of a high school. School improvement teams need to be established that focus on curricular goals. Sport booster clubs are active in all high schools. Why are math booster club or a biology booster club absent in high schools? In some
ways the school will bring focus to a parent whom is extremely busy with providing a living for their family. By inviting parents to be active in the school on multiple dates in a non-threatenng way the bridge of communication and interaction is strengthened and extended over time. Parents sometimes feel alone based on the limited information they are receiving, by a school opening up to have real exchange and real dialogue the parent will feel a new ally in the development of their child and possibly in the development of themselves.

Robert Debruyn, publisher and writer of *The Master Teacher* states *Seven Recommendations You Can Give Every Parent*;

one, a family routine to study for the child, a place for the studying to happen.

Secondly, parents should monitor out-of-school activities. Thirdly, invite parents to attend school events. Fourth, parents should have stated expectations that are realistic for their child. Fifth, maintain a supportive home for child to be able to discuss school and other teen-age issues. Sixth, parents should read in front of students even after they exit elementary school. Seventh, parents need to use all the resources available to them to strengthen their child’s school performance, such as music lessons and art classes at the local community center or other organization.

In addition, secondary schools need to collaborate and exchange with community organizations, most schools are in the infancy of forming business partnerships that provide some financial support for special projects. My visitation to Valley High School in Las Vegas showed what can be done when there is business support and a person who has the time, resources, and focus to
make the business connection and continue to improve it for the betterment of all parties involved. Judy Povilaitis, Magnet School Director of Valley High School is in charge of the Academy of Travel and Tourism and runs the entire program annually on financial funding from Las Vegas businesses. This is one example of a very successful situation for Clark County School district, Valley High School, the businesses involved in Las Vegas, and most important the students who enter the program (Povilaitus & Montoya, 2002).

In the past, students went to schools where one size fits all. While this might not have been correct it was the established norm of secondary education. As we have grown as a profession we have come to the conclusion that one size doesn’t fit all and that some students are better with a different “fit” as a school is concerned.

Aptitude-Treatment Interaction

The aptitude-treatment interaction is important because it brings into the formula of student characteristics and student motivation in a school setting. *Aptitude* refers to the curricular make-up of the school. As a principal the one paramount question is does our curriculum drive learning? And does this learning outcome correspond to our school improvement plan? The *treatment* part of the equation is the learning techniques used by the teacher, the school, or the school district (Santock, 2001).

As an example of a concerted effort in developing an aptitude-treatment interaction Clark County School District in Nevada is doing an excellent job. They have a magnet program in the following areas; business and finance,
computer graphic design, computer science, law, management information systems, system technology support, mathematics, applied technology, teacher education, aerospace and aviation, medicine, sports medicine, visual arts, performing arts, foreign languages, travel and tourism, and a multitude of vocational programs. If a student is interested in one of these programs then they have the opportunity to open enroll to the high school that offers that specific curriculum. These programs are matching motivation and characteristics of the individual student that solves many management problems of a school. Students want to be at that school because there is a “buy-in” by the students themselves. In addition they have an alternative school and even a night high school that meets from 2:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M. to allow for student choice.

Size of Schools

The size of a school is one of the areas that create many problems in a community. In Iowa there seems to be a current problem with both ends of the size spectrum. In some areas of Iowa school size is too small and they face consolidation or in a worst case scenario the school actually is facing closing. The other end of the Iowa spectrum is the large school concepts, such as West Des Moines Valley with a student population of over two thousand. Historically large schools come from the necessity of economic viability and the association of the industrialization age from the factory to the educational environment (Allen, 2002). Because of a large size factor regarding high schools it is economical to hire elective teachers because there are enough students present that will take that specific class. Smaller schools on the other hand deal with just the opposite
problem, with limited electives. Small school districts cannot economically justify the hiring of a teacher that will not have a full class or a full schedule. At the same time there is an economic staffing concern within the school district the high school itself is changing in all communities due to the diversity of the student body. There are ethnicity differences, and in some cases major socio-economic differences. But as a principal there will be limits to the changes that can be made based around specific school district policy, state law, and higher education expectations. Principals rarely have staffing, budget, and or curriculum autonomy in trying to overcome the size problem (Educational Leadership, 2002).

Smaller schools seem to work better when talking about school climate, school reform, and school violence. The best size of high schools that offer electives to the students and are economically viable for most school districts are schools between the student population of 600 to 900 (Johnson, 2002). Schools with a larger population have a tendency to be inpersonable. This could be ineffective in social control situations for school management issues. Students could feel a form of alienation and lack specific accountability, hence more bold in possible anti-social behavior. Arguments against the concern of smaller schools or school size are that higher educational institutions such as the University of Northern Iowa are not easy places confronting sociological issues for a student that comes from a small school, that actually the big school setting makes for an easier adjustment for students (Santock, 2001).
The Key Ingredient - Teachers

The last area that I view as key to the success of every student focuses on teachers. As a principal I will want to be an instructional leader, not a discipline manager. To truly have success with students there is a need to continue the success of teaching curriculum and methods. It is extremely important to have a positive learning environment for students after they have entered a psychological safe school. There is not one teacher in the profession of teaching that has not had some sort of classroom management incident in the classroom. That is part of the profession, that is what comes with the territory, but that is also what takes away from the learning process of students and takes away from achieving the educational goals of the school (Debruyne, 2001). The difference in classroom management from effective teachers verses ineffective teachers is not based on the response factor when dealing with classroom management issues but it is directly correlated to how the effective teacher monitors their students verses the ineffective teacher (Kounin, 1979).

My Role as a Principal

My role as a principal will be to offer opportunities for the faculty to share with one faculty to another faculty member and to give one on one support to individual teachers. My school will need a climate of efficacy and positive expectations for students to be able to succeed in learning and achievement.

An interesting dilemma is currently happening in education. As the education sector obtains more technology there becomes more people with dispersed networks, which now creates a need of an educational administrator with more of
a human touch. The educational administrator needs to set forth high goals and high standards and make teachers along with other administrators accountable for the attainment of these goals and standards. Most individuals want goals and a challenge. The practicing administrator needs to define the challenge and then help people achieve a mission. As an administrator, I will delegate, but also force innovation. As an administrator I have a responsibility to develop teachers and other administrators. I will expect my school staff to make a positive impact with regard to student’s educational lives, activity lives, and citizenship lives (Santrock, 2001).

As an administrator there will be problems presented throughout the days and months. As an administrator there will be times when “change” will be the buzz word. Changes that take place in schools are normally cosmetic, positive self-image enhancement in comparison to substantial change (Cunningham, 1997). I’ll guard against this by asking one simple question, “Will this impact student learning in a positive way?” The answer will be determined by the goal of the educational organization and asking if the answer coincides with the mission of the organization. Schools are not going to change until society changes, principals and educational leaders can and need to be catalysts in this change process. Key forces in the change process that will always have to be addressed are governmental legislation and economic shortages. For schools to improve and to really change for the good there will need to be a “force” for change which will allow for schools to be able to change. The principal is one of those forces, the
principal is the catalyst for change, the principal is the leader of change (Speck, 1999).

Conclusion

A principal will not always be liked, a principal will not always be agreed with, but a principal can and should be respected. Respect comes from the ability to show people that at the end of the day when all the issues and concerns take a respite that you really care about what happens to them (Debruyn, 2001). Caring doesn’t mean bending over backwards for someone and allowing them to run over an individual, it means doing the tough things when in the face of adversity it would be better to do the easy thing. My favorite quote is by Vince Lombardi in a speech that he gave in the winter of 1967 to members of the American Medical Association in Philadelphia with regard to leadership (O’Brien, 1987), he stated;

“The leader must be willing to use it. His leadership is then based on truth and character. There must be truth in the purpose and willpower in the character. Leadership rests not only upon ability, but upon commitment and upon loyalty and upon pride and upon followers.

The country needs not just engineers and scientists, but people who will keep their heads in emergencies, in other words, leaders who will meet in the intricate problems with wisdom and courage. A leader is composed of not just one quality, but a blend of many and each must develop their own particular combination to their own personality. Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile. In spite of what many think, none of us are really born equal, but rather unequal, and the talented have no more responsibility for their birthright than the underprivileged for theirs. The measure of each is what each does in a specific situation”.

Education needs leaders; education needs quality people that will lead. I will be this type of leader.
References


