

2008

# What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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## Recommended Citation

Dougherty, Stephanie Renee, "What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay" (2008). *Graduate Research Papers*. 549.

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# What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

## **Abstract**

A principal leads educational change. Schools are called to continually change to fit society's demands. Schools that remain stagnant are places where students are not being served in their best interests. Schools need to upgrade in order for students to be ready for the workforce. Principals need to continually scan for ways to encourage growth, improvement, and empowerment.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Stephanie Renee' Dougherty

May 2008



I knew I wanted to help kids but as I went to college, I was unsure of what to study. I bounced between social work and criminal justice, finally graduating with a criminal justice degree with an emphasis on juvenile probation. I thought that a career as a probation officer would open doors for eventually running a program for delinquents. When I began substitute teaching in a school for the severely disabled, I felt the need to pursue teaching. I found my niche teaching children with mental and learning disabilities and I'm very proud of my profession.

Why did I choose to be an educator? I've always felt that I wanted to help kids. Once I determined that teaching was the way to help, it seemed that all the twists and turns that I took to get to teaching made my professional life more meaningful. I didn't think that I could be a teacher because of a disability that I had since birth. Before going to college, my parents encouraged me to think about teaching but I felt that my disability would prevent me from doing well in that profession. I was born with a severe hearing impairment and with the use of a hearing aid, I can hear about 80 percent of speech in a quiet setting. In my mind, this impairment stood in my way of considering teaching as a career choice, but I was mistaken not to think about special education.

One of the differences between a general educator and a special educator is the setting. A general educator has a classroom full of students, but a special educator has a much smaller pupil-teacher ratio. A small group setting made my dream of helping students a reality. Children with special needs can learn from a teacher like me.

Education should be the third priority in a child's life. The first two priorities are family and shelter. Education is available to every child regardless of intelligence, race, or socioeconomic status. I believe that education is a necessary path to success.

Education is available to all but has to fit each child's needs. Public Law 94-142 very clearly states that a free, appropriate, public education is available for all handicapped children, ages 3 – 21 (Bartlett, Etscheidt & Weisenstein, 2007). This law has helped the field of education today. As a special educator, I believe that education, no matter how functional or academic, will shape every child's future.

The core values that have guided my life are family, work ethic, security, time, and competence. The value of family is very important to me and because of that, I believe that every child needs to feel loved and have a sense of belonging. It's important to me that the students I teach feel that I want them in my class. The value of having a good work ethic leads to high self-esteem, healthy habits, and daily satisfaction. I value my time. I enjoy every day as it comes, and I use every day to accomplish something. I value security. I like knowing that I'm providing for my family and providing a stable home. I strive for competence. I want to do my job well. I want to keep learning about my job. I want to be at my best performance for students. The value of competence is motivating me to continue my education.

I began pursuing a master's degree in educational leadership after being a special educator for 12 years. This decision was made at the right time of my life. I have three children and they are in school. I feel secure with the school district in which I work. Even though I love my job as a special educator, and don't feel the need to pursue alternative career paths, I feel the need to develop professionally. I want to learn new skills, particularly in the area of how I present myself. I want my personality to take on a new look. I want to be able to do more for the people I work with and for students.

Being in the educational leadership field, a person can improve oneself professionally as well as one's personal life. Developing interaction skills will enhance my relationships with fellow colleagues. I want people to see me as a supportive person, who can accomplish goals, and who is willing to help others. Public speaking skills will allow me to become a better speaker in groups, to be a stronger leader and not just a follower. There is a desire to learn new information. I am very knowledgeable about special education. I can write individualized education plans (IEP's), plan individualized instruction, find resources to help others, and encourage difficult students to learn. My knowledge base in other areas of education, however, is limited. For example, I do not know about politics, economics, and the inside workings of a public school system. My personal weaknesses are in the areas of communication, goal setting in a larger arena, and leadership. Knowing these limitations will allow me to establish some goals in acquiring knowledge for these areas of educational leadership.

I had never really thought about being a principal, however, I envied the role of the principal. I envy how the principal is able to oversee the workings of the entire school. It is not the sense of power that attracts me to the administrative role, but the sense of being able to make a difference. I desire the skills that I see in principals such as decision-making, communication, leadership, and having access to knowledge of all components of education. I see the principal as someone who is supportive of students, parents, staff, and the community. I see the principal as having a vast amount of knowledge in law, policies, and procedures. I see a principal as someone who cares about his or her school and encourages others to pursue a vision.

I have had the experience of working for five different principals. Each of those principals has had qualities that I would like for myself. The principal that I'm working for now, my mentor for the educational leadership program, is providing me ongoing lessons on how I can be myself and still be a good leader. Seeing that my personality closely matches his, I feel that I can achieve and grow as an educational leader. I'm confident that his experience will prepare me to assume the responsibilities of a principal, a special education administrator, or a program administrator for the juvenile justice system.

The critical elements for success in leadership are acting in the following roles: a leader of learning, a leader of educational change, a leader for improvement of learning for both students and adults, and a leader of service. In reflection, a principal will better prepare others in handling everyday occurrences with a clear understanding and a clear portrayal of how the vision and the school should be represented.

### Reflecting for Action

#### *Leader of Learning.*

According to the Encarta World English Dictionary (2006), to reflect means "to think seriously, carefully, and relatively calmly; or to have a particular thought which may or may not be voiced; or to bring credit, discredit, or another judgment on somebody or something" (Encarta.msn.com). To be a reflective practitioner in educational leadership, a principal needs to examine every facet of his or her school, apply thought on how the school can be improved, express desire to create change, and develop solutions to help the school.



A reflective principal is the person who enters the classrooms and provides feedback to the teachers. A reflective principal sits down with members of the faculty and helps them create solutions to daily occurrences of the classroom. He or she thinks about the past to avoid replays of similar problematic issues, and goes about solving problems in a more efficient way. “The principal encourages and nurtures appropriate strategies for creating a positive school culture” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 33).

Author of Becoming a Reflective Practitioner, Debra Daniels (2002), explains that principals should assume that:

A framework for reflection can provide the structure for looking back with the goal of moving forward. Reflection requires one to look back and consider many dimensions of an event, such as, influencing factors, identifying controlling factors, and then deciding if any adjustments can be made for the next time. (p. 54)

There are three different kinds of reflection: written reflection through the use of a journal (Hillocks, 1995), communication with a colleague, referred to as peer coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994), and formal research.

Keeping a journal allows a person to write personal accounts or discoveries, revisit those written accounts, gain a different perspective, and deepen their value system by developing a greater understanding about oneself. Questions can be documented. As a person gains more experience and communicates with a network of peers, those questions can be reflected upon and answered with a greater feel for what is best for the students.

Peer coaching can be seen as an example of collaboration. When a team of teachers work together to discuss various strategies and concerns about the classroom, something special happens. Sommers (1991) notes that teachers engaged in cognitive

coaching believed that they improved in their ability to teach higher order thinking skills and that they talked with their colleagues about the components of teaching. Costa and Garmston (1994) conclude that there are three components of cognitive coaching: “trust, desire to learn and grow, and working interdependently of others” (as cited in Daniels, 2002, p. 4). This conclusion could also apply to the principalship. For a principal to have a network of other principals to call, allows him or her to share ideas, brainstorm ways of dealing with issues, clarify goals and listen to others.

Principals need to keep up-to-date about current research and best practices.

Wilmore (2002) states that “Principals should incorporate principles of effective instruction, research, research methods, and other resources including professional literature, school and district data, and other relevant information” (p. 35). Formal research, as a form of reflection, allows principals to examine “multiple types of data from various sources...to eliminate premature or incorrect decisions” (p. 35). If a principal has an issue to solve, researching other schools with similar issues or reading case studies, will help in developing ideas or establishing some goals to alleviate the problems within the school. Helping teachers is a daily occurrence. If a teacher comes with a problem, the principal should take the time to listen, to research, and then share a couple of solutions that the teacher could try.

Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) state “Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5). A good instructional leader should be able to find research that is beneficial for teachers to implement in their classrooms. A goal of a

principal is to lead his or her staff to implement strategies that will improve student learning. The principal should provide direction and exercise influence.

As a future principal, I will first identify my personal mission. It is necessary to create a shared vision and become an advocate for a positive instructional climate. A positive instructional climate can be enhanced with the development of professional learning communities. A professional learning community is effective in dealing with student learning “issue themselves, engaging in open dialogue and applying positive peer pressure to bring about the desired change” (DuFour, 2004, p. 2). Next, I will develop a sound, instructional plan. The plan should emphasize assessments. “When teachers in a school are truly focused on student learning as their primary mission, they inevitably seek valid methods to assess the extent and depth of that learning” (DuFour, 2004, p. 1).

It is important to communicate with the community about the needs of the school. The school should be a safe place for all children. To be fair as a principal means not to pass judgment too quickly. I will acknowledge my own emotional intelligence.

Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) provide a summary of the 2002 research by McColl-Kennedy and Anderson on the emotional intelligence of a leader:

Emotional intelligence through a leader’s personal attention to an employee and through the utilization of the employee’s capacities, increases the employee’s enthusiasm and optimism, reduces frustration, transmits a sense of mission and indirectly increases performance. (p. 24)

To independently research and obtain a wide range of knowledge within a short span of time will provide a safety net to my decision-making. It will be vital to improve my ability on choosing the types of research that will greatly benefit the situation and the type of organization that I lead. A leader needs to be able to choose among his or her

various styles of leadership practices in order to best meet the organizational needs of the school.

Elaine Wilmore, (2002) asks in her book, "Is this a calling?" (p. 6). She feels that people who are aspiring to be school principals need to feel that the job is a calling and that it requires a special, personal mission. In the Second ISSL standard it is stressed that each principal reflects to identify one's own mission. Only then will a principal be able to work effectively with students, staff, administration, and community. I will increase my awareness about others and my own personal self. To be a reflective practitioner, I will follow the first standard of promoting success of all students by implementing a shared vision of learning. It will also be necessary to follow the second and third standards by nurturing an instructional program and ensuring safety in the learning environment. The Fourth Standard will be evident when collaborating with families and community members. Finally, when I am acting fair and ethical in the best interests of the students, and when I show my understanding and appreciation in the dynamics of the community that I work for, the Fifth and Sixth Standards will be in place.

#### *The Leader's Role in Educational Change.*

A principal leads educational change. Schools are called to continually change to fit society's demands. Schools that remain stagnant are places where students are not being served in their best interests. Schools need to upgrade in order for students to be ready for the workforce. Principals need to continually scan for ways to encourage growth, improvement, and empowerment. Mendez-Morse, Hord, and Boyd (1992) state, "Leaders who changed their organizations were proactive and took risks. They

recognized shifts in the interests or needs of their clientele, anticipated the need to change and challenged the status quo” (p. 1).

To fulfill the needs and demands of society, principals are often faced with the responsibility of revising the curriculum. The curriculum needs to fit in with the expectations of parents, community, and culture. As the workforce becomes more complex, the curriculum becomes more demanding. Principals need to ensure that educational change is an on-going process that requires revisiting, revising, reviewing, and ultimately changing.

It is not just the principal’s role that is becoming more complex but the teachers’ expectations have also increased. “Leadership roles of teachers are becoming more prevalent, more dominant, and more demanding” (Johnson, 2001). Changing the curriculum involves the understanding that change is a process, not a one-time event, and that there must be continuing efforts to allow the change to grow and be effective. To avoid failure in educational change, principals must communicate effectively, continually, and openly to teachers.

In a 2001 study by Judy A. Johnson, it was found that teachers and principals significantly expressed that “The essential element in the success of a curriculum revision project...is the need for specific training” (p. 8). The success of training depends on frequency. The more conversations held between the principal and the teacher, the more likely the reform or change will be successful. The success of change does not reflect on how well the in-service is presented during a one-time meeting, but rather on the times when the principal engages in brief but meaningful conferences with the teachers. When

principals value the resources found in their teaching staff, it becomes apparent that the vision for the future will be enacted.

Collaboration allows teachers to feel empowered and responsible for the changes required to improve the system. Principals must encourage a team approach. Teachers should take ownership by engaging in team discussions, periodic reviews, and evaluations. “The recent educational reform movements...have promoted increased teacher participation and leadership in the decision-making processes,” (Mendez-Morse, Hord, & Boyd, 1992, p. 1).

Leaders of educational change have the skills of listening and communicating. Effective change comes from being able to talk things through, to discuss pros and cons, and to voice concerns. Principals and other administrators are viewed as positive communicators when teachers feel that they can go to them and express whatever they are feeling. Principals can show that they value the resources of the teaching staff simply by listening.

Leaders of educational change “take the initiative, anticipate and recognize changes in their organizational environment, and begin to explore possible courses of action to respond to those changes” (Mendez-Morse, Hord, & Boyd, 1992, p. 9). As a principal scans the school culture, and recognizes shifts in instructional paradigms, he or she can guide the school in rethinking or revising the vision.

Elaine Wilmore, the author of *Principal Leadership* (2002), has stated three standards that are connected to the principal’s role in educational change. The first, second, and fourth standards are: “facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a school’s vision; advocating, nurturing, and

sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; and collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs” (p. 13-14).

Educational change would be a crucial aspect of my professional life. I must provide guidance to the staff while facilitating the vision and strategic plan. I must empower staff and appreciate their efforts and strengths. Teachers should be given the chance to try out the new components of change and they must receive feedback. The role of leadership for educational change requires the act of “energizing other people to make good decisions and do better things” (Mintzberg, as cited in Fullan, 2006, p. 14). It is important that the teachers have a voice in order to feel a sense of importance and efficacy. As a principal, I will encourage teachers to take the risk of leading and helping others, and that will give the teachers a greater sense of pride in what they do. I also must portray leadership in such a way that I’m practicing the “principle of power investment, meaning to distribute power to other workers, so as to get more power in return in terms of accomplishments and achievements” (Shanks, Beck, & Staloch, 2006, p. 7).

#### *A Leader of Learner’s Role for the Improvement of Learning.*

A principal of a school system has the responsibility for collecting and analyzing data with the purpose of continuing to strive for improvement. The purpose of the educational system is to prepare children for the demands of society’s workforce. Education is a way of passing down the norms and culture of a community along with learning from mistakes of the past. A principal has a role to educate his or her staff that it is best to keep moving, to keep improving, and to keep changing.

An effective principal must use current research to keep updated on the instructional strategies being tried. A principal must educate him or herself on what strategies seem promising and what seem to be a farce. The responsibilities faced by a principal are multi-dimensional. Mendez-Morse, Boyd, and Hord (1992) state, “Instructional leadership includes characteristics such as high expectations of students and teachers, an emphasis on instruction, provision of professional development, and use of data to evaluate students’ progress among others” (p. 2). Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1990) note “Principals influence student learning by developing a school mission that provides an instructional focus for teachers throughout the school” (as cited in Mendez-Morse, Boyd, & Hord, 1992, p. 4).

The value of serving in the best interests of the students keeps the principal acting and reacting to the changes of the educational climate. If the analysis of student data shows a deficiency, then a principal is responsible for finding the reason for the deficiency and looking for ways to eliminate the deficiency. If an instructional strategy, or worse, a teacher, is not up to standard for moving toward an instructional goal, it is up to the principal to implement a change.

There is a common value between principals and teachers. Principals want the students’ instructional needs to be met and the teachers want to make an instructional impact on their students. With this common value, the principal and the teachers are working together towards the same goal. When principals observe the workings inside a classroom, they are being kept aware of instructional strategies. “School leaders encourage their staff to experiment with various instructional methods to meet the academic needs of students” (Mendez-Morse, Boyd, and Hord, 1992). Through



communication, there is a constant effort in revisiting and revising those instructional modes of education. A principal values staff by encouraging them to challenge themselves to use their talents and abilities. To encourage teachers to use their talents helps give the school climate a sense of life and renewal.

In a 2003 article written by Larry Lashway (2003), Hoachlander states that “There is no single technique that will provide lasting impact” on the instructional climate (as cited in Lashway, p. 8). Hoachlander states, “The ability to blend many practices into a balanced, well-managed package of school improvement was an essential leadership requirement” (as cited in Lashway, 2003, p. 8). Modern-day principals must consider themselves to be learners. They must be willing to look into multiple ways of teaching, consider multiple ideas, and listen to a multitude of opinions. Principals must morally and ethically uphold the belief that children are first and all decisions must be made accordingly. Wilmore (2002) states:

Goals and strategies to achieve them should incorporate principles of effective instruction, research, research methods, and other resources including professional literature, school and district data, and other relevant information. Multiple types of data from various sources must always be used to eliminate premature or incorrect decisions and to minimize bias. (p. 35)

To enhance student learning, instructional strategies should be tailored to fit the needs of each student. When the goals of a particular student have been met, then new goals should be put in place. The principal and the teacher must work together to find appropriate teaching methods, incorporate useful motivational techniques, and fit appropriate learning modalities for a particular classroom.

An effective way for a principal to impact student learning is to encourage teachers to develop teams. Teams should meet regularly to discuss current classroom

practices, not focus on unsuccessful attempts or failures. The team of teachers is encouraged to “meet regularly to share, refine and assess the impact of lessons and strategies continuously to help increasing numbers of students learn at higher levels” (Schmoker, 2004, p. 2). Fullan (2006) suggests that teachers must be learners but “what is missing in school cultures then is most schools, structurally and normatively, are not places where virtually every teacher is a learner all the time” (p. 3). A problem with teachers continuing their learning is that there is little opportunity to reflect and research in the setting that they work in. Elmore (2004) observes that:

There is no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems of practice. This disconnect between the requirements of learning to teach well and the structures of teachers’ work life is fatal to any sustained process of instructional improvement. (Elmore, as cited in Fullan, p. 2).

In conclusion, the leader of learners’ role for the improvement of learning for both students and adults is an action that is closely aligned to ISSL Standard Two:

“...advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 13). To fulfill the role of principal, I would be expected to take part in professional workshops, read current research literature, and pass on information that I’ve learned to staff. To watch for educational trends, I would need to devote time and energy reading professional journals. To assist in keeping up with new research, I would benefit from a constant and open communication between colleagues and fellow principals.

As a principal, there would be continuing efforts in developing and encouraging teacher teams. The school would portray a “collaborative culture” that emphasizes

continuous learning, (Fullan, 2006, p. 1). There would be openness among the teachers and the principal in regards to sharing information and techniques. There would be trust in knowing that feedback and constructive criticism would lead to improvement of learning. It would be a part of my role to analyze testing data from the previous ITBS scores, quick computer assessments, and teacher data on final grades, fluency rates, and performance ratings. After close inspection of all data, I would be expected to communicate with the staff on the shortcomings and work with them to develop instructional plans of action. More importantly, I would praise and show professional respect for the teachers in their perseverance and determination in teaching all students at the best of their ability.

#### *A Leader of Service.*

A principal is a leader of service. The principal and the teachers within the school are providing a service to the community. The service is a free and appropriate education for all children that will allow them to continue on to be productive citizens in the future. An educational leader should model a “belief in what is right for children” (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p. 106). “The desire to serve is based on the love of children” (p. 171). Principals and teachers are servant leaders because they continually attend to the educational needs of all the children in their community.

A principal, as a leader of service, has important priorities that are considered daily on the job. The number one priority is to do what is best for the children. The principal thinks of the children and all the decisions are based on what is in their best interest. The principal does not think of personal gains or ambition, rather he or she thinks of how to make all children successful. A leader of service acts ethically for the

good of the community. Clear and honest communication about the school is an effective means of establishing trust and promoting a positive climate. A principal serves the children because he or she has the desire and the passion to see children grow into productive citizens.

The principal is the leader of service because of the daily ties to the resources and social agencies available for children. The principal is able to influence a child's life by providing the teachers, counselor, school nurse, the school lunch program, and other support services if they are needed. Through the media, the leader of service provides a way to publicly promote the school and increase the awareness of what the school is able to do for the community. Positive public relations can greatly impact the climate and culture of the school. Lashway (2003) states that a principal may have an "impact on school climate through promoting democratic participation, creating an inviting culture, building meaningful relationships, and acting ethically" (p. 10-11). Special recognition and accomplishments of teachers and students can be announced in the local newspaper. The community would appreciate and take pride in the local school through the publicity efforts of the principal. The Institute for Educational Leadership states:

Principals today must also serve as leaders for student learning...They must rally students, teachers, parents, local health and family service agencies, youth development groups, local businesses and other community residents and partners around the common goal of raising student performance. (as cited in Lashway, 2003, p. 2)

To serve the teachers and the community, the leader should be available and easily accessible. One way a principal could do this is by providing leadership from the center. Hord (1997) states "Leading from the center requires being at the center—a physical presence, with accessibility the key" (p. 41). A principal could place the

administration office in a location that can be easily available for teachers and for the community. A leader of service would hold to the idea that the school is a welcoming and inviting environment. Hord (1997) also states “Individuals who lead at the center take advantage of every opportunity to stimulate conversation about teaching and learning, to bind faculty around issues of students and instruction” (p. 42).

Elaine Wilmore, author of *Principal Leadership* (2002), addresses the service component of leadership in the ISSL Standard Four: “...promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (p. 66). To include families and community members as part of the educational process is an important role for a principal to uphold. The principal must develop skills in communication and collaboration. The principal must be willing to ask for help and receive help in return. The school cannot function alone within a community. The school is providing an important service to the community and the principal needs to insure that there is a sense of satisfaction and pride for all members. Wilmore (2002) states that principals need to be “...visible, proactive, and vocal about the successes and the needs of individual students and our schools” (p. 70).

It may be obvious that the role of principalship is demanding because the principal is the first to arrive and the last to leave the school building. To provide a service to the community, the principal has to put forth tremendous amounts of time making community contacts and making sound decisions for the good of all children. The servant leadership role will be the most demanding for me but rewarding at the same time. The rewarding aspect is bringing the school and the community together to impact

young children's lives. As an educational administrator, I would strengthen my goal to provide an educational setting of high academic standards in a positive and welcoming climate for all of the children in the community. I feel that I will always consider what is in the best interest of all the students. I will strive to provide an environment that invites children, teachers, parents, and other community members to be involved in creating a school of excellence.

The school would be welcoming because of the invitation to the community to join students during special occasions. For example, parents would be invited to attend a student recognition event, or an assembly for character education. As an administrator, I can serve the community by providing Character Education. Character Education is an instructional program that promotes good citizenship. The goal is to see students demonstrate citizenship and other character values while they are in the community. At the public library, the local ball fields, and the local clubs, students and adults will share the common language of building character. Another example of serving the community is by sharing the grounds and the school building. The community may feel a part of ownership if the gym, ball fields, playground, or classrooms are available after school hours. Most importantly, the community can feel welcome if there is a space of recognition for former students. A former student can be recognized for having leadership qualities, for serving his or her own country in the armed forces, for experiencing success within the community, or for blessing us with his or her memory.

With communication, honesty, trust, knowledge, and hard work, a principal would be a leader of service that promotes the shared vision of education at its best. A leader of service promotes the high qualities of the community.

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