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

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

## **Abstract**

Leadership in 21 st century education will become one of the most important cultural necessities, if education is to serve our society appropriately and move it forward to adjust to the challenges of the future. Leaders in education must be prepared to embrace new and challenging roles that will guide educational leadership into the future. Those roles will include: instructional leadership, organizational leadership, ethical leadership, visionary leadership, and collaborative leadership. As the educational leaders of the future move to incorporate these leadership styles into practice, education will be able to move forward in a positive and successful direction.

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

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

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Leadership in 21<sup>st</sup> century education will become one of the most important cultural necessities, if education is to serve our society appropriately and move it forward to adjust to the challenges of the future. Leaders in education must be prepared to embrace new and challenging roles that will guide educational leadership into the future. Those roles will include: instructional leadership, organizational leadership, ethical leadership, visionary leadership, and collaborative leadership. As the educational leaders of the future move to incorporate these leadership styles into practice, education will be able to move forward in a positive and successful direction.

One of the most important roles for an educational leader to embrace and practice is that of an instructional leader. With the introduction of No Child Left Behind and the movement towards educational accountability, it is imperative that the future principals and administrators have a strong background in instructional leadership and use that background to influence the climate of the schools they serve. To be an instructional leader, one must “promote the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining the school culture that has been developed through the goals, expectations, culture, climate, and values surrounding the vision” (Wilmore, 2002).

The instructional leader is responsible for developing and maintaining the school culture of learning regardless of the schools successes or failures. Without a strong instructional leader, the focus of that culture could easily be shifted to other, less important issues.

It is imperative that, as the instructional leader, one continuously moves others in the direction spelled out in the organization's vision. It is the instructional leader's role to support and encourage staff and students to achieve higher levels of learning success and to continue to be the cheerleader when things aren't always moving in the right direction.

An equally important role for leaders in education is to embrace and become visionary leaders. No organization can be successful without having specific goals and direction. It is the visionary leader's responsibility and charge to ensure that those people within the educational organization are all moving towards achieving the goals and direction established within the vision of the organization. The Cedar Rapids School District recently adopted a set of goals linked to a specific vision. The visionary leaders of the district have worked hard to ensure that those goals are met by ensuring that everything that is done within the organization is linked in some way to achieving those goals. The principal's primary responsibility is to "facilitate the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district's vision of learning" (Wilmore, 2002). What this means is that not only should the principal take responsibility for developing a school's visionary plan, he/she is also responsible for ensuring the implementation of the plan and maintaining the plan, regardless of the successes or failures the plan may be experiencing. Events within the plan won't always go perfectly and it's the principal's responsibility to continue to support and move the vision forward when others may become discouraged.

The leader's role of being an organizational leader is also an important role. As schools move into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, new challenges face the operations of these organizations. New technologies have increased communication needs of schools. Cultural and environmental changes require schools to make changes in relation to safety, ecology, legal, and overall societal needs. It falls on the shoulders of the educational leader to make sure that the needs of students are met within the confines of the school in ways that support society's expectations and financial supports. In this area, sound decision-making skills are an organizational leader's most important asset. The organizational leader must make decisions, which benefit the most students and also follow the law and organizational policies. One of the important points made by Wilmore is that resources must always take into account the organization's ultimate vision and goals and that all resources should "aligned with collaboratively developed long- and short-term goals" (Wilmore, 2002).

Ethical leadership is also an important role that the educational leader must embrace. Everything we do as leaders is scrutinized and questioned by students, staff, and the public. With good reason, everything we do as leaders should be done with a strong sense of ethics and honesty. It is so important that leaders are able to be trusted and consistent. Within any organization, a sense of distrust and inconsistency will result in an environment, which is not conducive to growth towards the vision.

Stakeholders within an organization must have the sense that the leadership within that organization will remain ethically and morally fair in their decision-making, in order to move forward in a positive manner.

Finally, it is crucial for an educational leader to demonstrate the skills and abilities to be a collaborative leader. Collaboration is critical to the success of any organization and it is the responsibility of the collaborative leader to ensure that the stakeholders have input into the operation and vision of that organization.

Without good collaborative skills and relationship-building skills, an educational leader is left to steer the ship, alone. It is important for the collaborative leader to build strong relationships with stakeholders within the organization and outside of the organization. “The principal as facilitator must give voice to all stakeholders, identify common values and resolve conflict while building the team, its unity and its vision” (Wilmore, 2002). Within the organization, the collaborative leader must ensure that all of the stakeholders have a voice. Community interests and needs must also be addressed and honored. In addition, it is important for the collaborative leader to ensure that the resources put in his trust are used in an efficient and responsible manner.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it isn't enough for the principal of a school to make sure the lights are turned on and the heat is working. The principal is entrusted with ensuring that the entire environment of the school is moving in the right direction and is a place of learning for all students. It takes an instructional leader, a visionary leader, an organizational leader, an ethical leader, and a collaborative leader to make sure a school is ensuring learning for all students.



As administrator candidates begin their journey of discovery and become leaders in their field, a distinct and natural event is likely to occur. The practitioner of leadership also becomes the practitioner of learning and more importantly, the purveyor of that learning to those who work within the same system of education. It is critical that those who hold positions of leadership are also reflective learners who encourage those around them to, likewise, become reflective learners.

Becoming a leader of learning is not an easy or automatic achievement. While we all aspire to be leaders of learning, first, outside influences can and do get in the way of staying focused on the learning needs of students and teachers. A common theme that emerges in the life of an administrator is the day-to-day struggles with management. With the increasing pressure to narrow the achievement gaps of students, it would seem that the principalship would focus solely on the learning needs of students. Unfortunately, many leaders find themselves consumed by matters unrelated to learning improvement (Knapp, 2003).

In order for leaders to become reflective practitioners as the leaders of learning, research suggests that leaders must take five steps in order to improve their skills. Leaders of learning must first make a concerted effort to persistently and publicly focus their attention on learning and teaching. Second, the leaders of learning must build relationships and secure resources from outside groups that can foster learning of students and teachers.

Fourth, the leaders of learning need to act strategically and share the leadership of learning along multiple pathways and among diverse groups within the learning community. Finally the leader of learning should create coherence by connecting student, professional, and system learning with one another (Knapp, 2003).

The most important of these five steps is the emphasis on persistent focus on learning and teaching and as novices grow into experts, they will be able to make adjustments in these areas, as needed. Experts have the ability to think more deeply about a problem and make adjustments, accordingly. Experts are people with content-specific knowledge (Shulman, 1986; Bransford, 1993). In order for leaders of learning to move beyond the novice state, they must be able to become reflective learners and evaluate the learning needs of students and teachers. Beyond this, experts are able to use this deeper knowledge to take action and make adjustments as they go. They also are able to consider their actions after the fact (Martin, 2005).

As a novice leader, it will be important for me to recognize the limitations that I have, but also to strive to achieve the actions of an expert in the field of learning leadership. In order to do this, I believe that it is important to immerse yourself in the knowledge and research that exists.

In my current role, I was given the responsibility of preparing a group of teachers to enter into co-teaching roles during the upcoming school year. In order to prepare those teachers, it was critical for me to immerse myself in the research that exists in regards to co-teaching.

To prepare myself to help my teachers learn, it was critical that I have a strong base of background knowledge in the area and hold myself accountable for the information I would pass on to my teachers. In my quest to become an expert learner leader, I also had to make sure that I considered my learner's needs. Martin states that leaders need to recognize the perspectives of others, accommodate how others learn, understand how hierarch filters information, anticipate problems, prioritize relevant detail, and be comfortable with ambiguity (Martin, 2005). In preparing for my professional development course, it was important to incorporate and anticipate the varied learners in my group and prioritize the information being disseminated. I also made sure that teachers were given the opportunity to evaluate the training and give me feedback on the training that was provided. The final step in my process to becoming a good learner leader will be to reflect on the process I used and self-evaluate my effectiveness. Beyond that, I will learn for the next situation in which I am asked to lead learners in the district.

Avoiding the trap of being just a manager in the principalship role will be one of the greatest challenges that face those of us entering the field. With the increasing emphasis on teacher and school accountability for student learning, the role of being a leader of learning becomes critical to the success of student achievement. Combining that with reflective research and self-evaluation will allow leader learners to continually improve and move from the status of novice to expert in the area of learning. It will be one of the biggest challenges facing us, and also one of the most important.

In addition to being a reflective practitioner of learning, the leadership role requires the ability to lead others through the change process. Continuous improvement has been adopted as a means to move school districts forward and with continuous improvement, comes change. The new educational leader will need to have the ability to identify changes that need to be incorporated in their building and then have the skills to move staff members through the change process.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) identifies six standards that principals must meet to be considered experts in their field. Each of these standards has their own requirements and criteria, which help to guide school administrators towards excellence in being an educational leader (Wilmore, 2002). Because educational leaders work with our most precious commodity, children, their role is constantly under the microscope and demands are placed on those leaders, daily, to improve and enhance the educational success of the students they serve. The result of this constant evaluation from outside forces creates a working climate that requires change. In order for school leaders to satisfy the outside forces that demand the best, they must also be the change facilitators within the organization they serve. They are on the front lines of various change initiatives that may be taking place within their schools.

Wilmore states that there are twelve Change Principals that guide change.

They are:

- Change is a process, not an event
- There are significant differences in what is entailed in development and implementation of an innovation
- An organization does not change until the individuals within it change
- Innovations come in different sizes
- Interventions are the actions and events that are key to the success of the change process
- There will be no change in outcomes until new practices are implemented
- Administrator leadership is essential to long-term change success
- Mandates can work
- The school is the primary unit for change
- Facilitating change is a team effort
- Appropriate interventions reduce resistance to change
- The context of the school influences the process of change (Wilmore, 2003)

In order school leaders to successfully implement changes in their school, it is imperative that principals understand each of these twelve principles and to recognize that they are valid pieces of the change process.

With all of the mandates and demands being placed on education during this Century, it is no wonder that being a successful facilitator of change is a critical part of the principal's responsibilities. However, with all of the change that is taking place, principals are on the front lines of ensuring that change initiatives are implemented with fidelity and that they are in the best interest of their students and teachers. It is critical that the principal work in a systemic model that aligns all of the components of the system when considering a change. If the primary vision of the school is on student learning, change initiatives all need to result in the accomplishment of that vision. Todd Whitaker, in his research on what makes principals great, found that great principals are loyal to their students and the school.

Making decisions about change require the principal to ask, “What is best for students, teachers, and the school” (Whitiker, 2003).

Once the decision has been made for change to take place, it is up to the principal, as the chief change facilitator, to participate in the implementation and sustainability of the change initiative. Hall and Hord cite that one of the barriers to the change process is the lack of administrative alignment and support (Hall, 2006). A lack of support from the principal can be the death-knell to a change initiative. That lack of support can come in many forms, but in order for a change initiative to be successful, it is imperative that the principal continually support and nurture the change initiative. While they may not be the only facilitators of a specific initiative, and hopefully they have many others behind the initiative, they must take the lead in ensuring the successful implementation and sustainability of the initiative.

Hall and Hord identified three types of facilitator styles that exist. The first is the initiator change facilitator. Initiators have clear and strongly held visions about what their school should be like and are the motivators who are continually articulating what the school can become (Hall, 2006). The initiator has strategic sense and they don't lose sight of the big picture while they are engaged in day-to-day activities. Manager change facilitators focus first on resources, schedules, and logistics when considering a change initiative. The manager usually studies the change initiative carefully before giving it full acceptance and only if it fits into the current system, easily (Hall, 2006). Finally there is the responder change facilitator.

Their primary focus is on the concerns and perceptions of others when considering a change initiative. They are likely to delay decision-making until they have heard from everyone about their concerns (Hall, 2006). Research has shown that of the three facilitator styles, initiator principals have the highest level of implementation success and responder principals have the lowest levels of success (Hall, 2006).

As I work to become a principal, it seems clear that change will be a critical and constant part of the job. It will be important for me to constantly protect the students and my teachers from change initiatives that don't necessarily support the vision that has been developed for the school. It will be equally important that I nurture those initiatives that will enhance and contribute to that vision. In my current position, I have been able to witness a number of change initiatives that have been mandated by state and federal legislation. As those changes have been implemented, I have witnessed each of the facilitator styles cited by Hall and Hord and will be interested in seeing whether those change initiatives will be embraced and sustained in the schools where they have been introduced. When placed in a similar position as a principal, I would hope to strive to emulate the characteristics of the initiator change facilitator. If a change initiative is to have any hope of survival, it will be up to me to see it through and assist with the implementation.

In an age of accountability and the changes that brings, everyone seems to be asking the same question, "What increases student achievement?"

The question is being asked in nearly every school and boardroom across the country. NCLB and IDEA have both increased the awareness and necessity of finding the answer to that question and putting those practices into use in order to improve student achievement.

It would be wonderful if the answer were in a program that every educator could purchase and implement, today. Unfortunately, the question is complex and has many layers and doesn't lend itself to a "fix" in a box. However, current research can help answer the question about what works in school to raise student achievement.

Robert Marzano proposes that, "Schools can have a tremendous impact on student achievement if they follow the direction provided by the research. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for this conclusion is the impressive list of schools that have 'beat the odds' compiled by Education Trust" (Marzano, 2003). Marzano recommends the implementation of three action steps. The steps include: implementation of an assessment system that provides timely feedback on specific knowledge and skills; establishment of specific challenging achievement goals for the school; establishment of specific goals for individual students (Marzano, 2003).

Peter Senge, author of *Schools That Learn*, introduces five disciplines for creating a learning organization.



The five disciplines are: the practice of articulating a coherent image of personal vision; having a common shared vision process; developing the capability to work with mental models when dealing with difficult areas of discussion; incorporating team learning into the classroom, between parents and teachers, and among all members of the community; and developing a plan for systems thinking (Senge, 2000).

These are only a few of the multiple examples of educational theory that attempt to answer question of “what increases student achievement?” Through my internship experience, I have heard the question and witnessed some of the answers, but not all. I believe that raising student achievement requires multiple and complex strategies that are different for each individual student.

Incorporating research-based best practices is a start for every school. While educators may have a feeling or idea about some practices and their efficacy, it is only through research that educators can be certain that at least for most students, specific practices have been shown to increase student achievement.

It is the role of the leader in the school to continue to examine all of the research that is in existence and help other members of the school community to determine which practices are research-based and which practices will meet the needs of students. It is critical that the principal be the leader in instructional practices. The principal has a significant impact. What is the principal’s focus becomes the schools focus (Whitaker, 2003). In addition, it is important that the principal recognize that instructional practices, while very important, are not the only factor involved with increasing student achievement.

What also needs to be considered is the importance of the people the principal places in the classroom that is most critical to student achievement. “Programs are never the solution, and they are never the problem. It is the people, not the programs that determine the quality of a school” (Whitaker, 2003). With this statement, Whitaker supports what much of current research that indicates that it is the teacher in the classroom who has the greatest impact on student achievement. I deeply believe this is the case and therefore, the focus of the principal should be on hiring, keeping, and developing teachers who will implement those best practices and will work hard to ensure that their students achieve.

Through my internship, I have had a number of opportunities to introduce teachers to a number of practices that have been touted as “research-based best practices.” I have conducted a number of trainings in the areas of developing and utilizing formative assessment in the classroom to drive instruction and utilizing co-teaching as a service model to include students with disabilities in the classroom. In both of these experiences, the teachers I worked with were polite and accepting of the information that I presented. All of the feedback I received from teachers indicated that they understood and could implement the practices being taught. What I found after the training was that it was critical to follow-up with teachers about their practices, give teachers the opportunity to collaborate with one another about implementation of the practices and incorporate a level of expectation that the practices would be implemented.

All of these things increased the likelihood that the practice was being implemented with fidelity and with care. Without these external additions to professional development, the research-based best practices presented were unlikely to become a part of the teacher's instructional practices. It is incumbent upon the leadership of a school to ensure that if specific research-based practices are going to be incorporated, they be done with care and understanding of how new initiatives become a part of a learning community.

The question, "how is student achievement improved" isn't an easy one to answer. It has many layers and issues, but the research behind student learning recognizes that active leadership and expectation will begin the process.

At the core of every principal's belief system is the learning and achievement of every child who might pass through the school door while that principal is in service to his community. Creating a learning environment that helps all children develop into productive citizens and lifelong learners is at the core of every decision that a principal makes in his day-to-day activities. There are many outside forces which impact the learning environment. Many things must be considered along with the question, "how does this impact the learning environment of students at this school."

The learning environment is not the only responsibility of the building principal. The principal also has a great responsibility to the community that he serves. It is important for the principal to incorporate the values and beliefs of the community into the school vision and ensure that those beliefs and values are addressed in decisions.

Many eyes are watching the actions and decisions made by today's principals and educational leaders. The media, community businesses, parent groups, teacher unions, state and federal groups are just a few of the groups which examine and scrutinize decisions made by educational leaders. With all of this scrutiny, it is any wonder that anyone would wish to go into a position of educational leadership.

I believe that those who enter this profession do so with the desire to serve the citizens and children of the community on a scale that goes above the role of the classroom teacher. Impacting policy and helping in the development of a school vision are all noble actions that can ultimately improve the educational experiences of many children. Principals enter the field knowing that they are stewards of their community and with the knowledge that a myriad of decisions they make will have a wide impact on children and their future. With all of the criticism facing schools, today, it is a tough job. During the time of my internship, I have witnessed a great deal of criticism and concern about the current state of education in the Cedar Rapids community. There have been charges of administrators lying to the public and mishandling of funding. There have been critics who question the decisions concerning curriculum and instructional practices. There have been criticisms which questioned the fidelity with which children are instructed and how services are provided to the neediest groups of children. Finally, I have witnessed a number of community leaders who question the morals and ethics of the administrators in the district. It is surprising that anyone would want to undergo these sorts of criticisms.

While I have witnessed a number of instances of criticism leveled towards educational leaders, I have also had the opportunity to witness the profound impact these leaders have had on the learning experiences of the children they serve. I have witnessed educational leaders who go above and beyond in their service towards children and who sacrifice personal time and gains to ensure that children receive the best possible education. I have witnessed educational leaders who spend countless hours researching and delving into the best instructional practices and with limited budgets and resources, deliver a first-class education to children in this district.

I have often heard the comment, “you don’t go into education, if you want to make money.” This statement might be true. Most educators are certainly not in their current positions because of the money and fame the position brings them. Most educational leaders are in the position as stewards of the greater community and have a deeply held belief that children are our society’s most precious commodity and should be given the very best educational experience possible. This is why I want to become a principal. This is why I want to become an education servant.

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