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A perspective of educational leadership in secondary schools

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A perspective of educational leadership in secondary schools

Abstract

Throughout my experiences in the Master of Arts in Education program, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the values, beliefs, and knowledge that shape my vision on education and leadership. Through this reflection, I have come to a more complete understanding of what I value and how this effects my actions. In this reflective essay, I will discuss three areas: my values, beliefs, and philosophy, my thoughts on the purpose of school, and my personal vision of educational leadership.

A Perspective of Educational Leadership In Secondary Schools

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Dirk A. Halupnik

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A Perspective of Educational Leadership in Secondary Schools

Introduction

Throughout my experiences in the Master of Arts in Education program, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the values, beliefs, and knowledge that shape my vision on education and leadership. Through this reflection, I have come to a more complete understanding of what I value and how this effects my actions. In this reflective essay, I will discuss three areas: my values, beliefs, and philosophy, my thoughts on the purpose of school, and my personal vision of educational leadership.

Values, Beliefs, and Philosophy

Education has always played an important role in my life. In my position as the child of a public school elementary teacher and district superintendent, as a student, as a secondary teacher, and as a prospective administrator, I have had the chance to observe many different educational situations from several perspectives. Analyzing these situations from the viewpoint of a student, a teacher, and an administrator has allowed me to reflect on them from various different positions. It is through these experiences and reflection, that I have developed my own values, beliefs, and philosophy of education. I have found this to be a dynamic set of ideas supported by three core areas that serve as the foundation of my beliefs. These core ideas include a positive learning environment, effective teaching skills, and ongoing assessment practices.

I believe that people learn best in an atmosphere of support, trust, and acceptance. It is important for us as educators to foster and promote self-enhancing attributions through feedback and retraining. Explanations lead to feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Positive attributions lead to academic success. All learning requires the courage to move beyond the boundaries of previous knowledge and ability. This means that all learners must come to an understanding of themselves and their abilities and limitations.

Research has increasingly shown that metacognitive awareness and self-regulation of learning are key elements to the learning process (Pressley & Wharton-McDonald, 1997). I believe the best learning environment exists in a positive atmosphere, where teachers offer a combination of support and challenge, encouragement and stimulus, and direction and question. Students benefit by taking an active role in learning about the concept, absorbing knowledge and ideas from the group, expanding and refining their concepts of the topic, and expanding and refining their ability to perform these processes (Gunter et al., 1999). This allows students to actively participate in their learning of the subject and in how they and others think. They are not expected to passively absorb material dictated by a teacher whom they may not relate to. They are building on their own experiences and participating in a learning community.

This connection to their perception of reality is just the thing that many at-risk students are missing. The connection may keep these students in school

where they can continue to develop the critical thinking skills needed to succeed in today's society.

An effective teacher is also aware of different learning styles and respects the diversity of their students. The teacher guides the students through experiences that enable the students to think, reach their own conclusions, and apply what they have learned. I consider this to be a continuous and active process that, if fostered properly, will guide the students toward the necessary skill of lifelong learning.

Constructivism is a perspective that supports my beliefs. Constructivism emphasizes the learner's contribution to meaning and learning through both individual and social activity (Biggs, 1996). To a constructivist, learners are active in constructing their own knowledge and social interactions are important to knowledge construction. In this perspective, the aim of teaching is to encourage knowledge formation and metacognitive processes for judging, organizing, and acquiring new information. Students are taught to plan and direct their own learning. Teachers serve as coaches and facilitators. They act as the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage". Students are encouraged to take an active, not passive role in their learning.

Constructivist perspectives are well supported by the key concepts of cognitive psychology. "You get out of it what you put into it" describes a cognitive perspective (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999). Cognitive-based

instruction focuses on the learner as a self-directed reflective learner. The ideas of schemata and levels of processing fit in very nicely with the constructivist teaching point of view. Rummelhart (1978) described schemata as complex data structures within which the knowledge stored in memory is represented. Schemata are scaffolding for organizing experiences. The combination of cognitive psychology and constructivism has become a powerful force for shaping change in education in this country.

I feel that ongoing assessment, including self-assessment, is essential to a quality education. This should be undertaken by all those involved in the educational process, from the student, to the teacher, to the administrator. Examining the effectiveness of practices currently in place and reflecting on this is absolutely necessary for personal and professional growth. Teachers must reflect on their beliefs regularly (Sharp & Sharp, 1998). This concept of being a reflective practitioner is essential to good teaching. Evaluation systems designed to support teacher growth and development through an emphasis on formative evaluation techniques produce higher levels of satisfaction and more thoughtful reflective practice while still being able to satisfy accountability demands (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). This statement captures my feelings on the process of teacher evaluation. I feel that if performed properly, the evaluation process can not only measure teacher competency, but also foster professional growth and development. If the teacher grows and develops his or her skills, then

the students will surely benefit from this. Dr. Robert Decker (personal communication, April 11, 2001) describes the evaluation process as the one place where an educational leader can make a real difference in student achievement and make a real difference for kids. My beliefs echo this statement.

There are many alternative evaluation procedures that can be used in place of and in combination with the clinical model that is currently the norm in teacher evaluation in Iowa. Things like the professional growth plan, portfolio, and action research projects put focus on the growth and development of the teacher (Peterson, 2000). There are options and models that can measure competency and foster growth and development. For example, the professional growth plan allows teachers to have individual input in their professional growth, while allowing the administrator to give input and feedback where needed. The evaluation draws on documentation the teacher has collected and progress made in implementing the improvement plan and the results achieved from that plan (Danielson, 1996). The evaluation process does not have to be a formality or a negative experience. If I can use my position as an educational leader to enhance and improve the teacher evaluation process, I can make a difference in student achievement and make a real difference for kids.

Purpose of School

In order to develop a philosophy of education, one must also have a vision of the purpose of school and the role of school in our society. There are many

conceptions of these two ideas. I will discuss the concepts of students gaining knowledge, the creation of good citizens, providing skilled workers, developing lifelong learners, and school serving as a change agent.

The most obvious of these concepts is the idea of individual students gaining knowledge. Young people attend school to learn those things that are deemed necessary for them to function in society. The ability to read, to manipulate numbers, to communicate effectively both verbally and in writing, and to locate information are four examples that I feel are crucial skills needed for success in society today.

This fits closely with another commonly cited purpose of school, the creation of good citizens. The knowledge attained by students throughout their education will be drawn upon as students fill their civil and social roles in society. This might be to know and obey the law, to be an educated voter, to sit on a jury, or even to hold a public office. Each of these is an important duty and, I think, vital to the well being of our nation.

Another popular view of the role of school is to provide workers for area business and industry. Since the state of our country is so strongly tied to the health of the economy, the importance of this role is obvious. If there is a shortage of skilled workers, business and industry will suffer and the economy will eventually suffer. Schools can provide students with those skills desired by

business and industry so that this problem is avoided. The Iowa community college system is a great example.

Providing knowledge, creating good citizens, and developing skilled workers all fit into the reproductive role of schools in society. "The reproductive role of schools involves the transmission and preservation of the existing culture, values, traditions, and norms" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 177).

Because society is changing so quickly, the ability to learn over one's lifetime has become more and more important. I feel that this is probably the most important role of school. With the advances in technology that we are experiencing, it has become necessary to be able to learn new skills in order to stay current. In my field of biology, the amount of material known in this science has increased five hundred percent over the last two years. There is no way that I could possibly teach my students all that they need to know about biology in one year. I believe that this phenomenon will only increase. Due to this, schools must be able to teach students how to learn in order to enable them to continue learning throughout their lives.

Creating lifelong learners is an example of the readjustment role of school. Schools must be able to "respond to change and readjust curriculum and instruction as appropriate" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 177). This is a reactive situation and results in society shaping the school.

Schools can also take a proactive stance and implement curriculum and instruction that are aimed at changing a particular aspect of society. A program aimed at promoting tolerance and diversity at my school is an example of this. This requires some risk to be taken by the school. However, if all stakeholders are in agreement on the issue, it can be a very powerful change agent.

While not all agree on which role a school should take in society, it will be important for me as an administrator to be aware of the different points of view that exist among my school community.

Educational Leadership

With a clear view of my educational philosophy and the roles and purpose of school, it is possible to discuss my thoughts on educational leadership. It is my opinion that school administration is a leadership position that requires management skills. I feel that there are several key skills that an administrator must exhibit in order to be effective. These include strong leadership, building and maintaining a learning community, effective communication, the ability to orchestrate change, and reflective practice.

Leadership is a key component of school administration. Over the years, leadership has been researched from several different perspectives. Some studies focused on observable behaviors demonstrated by individuals. This research (Koontz & O'Donnell, 1959; Terry, 1960) has emphasized the behaviors associated with influencing people to achieve a common goal. Other studies (e.g.,

Hitt, 1988) focused on improved organizational performance and increasing achievement.

All of these early studies can be summed up by their common elements and synthesized into one definition. This can be observed in the following statement by T. J. Kowalski (1993):

Thus, leadership is defined as a process that: (1) results in the determination of organizational objectives and strategies, (2) entails building consensus for meeting those objectives, and (3) involves influencing others to work towards those objectives. (p. 5)

Simply put, this means knowing what needs to be accomplished and convincing others to work towards these goals. In order to reach these goals, management skills, such as the efficient use of available resources and conflict resolution, are required.

There is no single definition of leadership that is universally accepted. “Despite thousands of empirical studies yielding hundreds of definitions of leadership, there is still no consensus about it” (Evans, 1996, p. 116). Much debate continues to surround the concept of leadership.

With this in mind, it is interesting to look at the ideas on leadership and leadership capacity proposed by Lambert (1998). Lambert (1998) states:

Leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to

surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. Such is the core of leadership. (p. 5-6)

This breaks away from the traditional concept of leadership as a set of behaviors exhibited by one person. This concept moves towards a place where leading is work shared by all members of the school community.

Lambert (1998) has developed a Leadership Capacity Matrix to describe conditions in schools with different levels of leadership capacity. This model consists of four quadrants, which focus on the participation in and comprehension of the work of leadership. The matrix consists of (a) Quadrant 1 in which participation and skillfulness are both low, (b) Quadrant 2 in which participation is high and skillfulness is low, (c) Quadrant 3 in which skillfulness is high and participation is low, and (d) Quadrant 4 in which skillfulness and participation are both high. This fits very well with the model for Situational Leadership developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1977). It is easy to envision the curve that a skilled administrator would be striving to lead a staff along.

The inclusion of the school community seems to be the way of the near future in school leadership. It meshes perfectly with the continually increasing

demands for school improvement, standards and benchmarks, and accountability. The Leadership Capacity Matrix and Survey (Lambert, 1998) is a useful tool for describing and measuring leadership capacity conditions at schools and targeting areas where improvement is needed.

In order for a school to offer the very best education to students, there must be a common vision among all those connected to the school community. A community is a place where people are “bound to values and bound together in pursuit of those values” (Sergiovanni, 1996, p.7). The best way to see those values take shape is to have frequent conversations about them (Goldman, 1998). Through this dialogue, a learning community can be created.

I feel that an effective school administrator must lead the school community toward a shared vision of what learning should be like at their school. This vision should be described to all involved and should be the focus of all decisions made regarding the educational program of that school. “The vision shapes the educational programs, plans, and actions” (Sharp, Walter, & Sharp, 1998, p. 3). When a school has created a learning community with a shared vision, the result is most likely to be positive. “ A common vision with a common philosophy and common conversation is causing a transformation in the quality of instructional services provided for students” (Boyer, 1994, p.31).

In order to maintain the learning community, the administrator must serve as a role model and actually display those qualities that promote this vision.

Some of these qualities may include: putting students first, being honest, treating all fairly, showing respect towards all, recognizing and valuing diversity, accepting responsibility, and communicating clearly with students, staff, and the community. While no one can be expected to be perfect, a school administrator must make every effort to display these desired characteristics in order to maintain a positive school climate and effectively lead.

I think one of the most important qualities a school leader can possess is the ability to communicate effectively with both adult groups and students. Basic human relations skills are essential to convey the vision of the school, to develop partnerships with community groups, to communicate expectations, and to resolve conflicts that may arise. All of these actions build relationships that can facilitate the development of mutual respect. This mutual respect becomes a powerful agent in accomplishing tasks. If the faculty has respect for an administrator, they will be more likely to go along with that administrator's agenda, even if they may not fully agree with it or are resistant to change. If that respect is not there, the administrator is now ineffective.

Directly related to this skill of communicating, is the ability to listen. An effective leader must be able to listen. This may be to hear opinions of the faculty, or the needs of the community, or the problems of a student, or maybe the advice of a colleague. Regardless of the situation, being a good listener can help an administrator gain a more clear perspective of the situation at hand and,

possibly, avoid unnecessary problems. By listening to the people closest to the children in their own school, administrators can create a learning environment and educational programs and services that best suit these children (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1999).

Another essential skill for effective school leadership is the ability to orchestrate change. In this era of school reform, the ability to adapt to changes mandated from society, state regulators, and the school community while still staying true to the school vision can be a difficult task. This rate of change seems to be increasing. Therefore, focus on this role is important.

Even though change is the norm, it is often met with resistance. Attempts at changing public schools over the past fifty years have been relatively unsuccessful. Schools have existed in a turbulent environment, but rather than restructure to meet changing needs, they have maintained the status quo (Connors & Reed, 1983).

Considering the inevitability of change, it is somewhat confusing that schools are so slow to change, if they do at all. There are many possible barriers to change. Basom and Crandall (1991) created the following list of seven common barriers to change:

1. A discontinuity of leadership deters change.
2. Many educators view change as unmanageable.

3. Educators have not been properly prepared to deal with the complexity of restructuring schools.
4. In following a “top-down” approach to making decisions, educators have not relied on research and craft knowledge to inform decisions.
5. Educators are conditioned and socialized by the format of schooling they experienced and understand.
6. There are competing visions of what schools should become.
7. Time and resources have been insufficient. (p. 75)

Another major barrier to change occurs when those persons affected by the change are not allowed a part in it, or are poorly informed about the purposes of the change (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). This fits in nicely with the fourth barrier on the list created by Basom and Crandall.

Schwann and Spady (1998) discuss the concept of productive change occurring only with the alignment of organizational vision with the structures, policies, procedures, and practices of that organization. This seems to dovetail nicely with the concept of culture and climate. Culture, a school community’s shared beliefs, values, and norms, will determine the organizational vision. Climate, the interpretations of culture, touches all of the functions of the school. These two must be compatible in order for the school to function effectively.

In order for a school to undergo meaningful change, the vision and all of those functions of the organization that are driven by that vision must change.

This means that culture and climate must change. This is a major challenge. Principals often find that the task is risky, expensive, and time-consuming (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). This may offer some insight into why school change has historically been so slow.

Creating and maintaining a learning community can help facilitate change. “Principals, teachers, students, and often parents and community members, shape and maintain positive values and shared purpose” (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p.30). By creating this shared vision, the foundation for change is developed. The learning community can work through active communication and listening, forming action research groups to explore ideas, using focus groups to further clarify ideas, and surveying the literature to learn from the experiences of others. When a learning community is in place, change can occur when the need appears.

In a world that is changing faster than ever, schools must be able to change to meet society’s needs. The New American Schools Development Corporation (1991) states:

Think about every problem, every challenge we face. The solution to each starts with education. For the sake of the future –of our children and the nation- we must transform America’s schools. The days of the status quo are over. (p. 7)

An effective school leader will need to be able to manage change within the school community. By involving all stakeholders in an active learning

community, meaningful and lasting change can be achieved. This action will benefit students, the school community, and society.

I consider a successful school administrator to be one who is constantly looking inward and striving for personal and professional improvement. A quality leader builds on strengths, but also looks to improve those areas that may not be as strong as others and, thus, continually improves their leadership skills. This reflective practice results in continual growth as an educational leader and reduces the chances of becoming stagnant and ineffective. Examining the effectiveness of practices currently in place and reflecting on them is absolutely essential for personal and professional growth. Continual growth through reflective practice will also result in greater job satisfaction. Skills will become more refined and mistakes will be less likely to be repeated.

Conclusion

I believe there is no greater cause than the education of our society's young people. In order to insure a quality education, there must be quality leadership within the educational institution. I think an effective school leader has a firm grasp on the values and beliefs that support their philosophy. I believe in an educational system that offers a safe atmosphere of support, trust, and acceptance while stimulating and challenging the mind through a constructivist teaching perspective. I also believe that continual, productive assessment is an integral part of a quality education.

While school fills many roles to many different groups of people, an effective school leader uses leadership skills and effective communication to blend these roles into a learning community. An effective school leader works to develop a learning community that is centered on promoting the success of all students, is open and conducive to meaningful change, and is constantly looking towards improvement through reflective practice.

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