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Educational leadership in an age of accountability : a reflective essay

Laura J. Medberry
University of Northern Iowa

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Educational leadership in an age of accountability : a reflective essay

Abstract

There are qualities of educational leaders that will lead them to success. A leader can use these qualities to improve the student achievement in a building, the self-concepts of the students and the teachers, and their own professional capacity. Four of these critical elements include the ability to develop a positive culture and climate, the ability to develop leaders within an organization, their ability to think systemically and systematically, and the integrity of their character.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN AN AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

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and Postsecondary Education
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Master of Arts in Education

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Laura Medberry

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Victoria L. Robinson

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Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

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John K. Smith

Date Received

Head, Department of Educational Leadership,
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

I chose to pursue a career in educational leadership because I know that there are natural qualities that I currently possess and others that I have the dedication to work toward that are essential qualities of future educational leaders. I am and forever will be a reflective practitioner. I understand the importance and have seen first-hand the benefits of making data-driven decisions in planning for instruction and assessing student learning. I am perpetually optimistic when I reflect upon my self-concept and my professional growth in my current position, the academic potential of all of my students, and the ability of my school organization to accommodate a changing society. Using data to make decisions and being an optimistic, visionary leader are essential qualities of an effective leader of the twenty-first century.

My decision to become an educational leader has been reinforced through three experiences in my career: my experiences as a bilingual teacher in Columbus Junction and two professional development opportunities, one in the Columbus Community School District and the other in the College Community School District. All three of these experiences had a reoccurring theme of how to foster the success of all students, not just the students that are easy to teach.

I was inspired by the work of Irene Kordik, an elementary principal from New Jersey. She has transformed at-risk schools into “90-90-90” schools. Ninety-ninety-ninety schools are schools with ninety percent of their students participating in the free-or-reduced lunch program, with a ninety-percent minority

population, and that have ninety percent of their children performing at proficient levels in reading and math. Her success and that of her students are a result of the conduct and instructional strategy norms that are implemented with students and staff.

In Columbus Junction, I was inspired by the impact that research-based best practice instruction had on students from low socio-economic status and of limited English proficiency. I was part of a bilingual team who served recently-immigrated Kindergarten through third grade students. Our goal was to educate ourselves and the staff in ways to serve these students in acquiring a basic English vocabulary and to develop their literacy skills in both English and Spanish. We held monthly meetings, wrote state and federal grants, and worked with the Iowa Department of Education. With strong parental support and effective instruction, approximately eight-five percent of my students left second grade reading at grade level in their native language and over half exited reading at grade level in both English and Spanish. I feel there are universal qualities of instruction and teacher performance that contribute to the success of students from all different backgrounds. As an educational leader, I will strive to foster those qualities in teachers.

While in Columbus Junction, I attended a two-day inservice conducted by a speaker who worked closely with Dr. Ruby Payne. Payne is an educator with a strong background in psychology whose work helps teachers understand the

complexities and ramifications of generational poverty. Her strategies, when implemented systematically and systemically, have a tremendous positive impact on the achievement of students from all backgrounds. I believe I have the ability to motivate teachers to implement and be consistent in using school-wide norms.

As curriculum coordinator for the elementary World Language program in the College Community School District, I lead the team in establishing norms that would facilitate our own success and the success of our students. As team leader, I include on our agenda a review of our group's norms. It is common for any of the group members to refer to our posted norms when we are meeting if they feel they, or a colleague, are in violation of one of the norms. In encouraging the process of self-reflection in others, I lead each teacher in self-evaluating her implementation of the five norms. This is the kind of practice this is commonplace for me as a building principal. It is the kind of practice that I encourage teachers to model for their students in order to promote their self-awareness.

From these three experiences I am motivated to implement teacher and student conduct norms and also norms concerning the implementation of specific strategies that have been proven to increase student achievement and create a positive and inviting school climate. I am able to envision a school with a positive and respectful culture where all students succeed and are encouraged to become lifelong learners and readers.

My work with first-year teachers, student teachers, and practicum students from the University of Iowa, has helped me realize that I have a talent for organizing creative thoughts and ideas into effective lessons and unit plans. I enjoy the enthusiasm and creativity of new and budding educators and have a passion for helping them tie their ideas to content standards and the Iowa Teaching Standards. I enjoy helping teachers find efficient ways to collect data on their students and the different ways they can interpret the data to set future goals and plan for daily instruction

My experiences as a bilingual educator in Columbus Junction and creating the World Language program at College Community Schools have given me several opportunities to experiment with different assessments and instructional methodologies. Through my work as a Spanish teacher and my understanding of the Total Physical Response research as it relates to second-language acquisition, I have a comprehensive view of the cyclical and dependent nature of assessment and instruction and its role in the classroom. I will challenge teachers to not only view assessments as a measure of student performance but also as a measure of their own effectiveness as an educator. The mores of our society have changed drastically in a relatively short amount of time. Students will not succeed as they have in the past without changes in instruction. With new requirements and accountability measures being enacted by the state and federal governments, schools need leaders who are grounded, yet visionary, in their beliefs about the

potential success of all students. Future leaders will help teachers understand that assessments are truly a reflection of teacher effectiveness. I look forward to collaboratively analyzing data with teachers in order to gain an understanding of their students' abilities as a result of their instruction.

My ability to collect and use data in decision making, my optimistic and visionary outlook, and my passion for helping new teachers reach their potential are three qualities I possess that will benefit me in my goal to be an effective educational leader.

There are qualities of educational leaders that will lead them to success. A leader can use these qualities to improve the student achievement in a building, the self-concepts of the students and the teachers, and their own professional capacity. Four of these critical elements include the ability to develop a positive culture and climate, the ability to develop leaders within an organization, their ability to think systemically and systematically, and the integrity of their character.

Building Leadership Capacity

The ability to develop leaders is a critical element of leadership. An educational leader must be able to build the collective knowledge of effective instructional practice and provide opportunities for teachers to build their leadership capacity.

Capacity is defined as, “the potential of each of us has to do more and be more than we are now” (Deal, 177). An effective school administrator will focus on developing teachers’ leadership capacity so that all students can benefit from the knowledge and attitudes of all of the teachers in their building.

In order for teachers to develop their capacities as leaders, principals must embrace their responsibility of providing leadership opportunities for teachers. As Linda Lambert states in her book Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement, “A high leadership capacity school is one in which teachers choose to lead because their environment has allowed them to do so” (Lambert, 36).

In the quest for maximizing leadership capacity, the importance of the principal’s role as communicator and facilitator cannot be underestimated. In Lambert’s text, 11 of the 18 essential principal behaviors for building leadership capacity relate to these two topics. Of the eight strategies suggested by Lambert for building leadership capacity, five relate to communication and facilitation including creating opportunities for dialogue, surfacing issues that don’t have easy answers, practicing respectful listening consistently, using language that reflects a belief that all children can learn, and studying and practicing the successful facilitation of meetings (Lambert, 37).

The ultimate goal in building leadership capacity is to be what Lambert labels as a “Quadrant Four” school. Quadrant Four schools have stakeholders with high levels of skills and a high degree of participation in the organization.

The six attributes of Quadrant Four schools include skilled leaders at all levels, shared vision, use of data, broad involvement and responsibility, reflective practice, and improving student achievement.

The most efficient way to build leadership capacity is for the principal to transform the school into a strengths-based organization. A leader must develop a person around their strengths and not around their weaknesses. In many organizations, the focus is on turning the desired performance into a set of well-defined steps (Clifton, 228). The assumption is that, if all members in the organization follow and master the prescribed steps, performance of individuals, and in turn the performance of the organization, will improve. These organizations tend to treat employees as components of an assembly line and remove worker individuality from the equation.

An effective educational leader will maximize the potential of staff members based on their own individual strengths. Effective leaders coach individuals to their peak performance by analyzing and valuing individual uniqueness. "Step-by-step organizations are designed to battle the inherent individuality of the employee. Strengths-based organizations are designed to capitalize on it" (Clifton, 229).

The idea of maximizing individual strengths within the organization supports the notion that all teachers can lead in their own way in a manner in which they feel most comfortable. The confidence and comfort level of staff

determines the overall culture and climate of the building. The culture and climate are critical when considering the overall effectiveness of a building and its leadership.

Facilitating a Positive School Culture and Climate

An effective administrator who promotes a positive culture within his or her school lives by the golden rule of administration: “Treat teachers as you would have teachers treat students” (Zepeda, 144). Principals respect that teachers bring a variety of experiences and future goals with them to their work every day, just as students do. Just as a successful teacher does with her students, an effective educational leader capitalizes on those experiences in order to maximize the learning and positive production of the staff.

In her article “Leadership to Build Learning Communities”, Zepeda highlights four types of learning including formal (in the form of graduate credit), informal (as in a peer coaching exchange), planned by others (as in a professional development setting), or self-directed (in the form of action research in combination with professional reading) (Zepeda, 146). A wise administrator will facilitate and encourage the self-directed learning initiated by the teacher and provide him or her with a forum to share all “lessons learned”. A leader might consider making peer coaching and some professional development voluntary, thereby transforming otherwise imposed learning experiences into potentially

more effective self-directed learning. All participants are intrinsically motivated to participate and hopefully can be counted upon to speak positively of the experience. This will help increase staff morale and motivation for continued learning.

When teachers are motivated to seek out their own meaningful learning, they can work more confidently to instill that motivation in their students. It should be the goals of teachers and administrators to “wrap children in a web of high expectations and high levels of support, so that the kids believe they are readers and writers and that they can do math, not just perform on a test” (Ponder, et al., 222). This quote implies that student success is two-fold. Effective leaders must not only instill a love of learning in teachers and students, they also are accountable for student achievement on statewide tests. There will be no lasting success in one without the other and both are equally important in creating the type of school culture that will develop productive citizens. Teachers and administrators must establish themselves as motivated leaders whose actions reflect a positive and optimistic attitude.

In her book *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement*, Linda Lambert explains the importance of learning experience design in promoting positive building culture when she states that “professional development designs that attend to both teacher and student learning might use [the term] ‘reciprocal process of constructivist learning’” (Lambert, 22). When teachers are empowered

through professional development that is “mutual and interactive” (Lambert, 22), they will pass on the positive attitude and intrinsic motivation for learning to their students and promote the positive and productive culture of the school.

Reflective professional dialogue and structured inquiry are crucial in fostering this type of constructivist approach to professional development (Lambert, 36). Without it, teachers might find themselves lost in their own ideas and new learning and their motivation may decline as a result. Successful schools designate time during faculty meetings for “Talk about Teaching” with norms that provide guidelines for the nature of the discussions (Zepeda, 145).

In order to establish a positive culture within the school, administrators must work with a group of stakeholders in order to write a common vision for their building. At Hunter Elementary School in North Carolina, it was evident to the authors of the article, “The Success Cycle at Hunter Elementary” that every teacher believed in the schools vision and could articulate its importance and their role in progressing toward it. Their school slogan, “Together We Can”, communicates the important anchors of teamwork and attainable goals in their daily progress toward the vision. The comments made by teachers from Hunter Elementary reflect a climate of trust. They enjoy a professional trust that assumes everyone is acting in the best interest of children.

Principals striving to promote a positive and productive school culture must not forget the importance of celebration. Meaningful progress toward the

vision must be acknowledged. As the principal at Hunter Elementary stated, “You’ve got to revel in the small successes that you have. And really celebrate that and continue to grow” (Ponder, et al., 237). Celebration is not just fun, it is an integral part of building the type of school culture that effective administrators desire. Celebration recognizes individuals and teams, reminds the learning community of what successful movement toward the vision looks like, and motivates others to make progress toward the vision (DuFour, 142).

A principal’s ability to establish and foster a positive and productive culture is a critical element of leadership. With appropriate celebration and recognition throughout the year, a principal can nurture a culture where all members of the learning community are motivated to learn, engage in reflective dialogue, and develop their skills of inquiry in their collective movement toward the shared vision. The importance of the individual system’s parts and their interconnectedness should be central when considering culture of the building. Effective educational leaders consider all of the parts when determining how to impact the school’s culture.

Considering the System

Effective educational leaders are systems thinkers. They have the capacity to think systemically about the interrelatedness of an organization’s parts, the root-cause of problems, and potential consequences of actions.

When systems thinking becomes a habit of mind, an educational leader naturally relies on data to inform their decisions. They consider the entire system and all of its parts when making their decisions and use specific language in order to explain the behavior of systems. This specificity allows system thinkers to make the best decision that will impact the organization positively at multiple levels.

Thinking with a systems perspective requires a leader to be courageous. Acknowledging the fact that decisions have lasting impact at multiple levels makes the decision-making process a daunting task. Systems thinkers rely on the knowledge they have and the knowledge of others to make the best choices for the organization and, consequently, they develop learning organizations. "All people in the system are seen as learners and act as learners. It is no longer as important to appear "learned" (Senge, 417).

Effective educational leaders understand that all people interpret new experiences through the complex lens of their past experiences. These interpretations, termed by systems thinkers as "mental models", impact the relationships and the actions of all members within the organization. Educational leaders can build upon these mental models by leading the members of the organization through a journey of self-discovery so that they can uncover their own mental models and consider others' perspectives.

As with all critical elements of educational leadership, the impact that a systems-thinking leader has can be seen at the classroom level. When building leaders think systemically, they encourage their teachers to be systems thinkers who, in turn, encourage their students to become systems thinkers. As Senge writes, “When principals acquire and demonstrate the habits of systems thinkers, they can begin to teach their teachers how to acquire and demonstrate the habits as well. Eventually systems education should be incorporated at all levels of the organization” (Senge, 416).

Character and Professional Competence

All of the critical elements listed above can only attribute to an educational leader’s success if that leader has integral character and values. They must act from these core values both in public decision-making and in private moments of self-reflection. They must know what they stand for, why they stand for it, and have the courage to act. Jacobson states, “A person’s character is the permanent and visible sign of his or her inner nature. The signs can be acts, words, or the failure to act or to speak” (Jacobson, 321). While the concept of character is multi-faceted, three powerful elements of it are humility, trust, and maturity.

Parker Palmer uses a paradoxical statement to communicate the idea of humility when he quotes a Hasidic tale: “We need a coat with two pockets. In

one pocket there is dust, and in the other pocket there is gold. We need a coat with two pockets to remind us who we are” (Palmer, 110).

Educational leaders who are humble see themselves as a servant or steward of the organization of which they belong. They do not hold the position of authority for respect, accolades, or monetary gain. They view their position to be their personal duty and tremendous responsibility. They understand and embrace their role as the highest authority within the building and do not abuse their power. As Peter Block states in his book, Stewardship, “There is nothing inconsistent between practicing stewardship and partnership and being a boss. Stewardship is the willingness to hold power, without using reward and punishment and directive authority to get things done” (Block, 32).

When educational leaders view themselves as stewards of their organization, they are humbled by their role within it and realize that their efficacy depends on the self-efficacy and commitment of others. “The community creates the opportunity for a person to be in a position of power” (Block, 42). They do not take their role, their work, and the work of others for granted.

As all members of the organization work to develop their personal efficacy and the efficacy of the organization, the building of trusting relationships is essential. Educational leaders must be trustworthy individuals in order to facilitate this process. An educational leader who is trustworthy builds connections between parents, students, teachers, and the community. The

development of these relationships may take time, but with patience and consistency, will develop.

Educational leaders must focus on developing personal and professional trust. In order to earn professional trust, they must humbly demonstrate their competence in regard to teaching, learning, and leading. To develop personal trust, they must communicate with others in a consistent, fair, and respectful manner and always honor and protect confidentiality. In The Eighth Habit, Stephen Covey brilliantly articulates the power of professional competence and its impact on developing trust. “When you develop both strong character and competence, the fruit is wisdom and judgment – the foundation of all great and lasting achievement and trust” (Covey, 149).

The wisdom and discerning judgment that Covey refers to are frequently associated with advanced age but they can be gained at any point in life. The concept of maturity is also associated with advanced years but can be realized at any age. The maturity in thought and actions of an educational leader of integral character is unrelentingly evident.

Members of the organization may test the limits of an educational leader’s patience and respectful demeanor. At times, even a leader of the highest integrity will be tempted to act outside of his or her core values in order to accomplish growth or change faster. A true leader never surrenders their integrity and, with time and consistency, matures. “Maturity develops when a person pays the price

of integrity and winning the private victory over self, allowing him or her to be simultaneously courageous and kind” (Covey, 150).

Conclusion

America’s school systems have been commanded to raise student achievement to higher levels than ever before. These expectations come without an increase in resources or time. The challenge facing educational leaders is thrilling. The ability to develop a positive culture and climate, the ability to develop leaders within an organization, and the ability to think systemically and systematically are all critical elements of educational leaders in the twenty-first century.

As schools respond to as well as shape society, the importance of the character of the educational leader within the building is even more profound and perhaps the most essential element of an educational leader. “Schools...have a central role in cultivating character by inculcating self-discipline and empathy, which in turn enable true commitment to civil and moral values” (Jacobson, 321). The character of the building leader shapes the character of the teacher. The character of the teacher shapes that of his or her students. The character of the students determines the future of the world.

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