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

Nicholas A. Proud  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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

### Abstract

Being a quality educational leader takes a great deal of time, effort, and experience, but it is a task that can be done successfully. The leader needs to be a reflective thinker, a leader of learning, a leader of change, and a service-minded individual. To perform and lead of all of these aspects effectively the leader must create positive relationships with students, staff, parents, and outside community patrons. Building positive relationships throughout the school community is essential. To assist others in reflection, to help people believe in the learning that is presented, and for everyone to trust you enough for you to lead them through.

What I believe about Leadership and Education

A Reflective Essay

A Research Paper

Presented to

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By

Nicholas A. Proud

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

## What I Believe about Leadership and Education

The question that is constantly asked of all educators is, “Why did you become a teacher?” Most educators will say it is because they are drawn to working with children, but for me it has always been that and more. All of the reasons that lead me into teaching are directly connected to my desire to further my personal education and become an educational leader.

When I was in high school I realized that I wanted to be an elementary teacher. Many people encouraged me to go into areas like engineering, science, or medicine, but I thought differently. I have always felt that teachers need to be highly qualified and they should be some of the best-educated people. So, I became a teacher wanting to give children the best education that I could provide and try to make a difference.

After being involved in classroom education I have moved into a leadership role and developed my beliefs about education and leadership. I believe that there are many aspects that create a successful educational environment of learning and promote quality learning within schools. The beliefs I uphold would develop and sustain a high achieving school by developing reflective thinking, being the leader of learning, leading change, and being a leader of service. When these beliefs are effectively implemented a school can become an extraordinary culture of learning and success.

### *Reflective Thinking*

Every educational leader needs to be a very effective at the art of reflection. “How effective you are as a leader is determined to a great extent by how aware you are of what lies within you” (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p. 13). By being aware of your core beliefs, values, and emotions, you can better reflect on key decisions that you will face as an educational leader. A leader should always encourage the staff to constantly reflect upon their teaching techniques and actively seek to improve and grow as professionals.

Reflective thinking by both staff and children leads a school to constantly strive to become better and improve. When children reflect on their learning they are able make connections and demonstrate a higher level of understanding. When the educational leader and teachers reflect it allows them to improve their practices. While reflecting educators are able to examine the lesson or professional learning session and think about modifications, successes, and future adjustments and improvements. I believe if you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always gotten. The art of reflective thinking prevents this from happening in schools. It promotes teachers and leaders to critically think about their strategies, techniques, and lessons. Being reflective creates a community that is consistently improving and growing, therefore ultimately doing what is best for children.

To become a school of reflective thinkers and openly collaborate together the educational community is marked and influenced by the following factors. Everyone needs to communicate through reflective dialogue that allows the participants to openly share their feelings, insights, and challenges with the topic. The group must encourage each other to share. The members of the collaborative group need to be open to improvement and therefore change. Teachers need to have an attitude of deprivation of practice and critical review and are willing to share, observe, and discuss their teaching and daily practices. Members of the group need to trust one another and work towards a positive, healthy school community that is constantly renewed and refreshed. Leaders in the school need to be supportive of what is going on and be knowledgeable about the topics so they can actively support them (Senge, 2000).

One of the first responsibilities of a principal is to be an educational leader and help staff members at the school to improve their instructional practices. Very similar to when teachers reflect on a lesson, principals also need to reflect on the professional development and the strategies that are being presented. School leaders need to select data driven, researched based strategies to use in their schools. When the leader is selecting the professional development topic he/she needs to be very reflective and look at all the possibilities. The leader should look at both the positives and negatives of their decision to implement the instructional strategies. The educational leader also needs to be reflective about

the impact the professional development will have on the stakeholders within the school and how he/she can ensure their involvement and support. School leaders “...must seek collaborative partnerships with all entities to help all stakeholders improve society and to enhance the teaching and learning as something of vital importance for our future” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 71).

Another major responsibility of administrators is to evaluate and observe teachers in the classroom. My belief is that a true educational leader is not someone who instantly gives advice or criticizes, but a person who guides teachers to reflect by using a variety of questions. The educational leader creates a staff that constantly self reflects about the positives, and looks for things they could adjust to make their lessons more beneficial to children.

The art of reflection is not only important when dealing with people, but when examining and disaggregating school data and information. An exceptional school leader is able to look at the numbers and reflect upon what those numbers mean and what a school should do with that information. In the era of accountability it is important to focus on the behavior that lead to success (Whitaker, 2003, p. 53). School leaders need to focus the staff, community, and leaders on the behaviors of the students that can be changed and will lead to success later on standardized tests.

### *Leader of Learner*

An important task of an instructional leader is to develop, implement, and sustain a shared vision for the school community. Understanding and owning the vision may be the most important learning for the school community. Shared goals are essential parts of schools, and one of the most important things that a principal needs to create within the learning environment. If everyone is not working towards a common goal that is best for children, the educational leader is not functioning effectively. Developing, encouraging, and maintaining a shared vision is very difficult, but I believe that it must be done.

I believe that all students have the ability to learn, and they should be given that opportunity. I truly believe that every child wants to learn. They may not always want to learn what is being taught, but they want to gain knowledge. I think it is the job of the educator to provide these students with a spark of interest that causes them to want to learn. In education we should constantly ask ourselves, "What is best for kids?" If we ask this question when we plan our lessons, select materials, create activities, and assign homework it will cause us to be better educators. We would be defining our purpose and examining if a particular objective was going to be worthwhile for the children to learn.

Besides, everyone deserves the opportunity to learn and having teachers provide him or her with a quality education. Teachers should also try to appropriately challenge all students. Education should not simply be seen as a

system that is trying to aid struggling students to reach a minimum national percentile rank. It should be viewed as a learning environment that meets everyone's needs and challenges him or her. A great deal of effort and resources are given to struggling students to help them achieve goals and improve, but the other students cannot be forgotten. I believe that your high achieving students need to be challenged and given the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. There needs to be resources and strategies in place, within a classroom or school to extend such students and provide them with a wealth of educational opportunities.

I also feel strongly about appropriately challenging all students. Educators cannot forget about those students who fall in between the struggling and the high achieving group. These students deserve to be challenged when necessary and given extra support. One thing that we need to remember as educators is that all children can learn challenging material. If we believe this as a school, "We cannot help but become bearers of hope for all students" (Landsman, 2006, p. 32). We need to provide a quality education to all students, doing the best we possibly can to meet the needs of every student that enters our classrooms.

An environment of open collaboration encourages continued learning among all teachers. When teachers are willing to openly collaborate they are able to plan, learn, and grow together. The leader needs to promote open collaboration that goes beyond simply sharing ideas, but becomes an opportunity to challenge

each other's thinking and ask probing questions without the creating animosity among the collaborative group. If the instructional leader encourages what is best for kids, then faculties are able to examine their teaching and learning through collaboration and openly share ideas without being offended. The educational leader can help create this atmosphere by modeling questioning and encouraging those questions. This mutual respect among group members allows the learners to more effectively grow and support the kid's first mentality.

Instructional leaders have limited day-to-day contact with students in classrooms, so their biggest impact can be felt through the influence of classroom observations and the professional development that is initiated, practices, and used throughout the school year.

I believe the biggest impact an instructional leader can have in the classroom is through the use of observations and evaluations. This will improve student learning and the teachers' abilities to effectively deliver research based teaching strategies. During an observation it is important to view it as a learning opportunity not a session full of criticism. It is an opportunity to reflect upon the lesson and the teacher's practices to become more effective.

The educational leader can impact student learning during observations and evaluations by making suggestions for future use. Being able to reflect with the teacher on adjustments or changes that could have happened, or by coaching the teacher about a skill he/she may be lacking, can make a difference for the

teacher. This is when the instructional leader can have a direct impact on classroom productivity, student learning, and the learning of the teacher. Thus *providing them with a few more ideas or suggestions to put in their toolbox of strategies*. Striving to be a life-long learner that continues to improve and never become stagnant should be the goal of all leaders for the students, staff, and overall school community.

Through the observations the leader can gain insights about what would be quality topics for professional learning that would be engaging and purposeful. It needs to be a learning opportunity that the learners feel is valuable and practical to them in their classrooms. The presenter plays an important role in professional development. This is the area that an educational leader can impact a high level of learning for teachers, therefore having great impact on the learning of the students in the classroom. "Successful schools require learning staffs, which in turn require planned professional development strategies related to the schools' development plans and performance appraisals" (Zepeda, 2004, p. 12).

Professional learning has become an important part of the learning process. In the past, staff meetings were used for correcting papers, passing along memos and announcements, and maybe for the principal to talk about an issue within the school. Now professional development is a learning opportunity for teachers to grow as professionals and become better teachers. The days of correcting papers during meetings are gone; now the meeting needs to be highly

engaging and full of opportunities for the teachers to learn. These engaging activities are the responsibility of the instructional leader. The role of the presenter is to help facilitate the learning at staff development by passing along new information (Gabriel, 2005). If the teachers themselves are not engaged in the new learning it will be difficult for them to transfer that learning into the classroom.

After selecting the strategies or content and gaining the support of the school's stakeholders, the educational leader then needs to plan and implement the necessary professional development for the growth of the staff. When leading the new learning "the participants must be active and doing more than sitting and getting information presented to them" (Tate, 2004, p. xxi-xxx). The professional development must be much more than simply a one-day learning session, but an ongoing supported process. Educators need to reflect on the new learning, make it work with their style of teaching, and have time to implement this new strategy into their classroom. When the new learning of the teachers filters into the classrooms and impacts the learning of a great deal of children on a daily basis then the professional learning is deemed successful. Not until the new learning is routinely used in the classroom is the process of implementing new strategies complete.

When a principal leads and completes a staff development session or cycle they need to reflect and determine if the staff learned what was intended. Did the

professional development achieve the objectives that were set in the beginning? Did the learners gain the knowledge that was intended for them to learn? Is the new strategy being routinely used, or is this initial temporary success and implementation? By reflecting using these questions and examining the learning sessions the educational leader can more effectively plan the next professional development lesson and future stewardship of the learning process.

### *Leader of Change*

The role of the principal is to have an affect on change in the school building that will have a direct impact on student learning. Although fostering a successful change can prove to be very difficult. A principal must be able to convince, persuade, and encourage all of the stakeholders to support the change that is being implemented. When developing a new vision or making a change within a building it "...involves getting staff members, families, and committee members together to talk, discuss, collaborate, and use data-driven decision making to determine exactly where the campus is now and where it wants to be in the future" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 20-21). Part of change that is very important is not to look at it from a negative perspective, but with a positive outlook. Change has been defined, "Not mobilizing others to solve problems we already know how to solve, but to help them confront problems that have never yet bet successfully addressed" (Fullan, 2001, p. 3).

Many leaders can come up with great ideas for change. The biggest challenge and the most difficult obstacle to overall when instituting change is getting everyone to “buy in” and then sustaining it over a long period of time. To achieve this, individuals thinking and feeling need to change. The concept of changing their thinking can change the behavior and encourage better results. Through changing the thinking data is collected and analyzed, information is logically presented, and then the behavior might change. When the feelings are changed the behavior is changed more and with even better results. To change the feelings, you want to create a surprising, compelling, visual experience. These experiences change people’s feelings about the situation, and this leads to a significant change in the behavior (Kotter, 2006).

For change to be implemented and successful, a variety of events must occur to thoroughly complete the change and assure its effectiveness in the future. Among these steps include: having a defined process to manage the change, getting the stakeholders to believe in the change, begin to change their beliefs and practices, and then for the change to be encouraged and nurtured during the process. If the educational leader effectively executes all of these steps and all of the people involved in the change the change should be successful. Whenever change is taking place within a school, the most important factor is the benefits that this change will have on students and their learning.

Change can be an uncomfortable word to many people and to execute change can be an even more difficult process or even an obstacle in some cases. The change process must have a common vision that everyone has committed to and are willing to work towards. The vision should be outcome based, and traditionally that outcome in schools should simply be to increase student learning. Without a common vision the participants within the change will feel confused and misunderstand the direction of the change and why the change was needed.

If the change is not effectively defined it is likely that the change will meet resistance. If the resources are not available the people involved with the change are likely to feel frustrated. These resources are not just simply the physical resources, but they also can be the resource of time, support of others, and they need to be accessible. The change process will obviously need a plan of action. Without the plan of action the participants may feel like they are simply, “on a treadmill” (Jones, Alderman, Baker, 2001, p. 6).

Whenever change is going to take place the biggest contributing factor to the change is the people involved. The people involved can play a very positive role or they can be a detriment to the change. “An organization does not change until the individuals within it change” (Hall & Hord, 2006, p. 7). For a change to be implemented, the internal beliefs of the people involved are going to need to be changed. This type of change will lead them to change their practices. If the

people involved do not believe in the change that is occurring it will not be implemented.

It is the educational leaders job to best find a way for the stakeholders to internalize the change. If a vision is firmly established within a school then it will be easier to tie the new change to the vision and therefore establish implementation. The stakeholders of the change need to know and understand why this change is happening. Until they understand why this is happening and the benefits of the change, it will be difficult for anyone to “buy-in” and internalize the change. Change is not comfortable for people because it is different from what they normally do. The educational leader needs to identify the people who are struggling the most with the change and talk with them and help them in changing their beliefs so their behaviors can also change. For a complex change to take place and be successful everyone needs to be on board and support it.

There are many ways for change to be supported and one of the most influential factors can be involving the stakeholders in the process of deciding what exactly needs to be fixed. Gaining the perspectives and opinions of the people involved allows them to feel as if they were heard and participated in the process to begin the change. This allows the teacher or the stakeholders to have a vested interest, share the sense of history, communicate with the community, and

provide information about the ease to which change can be implemented (Zepeda, 2004).

To ultimately achieve this change in practice the educational leader is going to nurture, support, and encourage the change. Most complex changes are going to take at least three years to implement (Hall & Hord, 2006). There is a large amount of support that will be needed to sustain the implementation of the change. Initially if the change is perceived to be beneficial, there will be a great deal of excitement, support, and effort given to the change. But like many things, enthusiasm will fade over time and it is the educational leader's responsibility to sustain that enthusiasm all the way until change becomes routine practice within the classroom. This concept is the idea of crossing the "implementation bridge" from current practices to the change in practice (Hall & Hord, 2006, p.10). To successfully be a steward of change the educational leader needs to support it in good times and bad, and encourage people to understand that a successful vision that includes change are built together.

One of educational leaders biggest roles is to implement change within a school. The most important purpose of the changes that are made within schools are to promote student learning. The educational leader's priority should be to promote the success of all students. Many times the leaders must lead the school community through a complex and difficult change to accomplish the goal of

success for all. Although, “If you do not change, you can become extinct”

(Johnson, 1998, p. 46).

### *Leader of Service*

The role of principal or educational leader is a service-oriented position. There are expectations of that person to provide service for everyone in their school building, but also to serve those in higher administrative positions or the school board members. In many occasions what the educational leader believes is best for the school others may disagree with, and will not support them. The leader needs to be very adept at handling difficult situations, having a servant attitude, and always maintaining the focus of doing what is best for kids.

As an instructional leader it is essential to build relationships with those you work with, the children in the building, the parents, and the stakeholders within the community. If the leader is not viewed as someone who listens to suggestions, problems, and thoughts he/she will not be a very effective instructional leader. This individual will not be very responsive to the needs of the individuals within the organization. Listening goes well beyond to simply hearing what someone is saying, true listening is a active process that includes, nonverbal listening responses, reflective feelings, paraphrasing, clarifying questions, and encouraging or summarizing statements (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p. 29). By doing these things as a leader you are not only showing more interest in the conversation, but also mentally taking notes and not allowing your mind to

wander away from the topic or discussions at hand. The ability to listen is essential to the growth of the leader (Spears, 2000, p. 2).

An instructional leader must be compassionate and empathetic. The leader cannot reject people's personal lives and keep them absolutely separate from their work atmosphere. A servant leader encourages personal interactions and tries to build relationships with all of the members of the school's community.

"Authentic relationships are fostered by personal conversations, frequent dialogue, shared work, and shared responsibilities" (Lambert, 1998, p. 79).

Developing this positive atmosphere of caring for one another develops a school climate that becomes bigger than personal agendas and develops a caring "we" attitude.

In education this is most important when dealing with children who come through our doors with a great deal of emotional strain and strife. Each day school educators have no idea what that child saw the night before, what happened while they were trying to sleep, or if they have eaten since school lunch the previous day. Leaders and the members of the school need to understand there are many students who face these struggles and we, as educators, need to be make school a place of healing, a place of compassion, and a place that students can come to feel safe and be successful.

It is essential for a leader to continually be observant and aware.

Awareness has two separate facets, having self awareness and awareness of

others. The awareness of others includes: the ability to feel for emotions, read a room during meetings and professional learning, and physical and visual clues of approval or dissatisfaction. The bigger part is being self aware as a leader because in many instances you are the one making the final decisions. You need to understand your emotions, your values, and your personality to be as effective as possible. Effective school leaders are able to have, "...self-awareness and self-control, these leaders are able to adapt readily to change and remain open to innovative ideas and taking risks" (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p. 19). Educational leaders need to be able to sleep at night with choices they make, and they need to know their personal boundaries.

Persuasion is the next area of servant leadership. The leader needs to be able to persuade stakeholders to make changes, move forward, do things differently, or in some cases completely revamp their thought process. Formerly in education, the principal made a top down decision and then the teachers were expected to implement the change. Greenleaf believed that the servant leader effectively built consensus within in groups (Spear, 2000).

Foresight is an important skill for leaders to possess. Although, a leader cannot read a book and develop foresight. To be effective you need to be able to foresee the likely outcome of a situation prior to it even happening. Additionally, a leader needs to look at the multiple perspectives of the scenario and try to predict the potential outcome and what unintended consequences. To be truly

effective at this, the leader needs to have a very intuitive mind and ability to look at a variety of information. This information could be personal opinions, data, and also gain a variety of perspectives to make the best decision possible.

The final task of a service minded leader is to build community. When you think about building community in schools it is in direct correlation with creating a school culture. "School culture is the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories, that make up the "persona" of the school" (Zepeda, 2004, p. 24). This culture or community atmosphere is important to develop, nurture, and maintain. In schools the leader needs to create a positive, child-focused environment that serves students and their needs. If kids remain the focus, the school will create a culture of growth and positivism.

### Closing

Being a quality educational leader takes a great deal of time, effort, and experience, but it is a task that can be done successfully. The leader needs to be a reflective thinker, a leader of learning, a leader of change, and a service-minded individual. To perform and lead of all of these aspects effectively the leader must create positive relationships with students, staff, parents, and outside community patrons. Building positive relationships throughout the school community is essential. To assist others in reflection, to help people believe in the learning that is presented, and for everyone to trust you enough for you to lead them through

difficult changes, is the goal of a servant leader. Without authentic relationships none of the leader's goals and objectives will be accomplished.

Leadership has many aspects and can be very complex in many situations. It is important as a leader to have relationships built with people in the school as well as in the community. The leader needs to have individuals they can trust to reflect with and get advice from. It can be very lonely being the leader having to make decisions that are not popular, but it is a challenge that I look forward to and one that will be ultimately rewarding in the long run. I will be able to see the impact that I had on many children's lives, teachers' careers, and families in the school community.

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