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My philosophy of educational leadership : a reflective essay

Abstract

As more and more demands are placed on schools, principals must be strong instructional leaders who find innovative ways to provide professional development for teachers. As leaders of schools, principals must meet the challenges of educating today's students. When professional development is of high quality, it can provide principals and teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to meet these challenges. By meeting these challenges, schools will strive to provide students with effective learning opportunities, opportunities that ensure high levels of learning for everyone (Sparks, 1997).

MY PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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and Postsecondary Education
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Master of Arts in Education**

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Lincoln James Rasche

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Becoming an educator was not a difficult decision for me to make. It seems as though my entire working life has been devoted to children and the well being of them. Hearing the laughter of a child, or just the smile brought to a little ones face has made my decision in becoming a member within the educational society an easy one.

There are two distinct reasons why I became an educator. The first reason has always been about the children. I need a little excitement in my life, and children definitely fuel the fire not only by their abilities to be honest and creative, but also because of their unpredictability. Reason two was about becoming a leader within the classroom. A leader that takes children on magical journeys daily, through the educational fields of gold.

As stated above, education was an easy choice. However, my beliefs about education have taken many twists and turns throughout my short career, because I have had so many great minds leading and molding me. These individuals have held many different, sometimes conflicting, views of education. As a result of their impact on me, I have clarified aspects of my own philosophy, combining views from these individuals' thoughts, as well as my own evolving personal views.

I believe that all children can and will learn. I will get that child to learn and help them succeed in every possible way. In order for this to happen I must create an environment that supports the child in many different ways. The

environment must be safe, support risk-taking, and also invite the sharing of ideas from all individuals. I must create an atmosphere that a child can grow and mature intellectually, socially, emotionally, and physically. I see three crucial elements as critical to this growth and maturation process. First, I must act as a guide to student learning. Next, I must allow a child's natural instinct and curiosity guide their learning. Third, I must model and teach children respect for all individuals.

Guiding a student in learning has to deal with providing access to information, rather than providing the information for them. A student's search for knowledge is met as they learn to find answers to questions on their own. Students need the opportunity to discover for themselves and practice skills in real-life situations.

Developing an environment that is relevant to a student's own life and interests are going to foster natural instinct, and curiosity. While instinct and curiosity are sparked, achievement and success are met. Invite children of the class to direct lessons and units of study. Knowing they had a hand in developing everyday lessons, students are motivated to generate richer work.

Helping children develop a respect for all individuals comes with open sharing of everyone's ideas. When everyone is given the chance to express him or herself, an environment evolves where students feel free to express themselves. Class meetings, and debates of everyday subject is one way to create such an

atmosphere. Students learn to respect all, and also learn to open their minds to different views given by someone other than himself or herself.

As I reflect on my philosophy on education, I believe there is something missing. It is not the something that affects the way I teach, or how individual students or peers look at me as a teacher, but something that needs a change. I believe that taking that extra step in becoming a principal is what is needed. I am raising my leadership abilities to a new level. Still involving the children, but not just on a classroom level, on a level that incorporates an entire campus.

My second reason in taking a career in education had to deal with being a leader. There have been many situations where my leadership qualities have stood out. Whether it was leading a group of my friends through a dark and dusky forest during Halloween time as a child, becoming the captain of the varsity baseball team in high-school, or leading a book study in my professional life, leadership has been an important part of my life. I feel I have always had some natural skill in this area. Leadership to me is an attribute that one is born with, and can be enhanced through practice, learning, and effort. Growing up with a firefighter as a father and a mother as a nurse provided me ample opportunity to see these skills in action. I believe I internalized many of their leadership qualities as a young boy. Today, as a teacher and aspiring educational leader, I am actually adding to the examples my parents provided.

Educational leadership, however, is a bit different than firefighting or health care. This type of leadership requires even more skills from many different areas. An administrator in the educational field needs to look at a variety of aspects when becoming the head of their campus. These aspects include education laws of the state and nation, ethical and moral values, political viewpoints, technological principles, fund management, and district curricular goals and objectives. While paying attention to those very important aspects, there is trying to manage a school full of personnel and students, as well as trying to build a cohesive family. It is a very tough road to follow, a road no doubt filled with hills and valleys. This road to me is a step, a step in a direction I have been longing for. I anticipate that this road will lead me on another part of my journey that will include many twists and turns. During this journey, I anticipate that I will become a better individual and leader within the educational system. I look forward to the journey.

Leader of Service

The leadership role and expectations of school principals has changed significantly over the past decade due to the increasing emphasis on high academic standards, testing, and accountability (Berube, Gaston & Stepan, 2004). Traditionally, school leaders were expected to be managers of the school, while teachers shaped the children. Principals would comply with district-level policies, address personnel issues, order supplies, balance program budgets, keep

hallways and playgrounds safe, troubleshoot situations that threaten tranquil public relations, and make sure that the busing and meal services operated smoothly (NAESP & NASSP, 1998). Today, not only are principals expected to manage the school in the traditional way, but transition into the instructional leader of the school, a leader who sets the directions for student learning along with teaching, coaching, and shaping the teachers in the building. Accomplishing this goal requires a different way of thinking about education and the educational system. The principal must not only be an organizational leader, but also an instructional leader at the same time.

Principals must have the intrinsic capabilities and the leadership styles to not only focus the school on student learning, but to manage personnel efficiently and combine pressure with support. Mendez-Morse (1992) found that a key factor in the success of schools is the presence of a skilled principal who creates a sense of a shared mission around teaching and learning and delegate authority to educators who have the trust and support that they need to get the job done. If the entire school community is on the same page, than higher levels of academic achievement will be reached, and a collaborative sense of success will be enjoyed by all.

The Instructional Leader

An effective school leader must advocate, nurture, and sustain the school's culture that has been developed through the goals, expectations, cultures,

climates, and values surrounding the vision (Wilmore, 2002). A school's culture refers to the way things are done within the society (Thomson, 1993). The culture of the school must convey the organization's values, its expectations, and the image it would like to project. Once a vision has been developed and implemented, it is the principal's job to lead the school forward one small step at a time to achieve the specific goals set forth in the vision. At first, each one of these steps should be celebrated as a whole. What gets recognized gets reinforced, and progression can be achieved through little things (Wilmore, 2002). It is up to the principal to be the leader in providing the stimulus of continuous improvement through campus plans and creative action research projects that are teacher friendly but can also have amazing results (Glanz, 1998).

Curriculum and teacher instruction are the fundamental purposes of what makes a school unique. Principals need to lead their school communities to work collaboratively in developing goals to reach the individual needs of all students. Goals should be made on many different levels throughout the school. They should start broad and work towards the individual. For instance, set forth goals for the school and work with each other in narrowing them down to grade level, co-curricular level, extra-curricular level, class level, and individual student level. When goals are set, it gives everyone within the school a chance to reach for something, a chance to achieve and break the goals. Smaller goals always point toward larger goals, and larger goals always point toward the vision of excellence

in the school (Wilmore, 2002). The best way to carry the momentum of the organization forward is to fill it with the best people available, then empower them to do what needs to be done (Maxwell, 1995).

The Organizational Leader

There are administrators in many schools that have great passion and vision, but are very poor implementers of paper and pencil tasks. Then there are many administrators that are the exact opposite. These leaders are able to run the "Library of Congress," but have no passion or vision for the school (Wilmore, 2002). It is hard to have both passion for instructional leadership and the understanding of organizational duties. Schools will not be successful places if it is one way or the other. Principals must work intelligently in finding the perfect marriage between both the monotonous tasks of being an organizational leader and the continual responsibilities of being an instructional leader. Sound decision making is a top priority in running an efficient school (Wilmore, 2002).

Knowledge of research based studies, local policies, and state and federal laws are essential for administrators. Although leaders must always be looking at raising academic achievement, many decisions must be made through law and policy.

The principal must ask if decisions being made by the school community are achieving the goals of effectiveness, efficiency, and accessibility. Leaders must develop a reputation for being persistent, fair, ethical, and equitable while the decision making process takes place (Wilmore, 2002).

School operations and resources focus on setting appropriate priorities to achieve campus goals (Wilmore, 2002). A principal must have great communication and interpersonal skills in order for these goals to be carried out. All school personnel must work together in agreeing on the basic common values established in the vision before any decisions are made. Necessary resources must be aligned with collaboratively developed long and short-term goals. Think ahead to potential needs, possibilities and problems that could arise. Biases are a big problem in decision-making, stick to the manufactured plan.

Not all educational problems can be solved with quality professional development. However, it can provide for a better work environment and assist teachers in growing as professionals. It can also prepare the students in a way that helps them becoming a quality individual as well as shape them toward becoming an upstanding member of society. An effective leader must empower others to work with one another in creating a learning community.

Educational Change

Only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to sustained improvement in student achievement (Fullan, 2002). Managing school change is one of the most complex tasks of school leadership. Often it is said that you do not find a successful school without discovering a successful principal. Schools will flounder without leadership from the principal (Petersen, 1999). Before a leader

can manage school change, the change process needs to be understood. School leaders must learn to overcome daily obstacles and deal with the non-stop commotion that surrounds a typical school day. Principals must play an intricate role in helping the teachers and other stakeholders by developing new organizational structures and creating a shared vision that focuses on authentic student learning (Maeroff, 1993; Newmann, 1993). This inspired and informed leadership is critical to the success of the school.

School leaders who understand the dynamics of the change process are well on their way to creating a successful school. Having many innovative ideas and understanding the change process is not the same thing (Fullan, 2002). The goal is not to incorporate as many changes as possible, but to selectively innovate change with coherence. Although some leaders may believe that their ideas are the best ideas, this is not enough. Leaders must work with and help others assess and find collective meaning and commitment to new ways. Principals must realize that the first six months or so after incorporating a change is going to be bumpy (Fullan, 2002). Along the way there may be resistance from other school members regarding the change process, and great leaders do not mind this. Some of these individuals may bring up pertinent points that will help shape the change. There is no step-by-step shortcut to transformation; it involves the hard, day-to-day work of reculturing (Fullan, 2002).

One single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve with every person involved in the decision making process. Successful school change requires principals, staff, parents, and students to help drive the mission and vision of the school. Outcome measurement is essential for individuals establishing the mission and vision of the school. Individuals should evaluate how well the school is adhering to its mission, and identify areas for improvement, develop plans to change educational activities and programs, and implement the plans or new programs effectively (Senge, 1990). Without a vision the school is blind (Peterson, 1999).

In addition to everyone working together in establishing a mission, the role of the principal is also to create the collective vision for the school itself. Principals need to create opportunities for teachers to learn about current research and to apply that research in their classrooms to create an environment that promotes learning. Principals need to create a climate that promotes risk taking for all and eliminates the fear of failure. If done successfully, schools will be able to develop a shared vision about what needs to be done, and engage in the kinds of activities that are needed to make this shared vision a reality (Bamburg, 1994).

Peterson (1999) believes that there are six critical components in leading successful change and improvement in schools. Flourishing schools must have:

- A clear, strong and collectively held educational vision and instructional mission;

- A strong, committed professional community within the school;
- Learning environments that promote high standards for student achievement;
- Sustained professional development to improve learning;
- Successful partnerships with parents, health and human service agencies, businesses, universities, and other community organizations;
- A systematic planning and implementation process for instituting needed changes.

(p.2)

Because these are only components that are needed to establish a successful school, there must also be goals set by the leader in order for these six features to actually thrive. A principal must shape the school's culture through actions and words. If other individuals see what the leader is excited about, as well as time and energy put forth towards establishing and maintaining the mission and vision, they will also work toward the common goals of school achievement.

Knowing about the challenges and problems associated with the change process is also considered necessary in creating a successful school. Initially some members of the school community, including school staff, may be reluctant to change. Through actions, words, and excitement, school leaders can overcome this reluctance by modeling behavior. They may show examples from other staff members who are embracing the change process, and encourage the disinclined

members of the staff to offer new ideas and strategies to help ease the process. Leaders must also understand the culture and needs of all students. This enables the principal to refrain from overlooking entire groups of students. Leaders of improvement efforts need to address the problems of support, money and time. In an era where time is minimal and money is sparse, leaders need to find new and innovative ways to incorporate change while also dealing with these roadblocks.

We will not have a large pool of quality principals until we have a large pool of quality teachers (Fullan, 2002). In order to be a successful change leader, the leader must involve many successful individuals who are going to make the school and children of the school a triumphant one. The conditions in which the teachers work needs to be conducive to continual development and proud accomplishment. Leaders need to reduce teacher workloads and work towards an environment in which the school day fosters student and teacher ownership. When ownership is established, change can be managed in a sustainable way that can lay the foundation for improved school performance. In doing this, the principal reduces his workload as well. The only way to get quality principals is to get quality teachers and stakeholders involved in the decision making process.

A Leader of Learning

We are in the midst of, in our cyclical American way, a new wave of school reform, and as usual we are blaming the schools for issues that properly belong to society as a whole (Schon, 1987). Today, Americans are again in the

midst of a new wave of school reform: a wave of school reform that has stretched administrators, teachers, students, and parents to a new level of educational practice. Because of this new school reform, administration leaders, and educators need to evaluate where they stand as a reflective practitioner. A reflective practitioner is one who allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both an understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation (Schon, 1983).

Reflective practitioners are administrators and educators who are active learners, who know their values and beliefs, and who regularly set goals for themselves. A principal leading and participating in activities that force teachers to envision themselves and their career, their awareness of their own cultural values and how those values interact with the values of their school, and their sensitivity to the role that language can play in closing doors or creating opportunities, gives principals a chance to rejuvenate themselves both professionally and personally. These opportunities also give a chance to rejuvenate faculty and staff as well (Kelleher, 2002). Reflective practice is about self-awareness. Reflective practitioners are capable of being successful

professionally and living peacefully even when there may be conflict between their beliefs, and the beliefs of their colleagues and students.

Active leaders are constantly testing new theories that allow for development within their school. Ironically, some leaders do not do this following established ideas and techniques, but by thinking things through, for every case is unique. The act of becoming a reflective practitioner enables one to spend time exploring actions and what was transpiring after the actions. Because of these explorations, development of questions and ideas about activities and practice can be made (Smith, 2001). It is imperative to understand the why's, how's, and what ifs in becoming a reflective practitioner who facilitates a steadfast campus.

Reflective thinking is a learned process that takes time. Time for reflection should be a critical and ongoing practice. Problems do arise however in the course of a typical school day. Sometimes, because of constraints, time does not allow for reflection. Delay compromises the reflective process and can impact the learning potential for everyone involved (Kernaghan, 2004).

Because delay compromises the learning potential, there are many different techniques that can be used as a reflective practitioner. The following are examples of activities that promote reflection. I plan to incorporate these activities into my daily life as a leader of learning to foster a learning community that strives for perfection socially, academically, and intellectually.

Thinking Aloud

I will express out loud thinking with everyone involved in the decision making process, as well as other processes involving the school. Thinking aloud uncovers reasoning behind making decisions. Another component of think aloud is describing and analyzing positive and negative experiences as they arise, this again will let all involved know why decisions are made the way they are.

Reflective Journaling

Recording and analyzing events in a prescribed manner will help get my personal thoughts about actions straight, as well as document any significant findings throughout the day.

Data Collection

Designing a procedure for collecting data to learn more about a problem is essential when trying to run a school. I will then use the data to further analyze a situation, act on the problem, or reevaluate.

Self Evaluation

During certain points in the school year, I will evaluate my actions as a leader of learning. From time to time during my career, I can look back and see how I have grown as a professional. In doing this I can hopefully pass on useful information to future administrators.

Use of the Problem Solving Process

This is a process I currently use with my sixth graders, as well as myself when problems arise. First I identify the problem, and generate possible solutions to the problem. Next, I evaluate the solutions, and design an action plan. Lastly, I implement the action plan and evaluate the results.

As its core, reflective practice is about self-awareness. Some people are by nature more reflective than others, but leaders of learning have a duty to encourage reflection of all learners in their schools, both students and adults. The outcome of any decision-making process in schools is an indicator of the values of the school and the ability of students and teachers to nourish themselves as lifelong learners (Kelleher 2002).

Professional Development

The Principalship has been identified as a key factor in the success of school change and improvement efforts. More educational theorists are learning that what teachers teach and children learn, for better or worse, is heavily influenced by the school principal (Barth, 1991). Schools need effective principals who have the skills, knowledge, and confidence to lead. Engaging in professional development that is focused toward the school leader, as well as staff, is extremely crucial for the ongoing process of making the school successful.

According to the Institute for Educational Leadership (2000), Being an effective building manager used to be good enough, but now they must do more. As studies show the crucial role that principals can play in improving teaching, and learning, it is clear that principals today also serve as leaders for student learning. They must know academic content and pedagogical techniques. They must work with teachers to strengthen skills. They must collect, analyze, and use data in ways that fuel excellence. They must rally students, teachers, parents, local health and social service agencies, youth development groups, local businesses, and other community residents and partners around the common goal of raising student performance. They must have the leadership skills and knowledge to exercise the autonomy and authority to pursue these strategies. (p.2)

The responsibility to lead rather than manage a school is an enormous and challenging responsibility. In order to meet these challenges, a school leader must have quality professional development for themselves as well as for the teachers in the building. Professional development is the answer to developing and maintaining the leadership schools need in order to improve teaching practices along with improving student learning.

When a principal plans professional development for teachers, they should begin with an end in mind. The leader must have a distinct purpose for the professional development: reaching the goal of improved student learning (Haar, 2004). It is well documented that teachers perceive many school district in-services to be a waste of time. Barriers for implementing effective professional development are also present in making the in-services one-shot and brief. The few programs that are full of diverse, attention-getting ideas and activities lack integration and conceptual development (Stepans & Saigo, 1999). Teachers do not have the opportunities to practice, evaluate, reflect, or follow-up on any ideas mentioned in the program.

Principals who design professional development need guidelines to follow to ensure that the activities for the participants will promote improved instruction and learning. Based on research, the following recommendations from Haar (2004) suggest:

- Create the time and the opportunity to develop and maintain an atmosphere that respects learning for adults as well as children
- Begin with the end in mind and focus on student learning
- Use school information and data to design a professional development program
- Maintain ongoing professional development with intensive follow up and support

- Provide the necessary leadership to establish and maintain a quality professional development program that supports a learning community
- Respect and use teachers' knowledge and skills
- Provide teachers with pertinent research and resources
- Expect principals and teachers to grow professionally and to be accountable for student learning

(p.23)

As more and more demands are placed on schools, principals must be strong instructional leaders who find innovative ways to provide professional development for teachers. As leaders of schools, principals must meet the challenges of educating today's students. When professional development is of high quality, it can provide principals and teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to meet these challenges. By meeting these challenges, schools will strive to provide students with effective learning opportunities, opportunities that ensure high levels of learning for everyone (Sparks, 1997). Effective professional development for principals is long-term, planned and job embedded. It focuses on student achievement, supports reflective practice, and provides opportunities to work, discuss, and solve problems with peers. Professional development should help principals along with staff to meet the tests of the every day educational life.

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