A reflective essay about my preparation for education administration

Stephen A. Reed

University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2002 Stephen A. Reed

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, and the Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/1379

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
A reflective essay about my preparation for education administration

Abstract
The power that schools have to positively impact students' lives and futures is amazing to me. Leading a staff, student body, and a community into positive relationships with one another can be a challenging task and service. Accomplishing this task can be rewarding. Schools exist to promote learning. Learning takes place throughout one's lifetime. The opportunity to lead a school is the opportunity to positively impact lives in the present, as well as the future.
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY ABOUT MY PREPARATION FOR EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

A Research Paper
Presented to
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

By
Stephen A. Reed
May 2002
This Research paper by: Stephen A. Reed

Entitled: A Reflective Essay About My Preparation for Education Administration

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

2-28-02
Date Approved

Victoria L. Robinson
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

3-3-02
Date Approved

Robert H. Decker
Second Reader of Research Paper

3-7-02
Date Received

Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, & Postsecondary Education
As I prepare to become an administrator I reflected on the influences that have lead me into this field of study. I have given thought to my personal history and examined why my beliefs have evolved to their current status. I have examined my personal characteristics in an effort to identify my strengths and weaknesses in order to improve upon my weaknesses and build on my strengths. In examining the experiences of my past that will aid me in my pursuit to become an administrator, I have learned a lot about myself. I continue to look for opportunities that will present me with new learning experiences. Through all of this reflection, I have created a vision that I will take into my administrative positions. It is a vision that will change as I pursue professional development and gain experience as an educational leader.

Personal Characteristics

I have had many people and experiences in my life that have influenced my educational philosophy. Family members, teachers, friends, and coworkers have all made an impact on my beliefs about education. I grew up in a household that was supported by education. The people who have influenced me the most, my parents, both work in the Cedar Rapids school system. I have always had a close relationship with my parents. They instilled in me the values that I have and allowed me to develop them on my own. My parents were always supportive of my endeavors in life. My family always showed a genuine interest in my activities. My parents attended my school activities, visited my worksites, and
called to see how I was doing while I was in college. I feel that the support my parents showed helped me form my opinions on how one is able to succeed in education. Students need to feel that they are working not just for themselves, but also for the people who care about them. Part of my success in education was because my parents wanted me to be as successful as possible. My parents had a quality lifestyle and wanted the same for their children.

My father's professional life has been completely focused around education. My father began his first teaching position less than a month after I was born. Many of my childhood memories are of Kennedy High School in Cedar Rapids where my father taught and coached. I witnessed my father's development in the profession. My father moved from being a teacher, to being a building administrator, and into his current position as a central administrator. I have observed my father's work habits and learned his beliefs about education. Most of the knowledge I gained from my father about his philosophies of education, I learned without the intention of learning it. I learned them by watching the way he performs his professional responsibilities and by the way he treats people. Many of my educational beliefs can be traced to ideas that my father presented me. It was at a young age that I began developing a respect for educators and educational systems. Ever since, I have developed varying philosophies of education that continue to change.
Philosophy

One philosophy of education promoted in a reading that I agree with is the idea that schools can shape and can be shaped by society (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). Believing that schools are an integral part of society that reflects its community is important. That is why I feel that working with students in a school setting is like working with people outside of schools. One of the philosophies that I have about education is that every student is important. I believe that self-esteem plays an important role in education. To me, if teachers can make students feel comfortable with themselves in a given setting, then the teacher will have a better opportunity for success in the education of their students. I feel that if students are treated with the highest level of respect that a teacher can easily create an environment that will be conducive to learning. Education can often be the solution to problems that people experience in life. I value the idea that individuals can use education to assist them in reaching their goals. Education can enable people to position themselves to be successful in the world. I cannot think of too many careers where continuing education is not thought of as an enhancement of professional opportunities.

One of my experiences is that successful individuals are usually well educated. I do not feel that this occurs by accident. Education can be a powerful force in the lives of people. Education seems to drive individuals to higher positions in their professions. Because of this educators must show students that
education is the cause of success professionally. If a teacher can relate that idea to students it would be easier to convince them that they must take their education seriously and to believe that education is powerful. It is the role of educational leaders to get students, as well as the whole community, to buy into the belief that education will lead to success in life.

Experience

As I continue to develop my ideas about school administration I find myself reflecting on my past experiences to analyze how I might address an administrative situation that might arise. The experiences that I draw from date back to my days as a student and up to the current time period including my studies in administration. Professionally I have limited experience as far as variety goes. I have only held a teaching position at Jefferson High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I attended high school in the same area of the state in the Linn-Mar Community School District. Outside of those two school districts, the only other practical experience in my background was gained during my student teaching placement in the Vinton-Shellsburg school district. Although my experience is limited in terms of number of placements, I feel that I have had the opportunity to view administrators who exhibit many different characteristics. I have witnessed administrators who could be defined as being strict, stern, and who implemented their ideas as they wanted them implemented. On the other hand, I have observed administrators who look to build consensus before
implementing policies, accept ideas from others, and whose personality is relaxed and easy going. Of the administrators that I have worked with, I have seen characteristics in all of them that I would want to emulate. My feeling is of the school leaders I have observed, the ones I admire most were the leaders that seemed to be acting natural in their positions. The administrators who seemed to be acting within their personality were the easiest to follow. Whether that administrator was outgoing or reserved didn’t matter to me. From my experiences I believe that a successful leader acts in accordance with his or her own personality.

Vision

I feel that I have not yet developed an exact vision of my expectations of administrative duty. I am being introduced almost daily to new responsibilities of administrators. There are many duties that administrators must perform that go unnoticed by the public or even other faculty members on staff. I do feel that one of the main roles that administrators must fill is that of being the leader of a school. A principal must lead on many different types of issues such as school improvement, parent relationships with the school, public relations, and even modeling ethical behavior. Based on my observation and practicum experiences, I believe it would be a difficult task if not an impossible one, to write a complete list of the roles a principal must fill as a leader.

One area that all prospective administrators could better prepare
themselves for is the leadership role. One perspective of leadership that I am
intrigued by was an essay I read written by Douglas K. Smith (cited in Beckhard, Goldsmith & Hesselbein, 1996; chap: 20): It was this reading that caused me to reflect upon the part of leadership that requires being a follower. I believe that a principal as a leader must be able to follow not only his or her superiors, but be able to follow the wishes of his or her staff. A good leader should not be afraid to accept ideas of others. By no means do I believe that leadership is all following, but I admire leaders who are open to thoughts put forth by others.

Another perspective of leadership that I have given a lot of thought to is one promoted in a book by Karl E. Sveiby (1997). In that reading two competencies are pointed out as characteristics that the author feels are required for a person to be an effective leader. They are professionalism and organization. I feel that this applies directly to educational administration. The organizational requirement seems to apply to all areas of leadership but the professional characteristic to me is a necessity in an educational setting. I believe it is of major importance for a principal to be a leader professionally. If an administrator expects his or her staff to act in a professional manner, then it is important that professionalism is modeled for them. In the experiences that I have had in schools, it seems that the faculty lives up to the standards that the building principal sets for himself or herself. If a principal carries out his or her duties with a professional attitude, that attitude will carry into the classrooms of the
My reflections of the influences on my thoughts involving education seem to change as I learn new information on the subject. As I continue my journey toward a position in administration I am continually changing the perspective I have on leadership and school administration. Because I am constantly being presented with ideas that are new, my views on education are always in a state of flux. There are beliefs that I consider to be the cornerstone ideas that I will carry with me throughout my life in education. I cannot state what my vision will be in five years or the or beyond, let alone what it will be when I accept my first position in administration. My vision for education will be developing as I learn and gain more experiences in administration. I do believe that the experiences that I have encountered and the experiences that I will encounter in the future will always be an influence on my vision of education. In the field of education, the philosophies that I believe in will continue to evolve in the short and long term.

Leadership

One of the most important tasks of a principal is to communicate a vision that inspires others. Administrators must take an active role in the restructuring process of both a school and the learning community. This is a role that involves risk taking or even failure. Leadership skills that include strong communication with staff are imperative for transformation to take place. Quick-fix solutions are not the answers to running and moving schools in a positive direction. Important
factors in restructuring are assessing organizational structure, analyzing and changing if needed the roles of teachers and students, creating autonomy among the staff, and including parents in the education process and decision making. Emphasis should be placed on the entire building as well as the school district.

An administrator's role is significant in the transformation process. An administrator must actively campaign and work with staff to assure the transformation process is implemented.

Leadership comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. I believe that administrators must exhibit leadership skills in a style that feels natural to them. Those who are being themselves will feel more comfortable in creating a following for an organization. Bolman and Deal (1995) wrote “the spiritual journey that leaders must take, and inspire others to take, begins with ourselves but not necessarily by ourselves” (p. 57). This is an important understanding to take into a leadership position. Setting and reaching goals for an organization is not necessarily an individual task. Leading an organization to meet a vision requires team work. An effective leader must include the followers of the organization in reaching goals and visions but remain aware that it is he or she who is the leader. Leading with this in mind will allow an entire organization to work in the comfort of understanding the power structure of the organization.

In assessing the requirements of leadership, leaders must look first at their own personality and attempt to understand what leadership traits come naturally
to them. Hersey and Blanchard's situational theory model of leadership is one way to identify the characteristics of leadership that will be effective in an organization (Daft, 2002). The situational theory focuses on characteristics of the followers in an organization and helps define which tactics will work best for the leader of that organization. The situational theory advocates four styles of leadership to address specific needs of the followers. Each style addresses describes a leadership behavior which will work when a leader is put into different situations.

The four leadership styles that Hersey and Blanchard outline are telling, selling, participating, and delegating. An effective leader will need to demonstrate all four of these styles on an as needed basis. Leaders can use the situational theory to analyze the different behaviors that can be implemented to lead effectively. Depending on the followers' readiness, the leaders will modify their leadership behaviors. According to Hersey and Blanchard a leader whose followers assume responsibility and individually work to maintain a level of success for the entire organization will most likely be able to maintain success by delegating responsibilities to the followers. At the other end of the spectrum is a leader who is faced with the task of leading followers who rely on specific instruction in order to carry out their daily tasks. In this situation, Hersey and Blanchard suggest that a leader must act in a direct fashion by dictating and monitoring daily activity to ensure success. Hersey and Blanchard's situational
theory is an effective tool in helping one develop their leadership styles when given a specific situation. A leader of any organization can benefit from the knowledge of the situational theory. School leaders can use the situational theory model to assist them in the many different leadership positions that the administrator faces. The different groups of followers that a school leader faces most likely will need to be lead with different tactics. The faculty, students, and the school community have different following characteristics. Hersey and Blanchard’s situational theory will help the leader identify the different needs of each group.

An administrator in education will take on many different leadership roles. Among the most important is the role of fulfilling the responsibilities of being an instructional leader. If the purpose of a school is to educate students, then the administrator must seek quality instruction for students. To accomplish this the leader must set up an organized structure designed around instruction. Elaine McEwan (1998) promotes effective instructional leadership as having an impact on each student and additionally the entire learning community. McEwan outlined a program that if followed will lead to achieving what she believes is the most important goal of every school: improving education. Throughout her writing, McEwan states that an administrator can make a substantive impact on each student’s life, without necessarily having direct one-on-one contact with the student. To do so requires being an effective instructional leader. Part of being
an effective instructional leader is performing the role of supporter for students and staff. An effective instructional leader will develop a culture and climate in which learning will be foremost. A mission and vision for a school should be developed around instruction and the school leader should communicate this vision and mission constantly to reinforce its importance in the education of students. Another role for an instructional leader is that of developing quality teachers. A teacher’s individual beliefs and vision need to be shaped and molded to fit those of the school’s. An administrator can accomplish this by being supportive of the staff and serving as a mentor to teachers. Eventually, with proper development by the school administrator, teachers will turn into leaders and will promote the same ideas and visions that the school leader holds.

Instruction is one of the main purposes that schools exist. An effective leader must be able to feel comfortable in perform in this role.

In today’s society, leading a school involves conflict. Unfortunately it seems that too much time is dedicated to conflict and conflict resolution in education. School administrators are many times the focal point of conflict by the very nature of their role as leader. Conflict can come to the school leader from many directions, the community, the student body, and the faculty of the school as well as others. Future school leaders must understand they have to recognize that conflict management is a major responsibility as an educational leader. To improve handling of future conflicts, one preemptive move school leaders can
make is to identify their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, completing the Life Styles Inventory (1989) survey is one method of determining skills that are natural for someone and skills that one needs to improve on. After taking the survey, leaders can learn how others view their personal strengths and weaknesses and then can compare them with how they view themselves. By doing this, a person can see which personality traits are going to cause difficulty in future situations. For instance, by analyzing the results of the survey, one might find that they are not strong in confronting people in the workplace. With that information, the leaders can go about and attempt to address this weakness by putting themselves in situations that will give them experience in confronting others. Conversely, by using the Life Styles Inventory, a leader might find that they are too strong in a certain personality characteristic and will need to address it. If the survey results find that one is too confrontational, that could be a hindrance preventing that person from being an effective leader. With the knowledge from the Life Styles Inventory, leaders can mold and shape their personality in ways that will allow them to be a successful leader.

There are many styles of leadership and beliefs about which style is most effective. Linda Lambert (1998) explains the role each person can take in making leadership flourish throughout an entire school and its community and the importance of continuous development of leadership skills throughout the community. Lambert also elaborates on leadership consisting of collaborative
learning involving mediating perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continual discussion using the reciprocal learning process. The theme of Lambert’s belief that should seem obvious is the idea that leadership is an evolutionary practice. The qualities which leaders bring to a first position are not going to be the exact qualities leaders have when they leave that position. Leaders will adopt new views and open their minds to new philosophies as they proceed throughout their careers and enjoy new experiences. I strongly agree with Lambert’s suggestion that high skill levels of leadership can be established and maintained by administrators providing professional development opportunities to all staff members. Educational leaders need to identify and develop teachers and students whose leadership capacity can be used as a benefit to an entire school. Molding these subordinate-leaders with the school vision in mind and creating a strong support system for any school leader will create a strong following for the administrator. Leaders must work with the followers in order to achieve goals.

Another source of knowledge regarding educational leadership is compiled in *Handbook of Instructional Leadership: How Really Good Principals Promote Teaching and Learning* (Blasé & Blasé, 1998). I feel that leaders must constantly search for sources of new information. Blasé and Blasé use research conducted through interviews and surveys to collect data as to what qualities and what actions make up a high quality educational leader. The Blasés point out in
their handbook that school administrators should be receptive to the ideas of their followers as well as being good listeners. Administrators can search for new ideas in the area of leadership but they must be certain that these new ideas are applicable to a school environment. School leaders must understand that a school is not the exact same as all other organizations. In an educational environment, the leader must understand that everyone from the parents of students to the local businesses has an investment in the productivity of the community's schools. Because of this, the school leader must reach out to the different aspects of the community.

Leadership is a skill that is constantly being refined. Leaders learn from mistakes and experience. For leaders to be as effective as possible, they must be open to new ideas and be willing to adjust past beliefs. The ability to lead may be the most significant characteristic trait that defines success or failure for a school administrator. Leaders must view their leadership style as a work in progress. Leaders evolve in the climate in which they work. People who believe that they are finished growing as a leader are people who are not true leaders. The characteristics that define strong leadership are not difficult to learn, but they can be difficult to put into practice. It is important that leaders reflect on their performance often in order to maintain a level of excellence. This reflection must come from both the leader and the followers. It is the followers' reactions that reflect whether a leader is truly effective. Whether the leaders are prepared for
their position and have the appropriate knowledge to be a school administrator will not be as important as having the ability to lead. A school without a strong leader is likely to have many problems. That is why leadership skills are an extremely important aspect of being a school administrator.

School and Community

The relationship between schools and the communities they represent is one of the most important factors in the morale for a particular school environment. Attitudes that communities hold toward a school can have a strong impact as to whether the school is successful in reaching its mission of educating students. It goes without saying that the process of educating students would be much easier with positive involvement of various aspects of the school's community. However, if the relationship of a school and its community is strained, the process of leading a school can be made difficult for the administration and faculty of the school. I believe with the media's recent scrutiny of education it is important for a school to maintain a positive relationship with the media of a community. Working with the media can allow a school to wage a public relations campaign that can leave a positive image in the minds of community members. A school with a positive image that produces results will be able to forge a strong relationship with its community.

Wherry (1986), explains that public relations is much more than press releases and publicity. Every school staff member, not just teachers and
administrators, plays a critical role in disseminating accurate information about schools. Teachers feel good about their school and speak positively if they feel good about their work environment. I believe that positive community relations is a practice of social responsibility, a matter of first serving the best interests of the public by educating students and then making sure people know about it. A school leader can play an important role in making sure that successes of a school get the attention they deserve. An administrator will enjoy seeing positive aspect of schools being recognized rather than having to deal with the media during negative times.

In today's education environment, administrators are needed to facilitate educational programs using innovative ways to encompass a variety of diversified groups. The shrinkage of resources and increased demand placed upon school systems may potentially lead to stressful relations between schools and communities. We must look no further than the current plight of many school districts across the state of Iowa. Funding is low but expectations for schools to produce the best results are higher than ever. Schools must answer to the demands of more than just the parents of students. Special interest demands throughout communities compete with schools for funding. This necessitates action from schools and society, which taxes the system for resources. Promotion of special interest agendas will inhibit other groups within the community and can have a negative impact on schools. Special interest groups can also influence
school policy and will continue to press school administrators until their demands are acted upon. Schools will be challenged by outside forces as strongly in the near future as they have ever been. School administrators will have to work to meet challenges presented by special interests groups while at the same time working to maintain a positive public image for the school. This situation represents yet another challenge to the amount of time an administrator gets to have dealing directly with staff and students.

Another issue that is being faced by schools with more and more frequency is the use of drugs by students. Virtually every school has been impacted by societal ills such as drugs and alcohol. The use of drugs and alcohol by school-aged children is a reflection of the problems that those two items cause in our communities. However, many times schools are the strongest force in children's lives and schools must address these problems. Society expects schools to attack the challenges that drugs and alcohol present. Schools cannot be the sole provider of social reform, but can provide a base and inquiry, support, and public awareness. Societal challenges and demands will force communities to re-think the traditional boundaries of their community. Cooperative community efforts are necessary for everyone to meet the challenges and prepare our youth for the future. There is no doubt that schools will be expected to address current and future trouble spots for the youth of our communities. A school administrator can build a strong relationship with its community by
welcoming this type of challenge, as difficult as it may be.

Building positive relations between a community and a school is an enormous task for any administrator. Leading a school in a community that is historically supportive of its schools is not necessarily indicative of how much that community will support its schools in the future. A school leader must be conscious of this situation, because to lose the support of a community might be an obstacle that is too hard to overcome in order to ensure a productive school environment. School leaders must take the time to maintain relationships with the community. This could be the difference in a school leader being effective in his or her position. A school administrator that loses support from outside the building will likely lose support within his or her building. The community a school is a part of must be treated with respect.

Conclusion

After writing this reflective essay dealing with my thoughts and beliefs regarding education and leadership I have discovered that reflection is an activity educational leaders should constantly participate in the reflective process. Writing about the experiences I have enjoyed in preparation for obtaining a position of leadership has caused me to think through my thoughts rather than just listing them while writing a paper. Self-analysis is a powerful tool that I will continue to use as I continue to develop my philosophies and views in education. Reflection causes people to ask questions of themselves in order to better
understand why a specific view is held. This puts the emphasis on coming to a
deeper understanding of one's philosophy or views. Reflection should be part of
every school leaders routine.

The philosophy of education that I hold is that education is the strongest
force in shaping someone's future. I believe that this philosophy is as strong in
my mind today as it has ever been. Extending this philosophy into the
professional goals I have set for myself makes me excited to enter the field of
education administration. The power that schools have to positively impact
students' lives and futures is amazing to me. Leading a staff, student body, and a
community into positive relationships with one another can be a challenging task
and service. Accomplishing this task can be rewarding. Schools exist to promote
learning. Learning takes place throughout one's lifetime. The opportunity to lead
a school is the opportunity to positively impact lives in the present, as well as the
future.
References


