

2008

Research and reflection on successful principal leadership : a reflective essay

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Rogers, Leah M., "Research and reflection on successful principal leadership : a reflective essay" (2008). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1433.

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Research and reflection on successful principal leadership : a reflective essay

Abstract

A teacher needs to act as a leader, allow the child's natural curiosity to direct his/her learning, and promote respect for all things and people. The teacher's role is to guide, providing access to information rather than acting as the primary source of information. The students' search for knowledge is the journey one takes as they learn to find answers to their questions. Providing students with access to hands-on activities and allowing adequate time and space to use materials that reinforce the lesson being studied creates an opportunity for individual innovation.

Research and Reflection on Successful Principal Leadership:

A Reflective Essay

A Research Paper Presented to:
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
And Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

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

By
Leah M. Rogers

May 2008

Dr. Else

This Research Paper by: Leah M. Rogers

Entitled: RESEARCH AND REFLECTION ON SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPAL
LEADERSHIP: A REFELCTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
in Education.

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7-25-08
Date approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

8-4-08
Date approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

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Educators do so much more than teach. In today's society, educators are expected to counsel, parent, and install values and morals to a plethora of children from various backgrounds. I was driven to become an educator because I wanted to make a difference in the lives of the future. As an undergraduate, I was especially interested in the disadvantaged child. I have always had a love for the underdog. I am able to see so much potential inside them...if these children only had a chance.

Each and every child has the potential to bring something unique and special to the world. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to provide a secure, caring, and stimulating atmosphere in which a child will grow and mature emotionally, intellectually, physically, and socially. It is my responsibility to provide an environment that is safe, supports risk-taking, and invites a sharing of ideas. There are many elements that I believe are conducive to establishing such an environment.

A teacher needs to act as a leader, allow the child's natural curiosity to direct his/her learning, and promote respect for all things and people. The teacher's role is to guide, providing access to information rather than acting as the primary source of information. The students' search for knowledge is the journey one takes as they learn to find answers to their questions. Providing students with access to hands-on activities and allowing adequate time and space to use

materials that reinforce the lesson being studied creates an opportunity for individual innovation.

Equally important is self-discovery. Students need the opportunity to study things that are meaningful and relevant to one's life and interests. Developing a curriculum around student interests fosters intrinsic motivation and stimulates the passion to learn. My role as a teacher is to give children the tools to cultivate their own garden of knowledge. I strive to present curriculum that makes learning relevant to life. I tie learning into the world perspective to help children become caring and active members of society.

Helping students to develop a deep love and respect for themselves, others, and their environment is equally important to building good character. My classroom is a non-threatening environment and enables children to express their own ideas. It is my belief that individual differences need to be recognized, respected, and celebrated. I believe that children, no matter their background, have the potential to succeed. It is very important that students know that I believe in them and I am here to help them succeed. I believe that a child's schooling should be a positive experience.

Reading is one of the fundamental skills that will help students reach their dreams. Almost everything we do requires reading. To take a math test, the students need to read directions; to drive a car the students need to read road signs. A child's perception of reading is based largely on his or her early reading

experience. An important belief of mine is if a child is introduced to reading in a positive way, he or she will have a greater chance of becoming a life long reader. Children who have less confidence in their reading have a greater chance of struggling in other subjects. I also think that students that are stronger readers will have a greater chance of being stronger in other subjects. This will give them better grades; give them a better chance of getting into college, which gives them a better chance of living a more successful life. As a teacher, this is what I am meant to do, help children reach their dreams.

I also feel positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior is very effective. This can be done in the form of a statement, such as, "I appreciate the way you got to work on your assignment so quickly." This communicates to students that not just negative behaviors are noticed and given attention. Positive reinforcement can be more effective than focusing on negative consequences for negative behaviors.

It is important for students to not only receive a solid education, but to work with someone who is aware of and sensitive to their individual needs. There is a need for compassionate, strong, and dedicated individuals who are excited about working with children. I feel I have the qualities to rise up to this challenge within the classroom or as a leader of a school.

For me, teaching provides an opportunity for continual learning and growth. One of my hopes as an educator is to instill a love of learning in students, as I

model my own passion for learning with them. Five years into my teaching career, I realize I want to take my role as an educator to a leadership level. My decision to begin a Masters in Administration in Education is because I feel I have always been a strong leader in any role I have taken on. Most importantly, I have the qualities to become an effective administrator and leader. I am a team player in and out of the school setting, able to work well with people, and establish good relations with all faculty, staff, and students. I am a life long learner, who strives to make a difference in the children of the future. This is why I feel I would be a successful educational leader.

As I enter into the next phase of my educational career I look forward to becoming a reflective practitioner who uses essential leadership responsibilities in my daily practice. I also look forward to becoming an enlightened leader who empowers her staff. As an administrator, I will stay true to these foundational elements and true to myself.

Leading Student Learning

Educational leadership is a business to build a brighter future for our country. It is the responsibility of the principal to build a strong foundation where all children can learn. A principal is continually reflecting on what is going on in his or her building every day. Reflection is the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder on the actions of oneself and others in one's immediate environment (Raelin, 2001; Seibert, 1995). Every leader has a professional responsibility to be

reflective about practice. As a result of this reflection; leaders are able to identify how to improve their professional activities in order to improve the quality of student learning. Reflection causes leaders to evaluate what happened and why. Reflection causes leaders to evaluate what happened and why. It encourages leaders to try out new ideas and promotes change in the culture of a school. The education world is ever changing and a leader must consciously think and adapt to the present situation while on the job. Reflecting while events are unfolding enables you to be proactive as a principal. Situations do not become problems if you are constantly reacting to situations in a proactive manner. If you are only reflecting at the end of the day, it may be too late to change what has already been done.

Individual Education Plan's are becoming more prevalent in schools. If you do not jump on a situation during an Individualized Education Plan meeting, you may be bound by law to follow through on the decisions you made whether right or wrong or in the best interest of the child. Reflection helps us go beyond our best guesses about what is or is not working. By taking time to reflect on what we are learning about ourselves and our profession, we can actually improve education.

A reflective practitioner as the leader of learning also needs to create an environment that supports teachers one hundred percent which in turn supports students to achieve to their greatest ability. As an administrator, I will be

dedicated in supporting staff using the following 21 essential leadership responsibilities.

Brewster (2005) writes that the balanced leadership framework basis the “results of meta-analysis of the 70 most rigorous studies that examine the effects of principal leadership on students achievement” (p. 143). Identified in the meta-analysis were 21 essential leadership responsibilities and 66 associated practices which have a significant statistical effect on the achievement of students. The 21 essential leadership responsibilities are those as follows:

1. **Culture:** The extent to which the principal fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation.
2. **Order:** The extent to which the principal establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines.
3. **Discipline:** The extent to which the principal protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus.
4. **Resources:** The extent to which the principal provides teachers with the material and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs.
5. **Curriculum, instruction, and assessment:** The extent to which the principal is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.

6. Focus: The extent to which the principal establishes clear goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention.

7. Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment: The extent to which the principal is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.

8. Visibility: The extent to which the principal has quality contact and interactions with teachers and students.

9. Contingent rewards: The extent to which the principal recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments.

10. Communication: The extent to which the principal establishes strong lines of communication with teachers and among students.

11. Outreach: The extent to which the principal is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders.

12. Input: The extent to which the principal involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies.

13. Affirmation: The extent to which the principal recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures.

14. Relationship: The extent to which the principal demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff.

15. Change agent: The extent to which the principal is willing to and actively challenges status quo.

16. Optimizer: The extent to which the principal inspires and leads new and challenging innovations.

17. Ideals/Beliefs: The extent to which the principal communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling.

18. Monitors/Evaluates: The extent to which the principal monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning.

19. Flexibility: The extent to which the principal adapts his or her leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent.

20. Situational awareness: The extent to which the principal is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems.

21. Intellectual stimulation: The extent to which the principal is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems. (p. 57)

As a principal, it is important that a sense of community and cooperation be fostered and that order be established in operating procedures and routines. It is further important that the principal protect the teachers from factors that influence their teaching and that the teachers are given provisioned material and resources for their professional development and for the execution of their jobs. The principal should be involved directly in the design and implementation of the curriculum, instruction and assessment and should be knowledgeable about

current standards of curriculum, instruction and assessment. The principal should remain visible and accessible to both students and teachers and should reward and acknowledge accomplishments of students and teachers.

Principals also communicate to parents the current school and district goals. Leaders need to justify why the school is using the research strategies they are using and what this research is doing to help their children achieve on state standardized tests. Parents need to be guided on practices that will assist them in helping their children. Actively communicating goals and rationales to the community will decrease confusion on district and school initiatives and keep the community and teachers alike focused on the future of education.

Communication with students and teachers in the principal's role is a necessity. It is further necessary that the principal advocate for the school and that the principal involve the teachers in planning and setting decisions and policies for the school. The principal must be willing to actively challenge the status quo and lead new and challenging innovations for the school.

The successful principal is one who has strong ideals and beliefs and monitors the effectiveness of school practices and the outcomes of learning for students. The successful principal is a flexible individual able to adapt to the present tense; yet look forward and guard the future of the educational vision. Finally, the successful principal is one who ensures that staff is informed on the latest current theories and practices and collaborates continuously with the teachers in the

school in order that the best possible provision of education be offered to students.

Most importantly, the 21 essential leadership responsibilities ensure a principal is following the Iowa Standards for School leaders (ISSL). For example, ISSL Standard Three states that a school administrator promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. The essential leadership responsibilities address order, discipline and situational awareness. It is important for a principal to establish a set of standard operating procedures and routines. The principal must protect teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus and the principal must be aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and use this information to address current and potential problems.

ISSL Standard Two states a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. Number one on the 21 essential leadership responsibilities addresses the need to sustain a school culture. I feel if a principal can live by these 21 essential leadership responsibilities he or she will have a strong foundation to build a successful school.

Leading Change

In the world of education change is inevitable and it is the leadership of the school that makes changing times exciting instead of miserable. Change happens when the principal can get the teachers excited and on board about the change that is going to take place in the school. Principals must empower and enable staff to reflect and grow as professionals. Schools that delay their evolution from the traditional top-down style of management to a more empowering style are creating obstacles that keep them from effectively managing change. In fact, the traditional management approach itself actually creates resistance to change among employees (Oakley & Krug, 1994).

The bottom line is that leadership shows up in the inspired actions of others. Administrators are assessed by the degree to which people around them are inspired. Success of a principal depends on his or her ability to empower staff and to have the staff take responsibility and ownership for the district's goals and objectives. Administrators who empower the teachers to make decisions, teach how to learn from a mistake, and pull the school toward the district vision will become true leaders. In the book *Enlightened Leadership*, Oakley and Krug (1994) refer to the ultimate leader as an enlightened leader. "Such leaders know the true power of an organization lies within its people, and they continually quest for better understanding about what it takes to bring out the best in these people" (p. 148).

As an administrator and an enlightened leader, a principal is sensitive to the needs of teachers. "Enlightened leaders realize that effective leadership is not about doing it one way or another, but about being aware of what is going on around them and making conscious choices about how to respond. They *respond* rather than *react*" (Oakley & Krug, 1994, p. 156).

Leadership that empowers enables administrators to empower teachers to reflect on themselves and focus their own professional visions in line with the district vision. This takes away some of the traditional control of leadership and gives it to the ones that need it the most, the teachers. Today's schools can no longer afford to merely be managed; they must be led, and people must be inspired to new levels of innovation, creativity and achievement. Teachers want to make a difference by contributing to the vision. They want to be valued for their work and feel important. People thrive to be part of a winning team.

As an enlightened administrator, I will put people first through caring about the welfare of the staff. I will be sensitive to the needs and desires of teachers and students. I will interact with all people I encounter honestly and openly and involve them in decisions that affect them. As an enlightened leader, I will take responsibility for failures and share credit for successes. As an administrator, I will be okay with stating "I don't know" or admitting when I am wrong. I will model self-responsibility and demonstrate behaviors I would like to see from others such as trust, appreciation, caring, and concern.

Researching different leadership styles has given me the ability to realize that leadership is not about strict control. Leadership is about empowering people to be self-responsible and provide them with the power and authority to do so. I must be a leader, who acts the same way at work as I would away from work. I need to be self-confident in myself and just be who I really am! Most importantly, I need to be true to myself and the wonderful people that surround me. The sky will be the limit if I build a leadership team that empowers one another to be the best they can be both personally and professionally.

In his article, Altnay (1995) says, "The leader's ability to enroll others is the key to achieving breakthroughs in a company. When a leader can inspire people as well as show them how they can contribute to his or her vision, people begin to expand beyond their previous limits." The bottom line is that leadership shows up in the action of others. We traditionally have assessed leadership by looking at the leaders themselves. But maybe we should assess leadership by the degree to which people are inspired. True leaders can make unreasonable requests of people, and have them fulfilled, because people are inspired.

More than ever, principals must be accountable for their schools and the students' achievement. As a principal, I will work with a strong comprehensive school improvement team to implement goals and strategies like Guided Reading, 6+1 Writing Traits, Reading Fluency Strategies, and Strategies that Work to build a strong educational foundation for students.

Guided Reading is a strategy to help students become good readers. Guided reading is one component of a four block reading program, which consists of self-selected reading, shared reading, writing, and working with words. Guided reading is one component of the shared reading block during which the teacher provides support for small, flexible groups of beginning readers. The teacher helps students learn to use reading strategies, such as context clues, letter and sound knowledge, and word structure as they read a text or a book that is unfamiliar to them. The goal of guided reading is for students to use these strategies independently on their way to becoming fluent, skilled readers.

6+1 Writing Traits is another model comprehensive school improvement teams implement to help schools reach the goals of No Child Left Behind (Cobb, 2007). 6+1 Writing Traits teaches a writing method. This model focuses on six qualities seen in outstanding written works. The six traits include idea, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. The main theme, or idea, is the heart of the message. Then there is the organization or the internal structure of writing. This is where the author's personal voice shines through. The voice trait gives the reader a sense of a real person speaking. The next trait is word choice. This trait has the author use precise, colorful and rich words to communicate. Next the writer strives to have their writing flow together with rhythm through sentence fluency. Lastly, mechanical correctness or convection is taught to the child.

Professional Learning Communities is a research based strategy a leader can use to promote reflection among teachers. As a principal, I would implement professional learning communities within the school I lead. Think out loud strategies are used when you brainstorm between staff members. The principal and the teachers are able to hear the thought process and rationale of their own actions and those of others.

Principals also communicate to parents the current school and district goals. Leaders need to justify why the school is using the research strategies they are using and what this research is doing to help their children achieve on state standardized tests. Parents need to be guided on practices that will assist them in helping their children. Actively communicating goals and rationales to the community will decrease confusion on district and school initiatives and keep the community and teachers alike focused on the future of education.

Principals must be well read and knowledgeable in the latest research because they must be able to sell the current strategies to their staff, as well as, assist the teachers in implementing the strategies. Principals are the leaders of a school and must become the cheerleader of the school and constantly communicate district goals to their teachers. This, in turn, will enable the teachers to feel confident in them and empower them within their classrooms.

Principals are able to communicate, facilitate and empower both teachers and parents because the Iowa Standards for School Leaders set high benchmarks for

the leader of a school. Actively researching and reflecting enables a principal to lead with a vision through his or her own ideas and beliefs, as well as being knowledgeable with the district goals. A reflective practitioner is devoted to his or her profession. He or she creates a climate for students and faculty to grow professionally and personally.

Leading Adult Learning

Leadership in schools, specifically Principal Leadership, has been shown through a growing body of evidence to have a great impact on the achievement of students. The responsibilities of a principal are many and the roles that principals must fill are many as well. Waters and Grubb (2004) state, "In an era of accountability when student achievement is paramount and evidence of the effects of principal leadership on student achievement continue to accumulate, it is not enough to just know what is important; principals must also know what is essential" (p.135). Furthermore, the principal must possess certain inherent capabilities in order to effectively lead while remaining a learner as well. The principal must possess public relations and communication abilities and all of that is just the beginning.

A principalship is not an easy road to take if you want to be a leader in an organization. You have the state and federal government breathing down your neck, parents and the community wanting to know every move you make, teachers wanting resources and answers to their question, and most importantly

the children of the future all at stake. This is why it is important to set a strong foundation in your leadership career. A principal must know what is essential and what is essential are the 21 essential leadership responsibilities (Water & Grubb, 2004). I truly believe one can overcome any obstacle if you can stay true to these 21 essential leadership responsibilities. A principal must wear so many different hats.

The work of Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe and Meyerson (2006) state that,

Principles are expected to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations/communications experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual and policy mandates and initiatives. In addition, principals are expected to serve the often conflicting needs and interests of many stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, district office officials, unions, state and federal agencies. (p. 4)

Brewster (2005) cited an eight-year study conducted by Sebring and Bryk of public elementary school principals for the Consortium on Chicago School Research. The study entitled: "School Leadership and the Bottom Line in Chicago" states four strategies for reform that were shared by principals for making improvement in schools. Those four strategies are:

(1) productive principals begin by addressing a few highly visible problems that can be resolved quickly; (2) productive principals focus on long-term changes to the instructional core; (3) productive principals collaborate with others to develop-and monitor progress toward a comprehensive, coherent plan for school development; and (4) productive principals attack incoherence. (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998, p. 214)

Brewster further cites the study of leadership practices in schools by Supovitz and Poglinco (2004). Through survey data and visits to sites they identified a set of behaviors characteristic of effective instructional leaders which included the following:

- Effective leaders create a safe environment for teachers to take risks and continue to learn
- Effective leaders emphasize collaboration and communication;
- Effective leaders develop other leaders;
- Effective leaders use symbolic acts to reinforce 'visions of instructional focus';
- Effective leaders develop a consistent set of expectations and incentives for teachers that keep the entire staff focused on meeting school-wide goals.

(p. 14)

Research, surveys and questionnaires all gather the same evidence. Effective leaders must communicate with staff and emphasize the importance of communication. As an administrative leader, I understand that I cannot speak off the top of my head. I must be sensitive, caring, and have deep concern in regards to what I communicate to the stakeholders. I must realize that what I say and especially how I say it can easily destroy my leadership credibility. In addition to effective communication, a principal must protect teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time and focus. As a leader, I will do whatever it takes to keep all distractions out of the classroom while a teacher is instructing students. If a parent needs immediate attention, they will need to report to the office not the classroom to speak with the administrator. If not available to assist them, I would have other leaders like the counselor or nurse assists them. If the office staff is not able to help them with their issue, I would let them know that we would be happy to set up an appointment with the teacher when he or she is not teaching, but we value our uninterrupted instructional time and can not disrupt the teacher. Lastly, I will continue to be the teachers biggest fan. The principal must reward, recognize and empower the teachers of his or her school. Leaders express confidence, encouragement, and support to all teachers and staff members. When needed, I will challenge staff to work through an issue they want to just give up on. Other times I will set up small wins or short term

goals to accomplish and then celebrate when they have accomplished the goal. I understand that boosting one's self-confidence can enable a person to move mountains. Overall, a principal needs to communicate effectively so the message is understood, support the teachers while they are teaching, and continue to focus on victories, both small and large, through positive reinforcement.

Leading Through Service

Today's successful principals hold many tough roles that provide them with mental and physical challenges. The school is a place for all to learn. A school leader has the responsibility to make sure that his or her school is acting as a social service to the community while promoting the school's vision. An "educational leader...acts as an advocate for all children and persons, regardless of socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, gender, learning style, and any other difference (Wilmore, 2002, p. 93). Bartlett, Etscheidt, and Weisenstein (2007) pronounce the federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which requires all children are entitled to a free and appropriate education. Great school leaders develop the political savvy needed to make sure that they "present a standard for the benefit of children and their families and to be a proactive voice and advocate for the needs of every child" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 93). Working as a leader of service for the school and the community, an educational leader must stay current and up-to-date on the ever changing laws at the local, state, and federal level. Policymakers are constantly changing laws to

benefit the greater needs of the community. An educational leader must stay abreast of these changes to make sure the needs of his or her school and stakeholders are being met.

Principals that continue as life long learners are true instructional leaders. They demonstrate the importance of learning at any age and model continuous learning. Reading has to be scheduled into an administrator's daily routine. Through reading, whether it be the newspaper, City Council notes, or a motivational book on leadership and vision, an educational leader can remain sensitive to the changing community or social "mores and values and their possible impact on the school community" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 94). A quality school leader always remembers that the school community is made up of not only students, but teachers, staff members, families, and communities.

Life long learners are role models for their staff, students, and the community. Supportive and reflective administrators create communities where everyone promotes learning. School districts offer many services to the community that may not be known to the general public, such as assisted classes for low income parents to learn how to use the computer, free lunch to students during the summer, and providing clothing and food to families who are in need. A leader of service is aware of these programs that help families within the district. These programs are essential in making sure the school is acting as a service and the community's needs are met. A true administrator empowers his or

her staff, as well as the community, to be the best that they can be in their personal lives and professional careers.

As a future administrator, I strive to incorporate all these characteristics of excellent leadership. As a life long learner I plan to continue my education by enrolling in classes that can help me as an administrator. I will also continue to participate in classes and seminars that educate teachers on new teaching strategies within the classroom. I will continue to seek out services that will benefit the school community and keep positive relations with other service departments within the district.

As a supportive reflective leader I will strive to develop a culture and climate that nurtures the minds of children. I will make it a priority to connect with every staff member in my building as well as every child. This can be done during assemblies, professional development days, after school, before school and any moment I can find to take the time to embrace the people in my community. I feel the foundation of education is built on caring relationships. I want the school and community to be healthy and prosperous both personally and professionally.

Summary

Caring, collaboration, and relationships will not run a school. As a leader, I foresee many challenges for the first few years. Reality is the first year I will be in survival mode. Much like teaching, I will have professional insecurities. I will understand that change takes time. There will be priorities set during my first

year. The foundation for the principalship will be my main focus when I begin my journey. All great things begin with a strong foundation. I will display the 21 essential leadership responsibilities in my office and refer to them on a daily basis. I will continuously reflect on the choices I am making while I lead a school. I will embrace change and empower staff to embrace change. I will support and protect staff and let them teach the students rather than being distracted from outside influences. I realize there will be ups and downs during my journey as a principal. The past three years have had many ups and downs and I feel I have come out of this program stronger, more focused, and ready to take on the challenge of leadership in education.

Reflecting on life I realize the choice is mine. The opportunity of leadership in education is a challenge I am ready to embrace. Steps have been taken to accept the things I can not change, but change the things I am able to change. Life gives you a whole lot of lemons and you must make lemonade. Everyone is given strengths, weaknesses, and gifts in this life and we must find what is true and passionate in ourselves and do what we can to make this world a better place. In the past three years, I have realized I am a strong passionate person with the ability to empower people and strengthen their soul. The gift I have been given will continue to be used throughout my professional and personal endeavors.

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