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Reflections on the roles and values of educational leaders : a reflective essay

Scott Schipper
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my personal, philosophical perspective on education, the purpose of school, and my values and beliefs relative to educational leadership. I think it is valuable for educational leaders to reflect upon their philosophies of education. It serves as a reminder to them of why they are in education and how they go about obtaining their own personal goals. These beliefs that I will be sharing have been formulated over my years of teaching and from my experiences throughout this leadership program.

Reflections on the Roles and Values of Educational Leaders:

A Reflective Essay

A Research Paper

Presented to

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of the Requirements for the Degree

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Scott Schipper

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Dave Else

3-6-02
Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Victoria L. Robinson

3-6-02
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

3.6.02
Date Received

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

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my personal, philosophical perspective on education, the purpose of school, and my values and beliefs relative to educational leadership. I think it is valuable for educational leaders to reflect upon their philosophies of education. It serves as a reminder to them of why they are in education and how they go about obtaining their own personal goals. These beliefs that I will be sharing have been formulated over my years of teaching and from my experiences throughout this leadership program.

<div align="center">Personal Background</div>

Before I get into my reflective paper I would like to review my background. I grew up in a small Iowa town of 2,000 people. I was the older of two boys in a family whose beliefs and values were at the center of our lives. I was taught at an early age that my personal values should drive the decisions that I make. Religious values were and still are important to our family.

Family always came first. My father use to say, "If you can't help your family, then why would you have one." I was also fortunate that I was always supported in everything I did. I knew that no matter what happened in my life, I was going to be loved when I got home. It did not matter if I was the starter on the team or that I received a "B", as long as I did my best and gave it everything I had.

As I grew older my father became a role model and great friend as he taught me what life was all about. He always provided for my brother and me, yet he never spoiled us, as he knew what it was like to live in poverty.

I started to realize everything he had done for me and that he often sacrificed so that my brother and I would have what he did not. This realization became very evident when I lost my father at an early age. I had just begun to really know my dad and to become close to him when my family lost him. However, I am living my life using the many values and beliefs that he instilled in me.

From this experience I learned many life lessons. First, I learned that hard work is very important if you want to succeed in life. However, hard work in a career should never distract you from what is most important. Second, God should be the center of your life and this should dictate the way you live your life. Third, if you tell someone you believe in him/her enough they will be inspired to do great things. My father always made a point to tell me that he loved me and that he believed in me. I will take that attitude with me as I begin my educational leadership career. I believe that I can be a very good leader, and this inspiration drives me to succeed. I also will make sure that those around me will know that I believe in them and that I care about them.

As I begin my own family, I hope that I will be able to share a little of my father with my children. I also hope that I will be able to share a little of him

with the children that I work with in the educational setting. If I can touch just one life the way my father touched mine then my educational career will be a success. That is why I look forward to the challenges of becoming an educational leader.

Educational Philosophy

My educational philosophy is comprised of three basic beliefs. First, all children can and want to learn. I believe that all individuals have the cognitive capabilities to learn. Learning is a skill that never ends and continues throughout life. I believe that humans, by nature, enjoy learning. The text, <u>What Kids Need to Succeed</u> by Benson, Galbraith, and Espeland (1998), states that "63% of the students surveyed felt that being motivated to do well in school was an asset they had in their lives"(p.118). I look at that statement as a future educational leader two different ways. First, I am pleased to see that students are internally and externally motivated while recognizing the fact that others around them want them to do well. However, on the other side of the spectrum, I am sad to see that the percent of students who feel they are motivated is only 63%. I feel that as educational leaders we must not be satisfied until 100% of our students feel motivated to do well in school. Is this a lofty goal? Yes. But why should an educational leader not try to do what is best for all of his/her students?

I also believe that learning and teaching should be fun. An educational leader needs to remember that the culture of an organization can influence its

productivity (Deal & Peterson, 1991). An educational leader should create an environment where students want to come to school and do not feel as if they are being forced to be there. This includes a curriculum that is student-centered because providing enjoying subject matter is a great motivational tool.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators play a large part in making learning fun. Extrinsic factors such as peer acceptance, positive reinforcement, and academic rewards along with intrinsic motivators including personal pride, self-fulfillment, and satisfaction lead to an enjoyable learning experience and a successful student. Probably the most important extrinsic factor in developing this school spirit is the educational leader (Martz, 1992).

The last belief in my philosophy of education is that there needs to be a successful system in place to produce a successful learner. Research shows that the most effective schools are those with a well-ordered environment and high academic expectations (Wong & Wong, 1998). The system needs to be constructed so students and teachers are given opportunities to be successful. Students should be allowed to explore and try new ideas and likewise, teachers should be given the chance to do the same. There may be failures along the way, but the positives will outweigh the negatives. Meier (1995) states that "people learn best when their natural drive to make sense of things is allowed to flourish"(p. 152). The feeling of being safe, not only physically, but also

mentally, allows students to take risks in class that in turn plays a large part in their success.

Purpose of School

A topic that has had many different views and perspectives is the purpose of school. When I first started teaching, I believed that the purpose of school was simply to provide a formal education to an individual. Although I still believe that education is the primary purpose of school, I now know that there are many different facets to an overall education. Schlechty (1997) writes that "the purpose of school is to provide students with high-quality experiences" (p. 64).

I also agree with Goodlad's viewpoint, as read in Kowalski and Reitzug's Contemporary School Administrators (1993), that "the purpose of school can be categorized as vocational, social, intellectual, and personal" (p. 189). During a student's educational journey, he/she will be given skills necessary for the work force, will learn to interact with others, will develop cognitive abilities, and will develop a self identity with his/her own personal beliefs and values.

Leadership Roles

An important person in guiding the educational journey of these students is the educational leader. One sociologist stated "that the effectiveness of a leader is in the ability to make actions meaningful to others" (cited in Deal & Peterson, 1991, p. 13). The leader role of the principal is pivotal because it involves

putting the beliefs of the principal as educator into action to achieve student and school success (Speck, 1999).

A leader plays many roles that are shaped by his/her own personal values and beliefs. According to Gossen and Anderson (1995) quality leaders have three characteristic attributes: "(a) they learn to relish cognitive complexity, (b) they are proactive, and (c) they are brave" (p. 225). These attributes are directly related to the roles that I feel an educational leader must play.

First, a positive leader is very crucial in the educational system. In order to have a successful system, the leader of the system must instill a sense of pride and a positive attitude. It is amazing how a positive attitude by one person can carry over to an entire group of people. Part of this positive attitude is that a leader must show his/her love of learning so that others may learn by example. An educational leader must love what they are doing in order to be able to expect that same attitude to be displayed by students and teachers. I plan to show my love of learning by continuing my education and by taking part in staff development opportunities. I also will bring a positive attitude to work every day and will show everyone that I love being there.

Another role is that of mediator. Every day educational leaders solve problems among students, teachers, students and teachers, parents and teachers, etc. Educational leaders must decide how the solutions to these problems will affect the individuals involved, as well as the system as a whole. The role of

mediator requires that leaders provide support so people can solve their own problems. This support ensures that those involved make decisions that are made carefully while considering all of the consequences, positive and negative. The role of mediator, when handled properly, can bring a great deal of benefit to a system as a whole. This benefit is the fact that everything in the educational system runs smoothly. Teachers, students, parents, and leaders work towards one goal, that of becoming educated learners, even though they have their own personal values and beliefs.

In order to be an effective mediator for both students and adults I would like to establish an effective management model. I would like to use a discipline model that is based on the theory of restitution. Restitution allows an educational leader to effectively manage a school system while teaching students "how" to behave. For the faculty and staff I will use a shared decision making model that will allow shareholders to be part of the decision making process. In order to have an effective shared decision making process I will develop cadres or leadership teams that have fair representation of all shareholders.

The role of motivator is also vital to the success of the system. As an educational leader, one must set high goals for the students and teachers, as well as themselves. A leader who shows belief in the shareholders of the learning community will inspire them to great heights. The leaders who I admired most were the ones who inspired me because they believed in what I could do. I will

do what it takes to show students and staff that I believe in them. I will not only be verbalizing this belief, but will also show them through different gestures such as staff appreciation meals and fun student programs.

The educational leader then must use this inspiration by having shareholders develop attainable short-term and long-term goals. The goals should also require some extra effort to stimulate learning. Again, educational leaders must lead by example showing others the importance of setting and attaining goals.

I plan to use these goals to build a strong foundation that has a clear mission, vision, and set of values. These elements will then drive the schools decision-making process and will give a purpose to what we are trying to do. This vision will be visited often to keep everyone in align with what we are trying to accomplish and will be seen everywhere throughout the building so it is always in sight.

Providing and organizing are two roles that I feel go together. An educational leader needs to provide an environment that is designed to help those around them feel successful. Does the educational leader solely create this environment? Probably not. But the educational leader needs to create an environment in which all parts of the machine are working together. This environment should be conducive to learning as well as safe, emotionally and physically. This safe haven will be created when "it is a place where students

discover, and adults rediscover, the joys, the difficulties, and the satisfactions of learning"(Speck, 1999, p.34). As an educational leader, I will be the head learner and will lead by example. This joy of learning will lead to a curriculum that is differentiated to meet the needs of all of our students. Rubin states that "once educators stop their education they start down the road to incompetence" (cited in Speck, 1999, p.158). This system will also allow for teachers to collaborate and to have opportunities for professional development. Teachers do not want to be left in their classrooms all alone. They do not want to be isolated from others. I feel that often we do our best learning not from textbooks, but by learning from others' actions.

Organization and allocation of resources is an important part of this, as a successful learning environment must be supplied with the proper teachers, materials, and facilities. The leader is then providing what is necessary for success by being the person to bring each of these factors together. Such provisions should include allocation of money, time for collaboration, and insightful staff development.

The final role that ties the others together, and becomes one of the most important is that of communicator. An open line of communication between the administration and staff, administration and parents, staff and students, as well as school and community, are vital to the success of a school system. Successful systems have an open two-way line of communication. Communication is one

facet that allows shareholders in the learning system to take ownership of the system, while building pride, trust, and encouraging growth.

I will need to create open lines of communication through the use of a multitude of medias including open forums, newsletters, and parent group organizations. I also will encourage faculty and staff to participate in group discussions. Communication will allow me to go from a "mine" mentality to "our" mentality in the development of a shared learning vision. Communication will also allow me to build trust with the shareholders of the learning community.

One idea that I learned from my readings was to have a community coffee. During this coffee the parents would be invited to ask questions, voice concerns, and develop an action plan that states what they want their children to receive during their educational training. I would also have a coffee time with the staff, faculty, and students. After having these coffees I would take the ideas written on this action plan by all of the shareholders and would show them to everyone at a large group meeting. During that meeting I would show everyone that what they want is the same as the other shareholders. From there I would develop a shared mission and shared values for our system.

<div align="center">Requisites of a Leader</div>

Probably one of the most valuable lessons I have learned from my experiences in this leadership program is the Requisites of a Leader (Jamita, 2000). I had never thought about what was essential for a leader to do in order to

be a successful leader. John Kotten of the Harvard Business School notes that "leaders must be able to devise and articulate a vision, set a strategy for achieving it, build a network of people who can help attain it, and motivate these people to work hard for that vision" (cited in Gerstner, 1994, p.119). Educators can also use the requisites that are used by successful business leaders.

The points that I will be discussing are from notes taken during Dr. Else's class Personal and Professional Growth (Personal Communication, Summer, 2000). During my educational leadership training I have had the opportunity to observe current educational leaders and how they meet these requisites that we learned in class. After observing these individual leadership styles first hand I have come to believe in them.

The first requisite is that the educational leader develops personal and systemic direction (Jamita, 2000). This includes developing a compelling purpose or mission, core values, and a clear direction or vision. It is important for educational leaders to align their mission, values, and vision in order to have a successful school system.

When I am an educational leader I will need to provide direction in order articulate a clear vision that reflects the beliefs and values of the school community. This direction will be given during staff development and faculty meetings. There also will be reminders of the school vision and mission throughout the school building through the use of signs, letterhead, pens, etc… I

will then need to begin hiring teachers who believe in and will foster these same core values and beliefs that have been articulated by our learning community. I also will need to develop a school culture that is flexible, collaborative, innovative, and supportive of efforts to improve achievement of all students (NAESP, 2001, p. 7).

The second requisite is to ensure accountability and improvement in the systems, programs, and people (Jamita, 2000). This requisite data has to be used to drive decisions and to show improvement. The educational leader needs to believe in the system and that the improvement of the system is what is best for kids. In order to improve, a school system must continually learn. In a learning community, adults and students learn together and contribute to each other's learning (Speck, p. 34).

As an educational leader I will have to use multiple sources of data as a diagnostic tool to assess, identify, and apply instructional improvement (NAESP, 2001, p. 7). I will need to consider a wide variety of sources to measure performance and I will have to analyze data using a variety of strategies. While analyzing this data I will need to identify barriers that are hampering success, design strategies for improvement, and assist in planning daily instruction. As an educational leader I will also find schools that have similar demographics and will consider using strategies that have been successful for them. Finally, in order to use data as a driving force behind improvement I will need to assist in creating a

school environment that is comfortable using data. Staff must be trained in how to analyze data and how to incorporate the findings into the school improvement plan.

Leveraging human resources (Jamita, 2000) is the third requisite and one that is vital to the success of a leader. I feel that good leaders are not micro-managers. They are leaders who empower others to attain the goal at hand. This empowerment creates a learning culture with teams that are driven to become successful. These teams, which I will call the school leadership team, will consist of members who want to study, evaluate, and improve the system because that is what is best for kids and it has become their passion. I want to find leadership contributions from multiple sources and I also want to develop learner-centered leadership (NAESP, 2001, p. 7). Many believe that those closest to the action should be making the majority of the decisions (Fiske, 1991). The team of leaders that is developed will know first hand what the shareholders are thinking and how everyone in the system is interacting. This team will also assist in developing staff unity towards school-improvement as they become the leaders in the staff.

The fourth requisite of a leader is to apply profound knowledge of teaching and learning (Jamita, 2000). Curriculum needs to be built around that which shareholders believe is most important, and also needs to be constantly assessed to ensure that it is meeting the students' needs. There also needs to be constant staff development and a learning process that involves everyone. People

who see their hard work used by the leader and system will be encouraged to do so again in the future.

As an educational leader I will need to demand content and instruction that ensures student achievement of agreed-upon academic standards (NAESP, 2001, p.7). Some strategies that I will use are to: (a) monitor alignment of curriculum with standards, school goals, and assessments; (b) observe classroom practices to assure that all students are meaningfully engaged in active learning; (c) provide up-to-date technology and instructional materials; and (d) invest in teacher learning through professional development that is tied to school learning goals.

The last requisite of a leader is to build a culture, climate, and community for learning (Jamita, 2000). This includes building school, family, community relationships; developing trust; and motivating everyone involved in the system to want what is best for the kids. People are the chief resources in the education enterprise (Schlechty, 1990, p. 64). The shareholders emotions, thoughts, and ideas will build the culture and climate of the system. The educational leader must find a way to develop this climate further and to use it for the good of all. As mentioned before, when someone has ownership in a system and knows that the leader of that system believes in them they will strive to do what is best.

As an educational leader I will use numerous strategies to build the learning community. First, I will challenge the community to take greater ownership in the learning community through open forums and school mailings.

Second, I will share leadership and decision-making with other shareholders. I feel that shared decision-making leads to greater ownership on the part of the shareholders. Third, I will encourage parents to become meaningfully involved in the school and in their own children's learning. I want the parents to know what their children are learning so that they can reinforce this learning at home. This will be done through PTA events, parent volunteers, carnivals, library nights, and other family oriented events held at the school. Finally, I will make sure that students and families are connected to the health, human, and social services they need to stay focused on learning. This will be done through parenting workshops, information nights, and also home visits when necessary (NAESP, 2001, p.7).

<div align="center">Leadership Guidelines</div>

Being an educational leader in the society we live in today will definitely be a challenge. I was reading the book <u>Tales Out of School</u> by Joseph Fernandez (1993). In this book there is an interesting discussion about the problems seen in high schools during the 1980's compared to that of the 1940's. I know that the study was done in the 1980's but I feel that the problems seen then are vary comparable to the ones that many schools face now.

The results of this California Study (Fernandez, 1993, p. 2) showed that the top five major problems teachers faced in a high school in the 1940's were: talking, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, and getting out of turn in line. Compare this to the top five problems of the 1980's: drug abuse, alcohol

abuse, pregnancy, suicide, and rape. No wonder many individuals are shying away from being an administrator!

Respect resistors

I believe in four guidelines that will lead me to becoming a successful educational leader (Fullan, 1998). First, I am going to respect those who I wish were silent. These are the people who criticize your decisions and are the ones who tend to resist change initiatives. Fullan states that "reform often misfires because we fail to learn from those who disagree with us" (1998 p. 3). I agree that a leader can learn from those who resist change. These individuals may have points that the educational leader had not thought of, and if I truly want to have a shared decision-making management system then I need to be willing to listen to the other side of the issue. Many problems that educational leaders face have painless solutions. I hope to ease through these painless solutions by challenging staff to find solutions to the questions.

I feel that leadership teams allow for all shareholders to be heard. In these leadership teams members will be allowed to say what is on their minds and to speak their peace without repercussion. I also will have an open door policy to those who would like to discuss matters with me privately. As an educational leader I will avoid verbal brawls with those who disagree with me as this will lead to further tension. Instead, I will peacefully talk things through with these people by letting them speak what is on their mind without interruption. I then will

explain my side of the situation and my thought process on the decision that was made.

Form new alliances

The second guideline is to move toward the danger in forming new alliances (Fullan, 1998). In order to move toward the danger I will have to build school-community relations by breaking down boundaries that exist. As mentioned earlier one way I will do this is by including community members in some of the decision-making process. Fullan also suggests that another boundary that needs to be penetrated is "that of student performance data". I will need to become literate in our school assessment and be able to present the data to the public in a clear manner. As the educational leader I will be accountable to the public and will need to be able to show how our learning community is dedicated to making data-driven decisions. I would like to hold public forums or "coffees" to present school data to shareholders. Through these open forums I will teach shareholders how to analyze the data and will encourage them to ask questions about how our school improvement is guided by this information. I will also use this chance to inform the shareholders on what is going on at the school on a day-to-day basis and how we work towards our learning goals everyday.

Manage emotionally

The third guideline that I will use is to manage emotionally as well as rationally

(Fullan, 1998). I will need to be emotionally healthy in order to lead staff against

the many challenges that we will endure as a learning community. Maurer (cited

in Fullan, 1998) states that "dealing with resistance can be very stressful. People

attack you and your precious ideas. Sometimes they seem to show no respect for

you" (p. 4). I know that there will always be one person who does not agree with

me. One way to handle this stress will be for me to continue my exercise habits,

find peer support, remembering what the big picture really is, and realize I will

never please everyone. I also will stay mentally healthy by continuing my

religious beliefs, taking time off for me, and by continuing to improve my

leadership through professional growth.

By being emotionally healthy I also will be able to concentrate on

"reculturing, not restructuring"(Fullan, 1998, p. 4). Reculturing involves

changing the norms, values, incentives, skills, and relationships in the

organization. Reculturing makes a difference in teaching and learning while

restructuring has no affect on either. Restructuring only concentrates on changing

the formal structure of the organization. In order to focus staff on reculturing I

will need to get them thinking in terms of the big picture and outside of the box.

This will be done through staff development and team building sessions.

<u>Establish hope</u>

The last guideline is to fight for lost causes (Fullan, 1998). In order to fight for lost causes an educational leader needs to have hope. Vaclav Havel (cited in Fullan, 1998), president of the Czech Republic, says the definition of hope is:

> *Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless.* (p. 4)

Educational leaders who have hope will be able to endure the many stresses that come with the job. Hope will also allow leaders to put problems into their right perspective and will allow them to not panic when faced with immediate or pressing problems (Fullan, 1998). Educational leaders who have hope will instill hope in their followers by showing that they are willing to fight for them.

I want to be a leader who is excited to come to work everyday. I want the learning community to see this enthusiasm because it shows that there is a purpose for being there. I also will continually to remind everyone that I care about them and that what they are doing is important and meaningful. I also will stand by the staff and the students through the hard times and not just be there during the good times. Often people find out who truly believes in them when times are tough.

Conclusion

Wilbur Wright (cited in Dobyns & Crawford-Mason, 1994) once said, "It is possible to fly without motors, but not without knowledge and skill"(p. 4). This quote clearly states my feelings about leadership in education. It is impossible to be an effective leader without the knowledge and skill to lead a group in the direction of mutually agreed upon goals. Educational leaders must be lifelong learners who are striving to provide the best opportunities possible for their students and staff.

With the predicted future shortage of people with administrative degrees there will be great opportunities for people like myself to do great things. I feel that this is a challenge to the new generation of educational leaders. This challenge is not going to be easy as the culture and society that we are living in today is changing rapidly.

Through my educational leadership experience I have learned that education also is constantly changing with new ideas and teaching strategies. However, one thing that can stay constant is the educational leaders love of learning. Educational leaders who show a love for what they are doing are those who become successful. I hope that my love for education and for the shareholders involved in it will lead to a long and successful educational leadership experience.

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