University of Northern Iowa

UNI ScholarWorks

2003

Never settle, keep exploring : a reflective essay

Brenton D. Shavers
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

Never settle, keep exploring : a reflective essay

Abstract

I taught 3rd and 4th grades in an urban area in St. Paul, MN. This was an eye opening experience for someone right out of college. I was one of two African American teachers and one of only three males in the building. A principal, entering the building for her 1st time as their new leader, placed me into a leadership position immediately.I found myself spending countless hours in activities outside of school, in support of my students. It became increasingly evident that these supports needed to be in place for both students and their families in order for the students to grow academically.

NEVER SETTLE, KEEP EXPLORING:
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

Master of Arts in Education

by

Brenton D. Shavers

May 2003

This Research Paper by: Brenton D. Shavers

Entitled: NEVER SETTLE, KEEP EXPLORING: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master

of Arts in Education.

Robert H. Decker

4/10/03
_____
Date Approved   Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Victoria L. Robinson

4/15/03
_____
Date Approved   Second Readers of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

4·15 03
_____
Date Received   Head, Department of Educational Leadership,

Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

Webster Dictionary defines reflection as the fixing of the mind on some subject, serious thought or contemplation. As I reflect on my life, my personal passion to become an effective leader in our educational system is becoming increasingly more obvious. By undergoing a challenging personal crisis early in my adult life and through experiences from various employment positions, I have taken the necessary steps toward earning an educational degree and now pursuing a degree in Educational Leadership.

The Early Years

As early as I can remember, my parents have always been there to support me through every adventure I decided to undertake. This has been important, considering I am not their biological child. I was only days old when they took me home from the hospital and treated me as if I was their own child. I can not remember my age when they informed me that the person I was calling mom, was actually my biological grandmother and the person I was calling my brother was actually my father. However, I can remember being curious about why my last name was different from everyone else in the family.

During my middle school years I was officially adopted. This was definitely an interesting time in my life, confused with adolescence and identity. I spent many days and nights wandering, but afraid to ask the question, Why my biological parents did not want a child or more specially me personally? I went through some tough times attempting to deal with the feelings associated with being adopted, but I had the luxury of knowing who my biological parents were and where they lived.

It was not until my high school years that I decided to ask the "why" question. To my surprise, the answer was race. My biological mother was of European decent and my

father was of African decent. My biological mother's family, from the onset, did not approve of their relationship. When they found out she was pregnant, the decision was made to continue with the pregnancy and that my biological father's parents would take me home and begin the adoption process. Just knowing that small, but critical piece of information has effected how I view and interact with every individual I encounter. I suppose I could have chosen the avenue of hate, but the avenue of understanding and tolerance was better suited for my personality. In addition, it granted me the opportunity while in college to learn more about race relations and the reasons behind the actions of individuals.

A Defining Moment

While in college, I participated in a number of extra curricular activities. One such activity was football and during a game, my senior year, I was paralyzed from the neck down while making a tackle. While I lay motionless in the middle of field, I remembered the sense that everything around me seemed to be occurring in slow motion. I knew at that moment things would no longer be the same as they once were. Hearing the news that I would no longer be able to walk or use any of my limbs, set me into a state of depression. I could not understand why I had to be the one to go through this live changing event. I also did not want my family and friends around me, knowing that I would be confined to a wheelchair and need their assistance with everything for the rest of my life made me increasingly anger. I often wished for death, and thought of various ways I could commit suicide, but that just created more anger inside knowing that I could not do that due to not being able to move any muscles in my body.

Since I was spending a great deal of time feeling sorry for myself, my family and friends did what they could and provided the support I needed through this terrifying event. I slowly began to come to the realization that since I was not taken from this earth on that Saturday afternoon, I still must have something important to share with society. I began wondering what my future would consist of, since I was no longer able to pursue my childhood dream of a career in Law Enforcement. It was not until a group of students from a local elementary school began writing letters, sending pictures and visiting me, after school and on the weekends. This was the defining moment in my life and encouraged me to pursue an educational degree.

After countless hours of rehabilitation, I began regaining movement in my legs and left arm. Enthused to get back into school, I enrolled in the elementary education program at the college I had attended prior to my injury and sought out part-time employment at a local daycare facility. I graduated a year and a half after resuming my college career with an Elementary Education Degree. This experience, as well as the ones to follow, has assisted in the development of what is now my professional philosophy.

A Sound Philosophy

Webster Dictionary defines philosophy as the love of or the search for wisdom or knowledge. Throughout my career as an educator and manager, I have learned the importance of having a sound philosophy that you trust and can rely on during difficult and stressful situations. My personal philosophy contains elements of a behavioristic individual. The typology for this characteristic involves, analyzing the influences on and consequences of behavior centered on logical positivism (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000,

p.6). In addition, my personal philosophy contains the following six components, which correspond to the six Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL): (1) Visionary Leadership, the need to establish mutually beneficial partnerships with community businesses and agencies. (2) Instructional Leadership, encouraging children and adults to grow personally, take calculated risk, and take responsibility for their actions. (3) Organizational Leadership, taking an interest in the personal development of others. (4) Collaborative Leadership, teamwork is the core to success in any organization. (5) Ethical Leadership, being honest in your dealing with other people and (6) Political Leadership, awareness of basic dividing lines amongst people within communities and organizations.

These standards have helped me understand and developed what I now call my philosophy. While developing my philosophy, it was surprising to see how I had used portions in prior situations and places of employment. I will now discuss how my philosophy relates to the six ISSL Standards.

Standard One: Visionary Leadership

Visionary Leadership involves facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. When I think of this standard, I picture an individual who can determine the status of their organization and then develop a strategic plan to promote change. The strategic plan requires the cooperation of the internal and external stakeholders within their community, to work jointly as a creative team, to either maintain or improve their current status. Understanding future goals, a visionary leader empowers others and directs the future course of success. Empowerment is the overall

purpose of education and is defined as a process whereby students acquire the means to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves and the world around them (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker & Jefferies, 2000, p.69). In addition, they make the proper checks to assure permission is granted then, seeks out individuals or organizations to assist in the learning process. I strongly believe that community partners can add a valuable component to any educational program, while keeping everyone updated on a consistent basis.

As Dean of Students, at The Covenant Academy of Minnesota located in Faribault, MN, I learned how critical it was to be visible and supportive of both student and staff needs, both in and out of the classroom setting. The visible principal has the opportunity to model his or her beliefs and to promote a positive instructional climate (Whitaker, 1997, p155). By being a visible person on campus, I was able to see the areas in which the staff needed additional support and/or training. It was also easier to notice when students were struggling with issues.

Although all students have elements of resiliency, it still may seem almost impossible to overcome any type of adversity without the presence of a trusting relationship, even if that relationship is with a single adult (Henderson, 1997, p.10). When staff and students are not challenged to advance their skills, they may become unaware of the changes taking place in our society today. Principles who create an exciting and reinforcing learning environment will find that students and teachers will want to do what needs to be done (Whitaker, 1997, p155).

Standard Two: Instructional Leadership

Instructional Leadership involves advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. The principal, as an instructional leader, needs to create learning communities, participate in principal institutes, focus on instruction, encourage peer learning, and coaching (Fullan, 2002, p.20).

While reviewing this standard, I found myself thinking back to my first years as a teacher in St. Paul, MN. Working with Hmong students and families, I was uncomfortable due to unfamiliarity with their culture. It was not until I began attending events in the Hmong community, that I became more culturally sensitive and aware of the importance of maintaining their history and tradition. Also, I gained an understanding of the family structure and the feats the families had undergone to be American citizens.

The value of multicultural education becomes more evident daily as families, from foreign countries, move into communities all across the country. They bring with them their language, religion, beliefs, and not any least important, their preconceived notions of this county. Again, I looked at the parent in the case study for instructional leadership and the term "melting pot" was used to describe America. Indeed America is a melting pot and that multicultural education needs to encourage growth and understanding of all cultures. Educational or instructional leaders must have the basic assumptions similar to those of their students and show the ability to help minority youth prepare themselves to compete in today's society. All teachers and administrators should celebrate their student's diverse strengths, talents, and cultural backgrounds in various

Standard Three: Organizational Leadership

Organizational Leadership involves ensuring management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. In the educational community, closing of schools, increased class sizes, and budget restraints have affected the quality of service provided to students. Principals are then placed into a position to encourage their staff, families, and communities to take an active part in the education of tomorrow's leaders. By encouraging this involvement, principals have to be open to suggestions and create a sense of shared governance by accepting feedback and different opinions. Involving others in the decision process, encouraging growth, and increasing accountability with the team can accomplish this. In the case study for organizational leadership, the principal made decisions without consulting those who would be most affected by them. It is extremely important to involve those who will be effected by your decisions, in the decision making process to promote ownership.

I served as Case Management Supervisor for Buchanan County in Independence, IA. This experience was valuable in relationship to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which guarantees basic civil rights by prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities. I supervised county workers and case managers that provided funding for work programs, treatment and health care facilities, and respite care for individuals with Chronic Mental Illness, Developmental Delays, and those with Mental Retardation. This experience allowed me to develop relationships with mentally and/or physically challenged individuals in a way I had not thought possible. In addition, my sensitivity towards this population increased, which made me aware of the services

our schools need to provide to support individuals with disabilities throughout their *academic careers.*

The IDEA legislation established education as a right for those children with disabilities who are in need of special education or any related services in states accepting federal funds for that purpose. The law now requires that each student with a disability be treated as an individual and educated according to the child's unique needs and capabilities (Bartlett & Etscheidt, 2002, p.78). This now means that students with disabilities are no longer expected to make adjustments to the services available in individual schools, but instead those individual schools were now expected to make the necessary adjustments and to create a plan that provides the services that the student requires. I learned that students with severe disabilities benefited significantly from being included in various regular education settings as well did their non-disabled classmates.

It is quite obvious by visiting schools, that to often, regular education teachers have been taught to teach curriculum, not students (Hardin & McNeils, 1996, p.41). This may be one reason for the number of students who end up failing, dropping out, or creating problems in the classroom setting due to being missed or under diagnosed. Teaching those students whom are creating problems in the classroom and those with diagnosed behavioral problems requires a team approach. This approach will encourage individuals to interact and communicate on various perspectives that are critical in the problem solving process and to understanding that behaviors are a type of communication. During this interaction, a shared vision of the group's goals for the student needs to be formed, which needs to include the positive behaviors expected of

them. Finally, it is up to the team to discuss proactive, preventive plans to help the students learn new way of communicating and getting their needs met, without first misbehaving.

Standard Four: Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative Leadership involves collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. Leading collaborative change in schools means helping staffs become more productive without substantially depleting their resources (Donaldson, 1993 p.12). It takes a lot of hard work and commitment, by many people, to forge a firm bond between a school and its community (Krajewski & Matkin, 1996). To encourage growth and understanding of various groups and organizations, collaboration needs to take place.

This standard was an essential component that was not present in my academic preparation toward becoming a teacher, especially in an urban area. I was however, prepared to teach in the ideal classroom, in the ideal world. So, I must ask, What is the role of colleges and universities to assure students are trained and ready to face the needs of education today? This may seem like an easy question to answer, but is it really?

One such need is the knowledge of community partnerships. In a time of budget cuts and educational shortfalls, this can be a valuable relationship to develop and nurture. By bring the community into your school, you are providing students and staff with the opportunity to advance their learning. You are also encouraging communication and team building amongst yourself, students, staff, and partners. To get the most out of

these relationships, it is important to make your partners feel like a needed and valuable resource.

Another need is teacher accountability and the use of best practices. As school districts have attempted to develop evaluation systems that merge the requirements of quality assurance and professional development, they have concentrated on enhancing evaluators' coaching skills. That is, they have tried to equip evaluators with the capability to provide supportive feedback to teachers as they make those evaluative judgments (Danielson, 2001, p.13). Without this training, our schools will continue to decline as indicated by comparing our test scores with those from other nations. In addition to collaborative efforts, universities need to focus on increasing the ethnic diversity or awareness of teachers and how that correlates to the curriculum currently being taught. Until this occurs, minority students will continue to have an unacceptably high drop out rate and low performance levels. Another factor that could have an impact on student achievement is the lack of minority teachers in K-12 to mirror the minority students themselves.

I taught 3rd and 4th grades in an urban area in St. Paul, MN. This was an eye opening experience for someone right out of college. I was one of two African American teachers and one of only three males in the building. A principal, entering the building for her 1st time as their new leader, placed me into a leadership position immediately. I found myself serving as the 3rd/4th-Team Leader and Staff Advocate. This responsibility placed upon me forced me to mature and to think of others viewpoints prior to reacting, which is a skill that is easier said than done.

While in my new surroundings, I was shocked to see the lack of the male presence, especially the African American male, in the elementary school, which consisted of 85-90 percent African American/minority enrollment. The most important factor in influencing student achievement is having a teacher whose linguistic abilities and background are similar to those of his and her students (Khazzaka, 1997, p.12). In addition to the lack of the male presence, was the lack of educational and community partnerships that were available to the students and their families. Developing partnerships can increase the likelihood academic success will occur for students. Success of most collaborative efforts is dependent on identifying one mutually agreed need and focusing time, resources, energies, and talents toward meeting that need (Jastad and Tymeson, 1997, p.47).

I found myself spending countless hours in activities outside of school, in support of my students. It became increasingly evident that these supports needed to be in place for both students and their families in order for the students to grow academically. I noticed that without a strong and creative administrator, those supports did not function or were not in place at all.

Standard Five: Ethical Leadership

Ethical Leadership involves acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. Productive leaders in the educational system need to encourage the involvement of the staff, families, and community to do what is best for students. When implementing this process, demonstrating the qualities you are looking for is extremely important. People will not follow others, who they do not believe in or who they see doing things contradictory to what they are saying. We know that in the real world, it is tempting to

do nothing at all, and to carry on as if things were normal. If our educational system falls into this temptation, it will complete the four life cycles and die, carrying with it the hopes and dreams of the students we are here to serve.

I served as Treatment Director for Mobile Programs for VisionQuest in Philadelphia, PA. The program served juveniles delinquents who entered 3-4 years behind academically and without any intentions of improving their current situations. Again, the majority of juveniles entering programming were minority and from single-family households. With this, I began to wonder what our communities and schools were doing wrong toward the education of minority students. The schooling of minorities should result in their being able to compute, to read, write, and speak Standard English and to express and to act on the nation's democratic ideas and beliefs (Khazzaka, 1997, p.12). I found myself, once again, spending countless hours tutoring and encouraging students to succeed academically and trying to teach them the skills necessary to develop into productive citizens.

One of the difficulties I had with this program was that once we considered the youth to have meant their treatment limits, we sent them back into homes in Philadelphia where the problems started initially. Which left the question, was this ethical? Without treating the families, the cycle will continue and our prison system will continue to thrive.

Standard Six: Political Leadership

Political Leadership involves understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. It is clear that all of the ISSL Standards intersect when making decisions in the business or educational community. Senator Clinton of New York, proposed amendments that were passed

unanimously that provided specific flexibility to states and school districts in the

spending of federal funds on recruitment, incentives, scholarships, and bonuses, for

teachers and principals (Reeves, 2001, p.82). As leaders in the community, it is

important that we remember whom we are representing and the impact we can have on

their lives with the decisions we make. When looking at our educational system, I see

that the planning and building of new schools, the educational budget, option taxes for

school improvements, etc. all have political implications, which can be swayed by

energetic and courageous leaders only if they keep all internal and external stakeholders

well informed.

In addition to my paid experiences, I served as the Education Chair for the

Minneapolis Branch of the NAACP. I was involved in an Educational Adequacy Lawsuit

against the State of Minnesota. The case dealt mainly with segregation issues involving

minority students in the Minneapolis Public School system. During that time, I had the

opportunity to visit schools and talk with students, teachers, and administrators. Through

those conversations, I acquired a greater understanding of the educational system as a

whole and the need for administrators to involve outside resources, parents, and teachers

in the educational process. With the idea of shared governance, all individuals have input

in decisions affecting the school. Through shared governance, a sense of

interdependence and responsibility is gained, as well as, improved professional skills

(Cook, 1998, p.S35).

While serving in this position and in the juvenile correction system

simultaneously, I was able to collect data on African American youth in our public

schools. The data demonstrated that the proportion of African American children

expelled or removed from their school, and ultimately arrested and adjudicated into the juvenile correctional system was far greater than compared to white youth. While visiting schools in the district, there were identifiable problems contributing to this disproportionate number. They included risk factors in their neighborhoods and the school, misinformed decisions made by educators, mental health and juvenile justice professionals, and lastly, but by no means any less important, was the impact of race, class, and culture.

The overall goal of the lawsuit was to expand the opportunity for students in disadvantaged areas of the city and also in failing schools to have the opportunity to transfer to schools in other areas of the city or suburbs. After many hours of debate a settlement was reached with the State of Minnesota that satisfied all parties included in the lawsuit. The agreement is currently in its second year of implementation and progress is slow, but definitely in the right direction to assure that all students are provided an equal opportunity to succeed in our public school system.

In my pursuit, I enrolled at the University of Northern Iowa and became a student in the second Urban Education Network 2001 Principalship Cohort with the goal of earning a Masters Degree in Education and eventually becoming an administrator. Now, two years later, through the use of creative lessons and activities, I have needed to search deeper into my soul and explore the reasons behind my quest to examine the role of administrator and then determine if I truly had the passion needed to develop into an effective leader. I now approach graduation certain that in my pursuit to be an effective administrator, I have taken the appropriate steps necessary to lead, manage, and teach others in our countries educational system. Through my experiences, many discussed

throughout this paper, I have created a passion that as a student in the Waterloo Public School system, I would have never imagined I would pursue.

The relationships with my cohort members have developed into ones of support and understanding and through these relationships I have equipped myself with the necessary skills to be an effective leader. This was accomplished through many hours of hard and technical work, which required me to get into the community and become visible and interact with the stakeholders involved in our children's educational development. Having this knowledge base and network of individuals, who I can call upon for advice, increases the likelihood that, as a new administrator, I will not commit a fatal error that would prematurely end my role in the educational system. In addition, having individuals in various regions of the state provides me with the opportunity to keep abreast of creative and effective teaching strategies that will promote student achievement in my school and district.

I believe learning never ceases, therefore, the knowledge I have gained using cooperative learning strategies while completing these courses and from staff development opportunities, has taught me the valuable lesson of including others in the process of change. As administrators, we need to keep this in mind through the many change initiatives that will cross our desk and that we need to make them feel as though they are productive members of the group. This applies to the school as a whole and includes the students, associates, custodians, lunchroom aides, teachers, secretaries, parents, and community members. Within this list, the student is the most important stakeholders but most often not included. Over the course of these two years, I have

gained the knowledge of the importance of change and why the student needs to be an active participant in the change process.

As educators, we need to share, inform, and ask questions of our students and when we take the time to do this, I know we will all be surprised with the learning we gain along the way. We need to remember that without students and the many other stakeholders involved in their lives, we will only achieve portions of our overall goal to increase their academic achievements. This must be done in steps, starting in our individual classrooms, then moving throughout the schools across this country, which should be the reason we became teachers and administrators in the first place.

In closing, I recently had the opportunity to attend the graduation ceremonies of students I taught in St. Paul, Minnesota when they where in 3rd grade. I can not possibly explain to you the sense of pride and accomplishment I felt inside while watching them proudly move across the stage and receive their diplomas. Surprisingly, the pride was not attributed to the countless hours I spent on the weekends at the recreation center with them or any other effort that I may have put forth during those early years of their educational experience. Instead that sense of pride came from knowing that they achieved what we spoke of so often in class, that if we are to achieve our dreams, we must never stop learning! Remembering that and all the other challenges and now watching their faces filled with joy and their hearts with hope as they embraced one another and family members, I can only hope that they continue on their paths to success.

References

Aronson, E. (2000). Nobody left to hate. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company, LLC.

Bartlett, L. & Etscheidt S. (2002). Successful Inclusion for Educational Leaders. Upper
Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice-Hall.

Cook, M. J. (1998). Quality improvement through organizational development. Total
Quality Management, 9, 4, S35.

Cunningham, W. & Cordeiro. P. (2000). Educational Administration. Needham Heights,
MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Danielson, C. (2001). New Trends in Teacher Evaluation. Educational Leadership, 58, 5,
13.

Donaldson, G. (1993). Working Smarter Together. Educational Leadership, 51, 2, 12-16.

Fullan, M. (2002). The Change Leader. Educational Leadership, 59, 8, 16-20.

Hardin, D. & McNelis, S. (1996). The Resource Center: Hub of Inclusive Activities.
Educational Leadership, 53, 5, 41-43.

Henderson, N. (1997). Resiliency in Schools: Making it Happen. Principal, 77, 2, 10-17.

Jastad, D. N. & Tymeson, G. (1997). Demonstrating visionary leadership through
community partnerships. The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance,
68, 5, 47.

Khazzaka, J. (1997). The instructional leader as cultural mediator. The Clearing House,
70, 3, 12.

Krajewshi, B. & Matkin, M. (1996) Community Empowerment: Building a Shared
Vision. Principal, 76, 2, 5-8.

Manheim-Teel, K. & DeBruin-Parecki, A. (2001). Making School Count. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.

Reeves, D. (2001). Crusade in the Classroom. Riverside, NJ: Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Rogalin, R. (2001). Bring in the Dads. PrincipalCEO, 1, 1, 17-19.

Solo, L. (1997). School Success Begins at Home. Principal, 77, 2, 29-30.

Thomas, C., Fitzhugh-Walker, P. & Jefferies, P. T. (2000). We Can Have Better Urban Schools. San Francisco, CA: Caddo Gap Press.

Whitaker, B. (1997). Instructional leadership and principle visibility. The Clearing House, 70, 3, 155.