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Leadership and education : a reflective essay

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Abstract

My principle belief about education relates to the importance of students. Without the students, what we as educators are doing would not mean anything. As educators, we must do everything that we can to ensure that we keep our students engaged and learning. I believe that educators often lose sight of what is important and instead get caught up in trivial happenings (e.g., whether we should have the school buses pick the students up on the north or the east side of the school). If educators continue to stay focused on the students and do what is best for them, we are doing what is right.

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A Reflective Essay

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What I Believe About Leadership and Education

Since I started my first year at Wartburg College in elementary education, people have been asking me the same question time and time again, “Why did you become a teacher?” At first, the answer was not clear to me. As I continued my education and went on to become a teacher, the answer started to become clear. Now, as I begin the next step in my career, I am confronted with a similar question, “Why did I choose to pursue a career in educational leadership?”

Education as a Career

Initially, my answer to “Why did you become a teacher?” was that I enjoyed working with the children. Certainly, I did, and still do, enjoy working with and being around the students. Each day presents a different and sometimes unpredictable challenge. This is one reason that teaching is so enjoyable for me. Another reason that I chose to become an educator was because I enjoyed working with math and numbers, but could not see myself working at a “desk job.” Now that I have been teaching for several years, I feel the true reason I became an educator is the feeling that I get when a struggling student looks at me with relief and says, “I got it,” with a smile. That feeling of satisfaction is the reason I wanted to be a teacher, and it makes all the work and time worthwhile. Knowing that I have helped someone to achieve success when all they have known is failure is all the reward that I need.

Beliefs about Education

My principle belief about education relates to the importance of students. Without the students, what we as educators are doing would not mean anything. As educators, we must do everything that we can to ensure that we keep our students engaged and learning. I believe that educators often lose sight of what is important and instead get caught up in trivial happenings (e.g., whether we should have the school busses pick the students up on the north or the east side of the school). If educators continue to stay focused on the students and do what is best for them, we are doing what is right.

I also believe that a teacher is not in a classroom to “preach.” I feel that I play a guidance role in my classroom. That is, if I help the students to teach themselves, they will take ownership of their learning and retain more of what they have been taught. Sometimes this means that they are talking in small groups, working with computers, going to the library, or working in the room in an “organized chaos.” I am present to guide the students as they work through problems. I offer instruction as needed, whether to a whole class, or to a small group. I put guidelines in place that will lead students in the right direction and enable them to succeed now, and in the future.

Pursing Educational Leadership

Earning a degree in educational leadership is a decision that I have made to not only become a better educator, but also to create options for later in my

career. I knew that I did not want to spend my entire career in a classroom.

While I enjoy teaching, I have always wanted to move on to a position of leadership and greater responsibility. As my career progresses, I may choose to pursue different options, such as becoming a superintendent or a college professor. While the future is unknown, I feel confident that I will have many options as a result of degree in educational leadership.

Beliefs about Leadership

My main belief about leadership is that in order to be an effective leader in any field, we must first earn the respect and trust of others. If people cannot trust us or rely on us, we will lose them immediately. Building trusting, productive relationships takes time, but if we do not take the time or make the effort, we will likely have a short leadership experience. I also believe that as a leader we are still learners.

When I take my first job as an administrator, I will not know everything. I will, however, work hard to learn about my position and learn how to make myself a better administrator. Part of being a life-long learner also includes learning from your mistakes, and not being afraid to admit making a mistake. An effective leader will admit that they made a mistake and then learn from that experience. Part of the job of being an educational leader is balancing the managerial duties with the leadership duties and not letting one overtake the other. Will you be a leader 100% of the time? Will you be a manager 100% of

the time? Finding a way to balance the two is a major part of being an educational leader.

I'm getting accustomed to the two most common questions that people ask, "Why do you want to become a principal?" and "Why don't you just keep teaching?" I must make certain that I am taking this step for the right reasons. To me, my feelings and aspirations are a chief factor in my decision. I am consciously asking myself if it feels right, do I really want the added challenges and responsibilities of educational leadership? Becoming a principal *does* feel right to me. I believe that I will have the tools and the knowledge to perform well as a principal. I understand there will be difficult challenges throughout the process but with my training I know that I will find a way to get through those times. I feel that I am strong in my beliefs, and therefore, will make it through challenging situations and be successful

Leader of Learning

According to Cooper and Boyd (as cited in Edmonson & Fisher, 2000), "Reflection means focusing on thinking and understanding and not just what you did or are doing. Good learners think about their own thinking; they reflect in action, for action, and about action" (p. 57). Reflection is a very important part of every decision that a principal makes. By reflecting on your actions you are constantly learning and improving yourself and the learning community. In essence, this is what I believe a reflective practitioner to be.

Current Research

The current research parallels Cooper and Boyd's concept of reflection. Knapp, Copland, and Talbert (2003) incorporate this concept by offering a reflective toolkit to assist school and district administrators in improving the students' learning. The toolkit consists of five areas of action to which administrators can commit themselves. These are areas that will ensure an equal opportunity for student learning. I will offer a brief summary of each area, as well as what the school and the district can do to commit themselves to each area.

Establishing a Focus of Learning

The first area of action is establishing a focus of learning. At the school level visiting classrooms and then having conversations with your teachers about student learning can do this. You can also review the data from your students and use it for school planning. At the district level, you can be constantly reviewing student data and then sharing this data with the teachers (Knapp et al., 2003).

Building Professional Communities that Value Learning

The next area of action is building professional communities that value learning. This can be done by creating structures for regular interaction among co-workers as well as letting teachers have a part in the decision making process. At the district level you can allow schedule changes in order to give the teachers time to work and share together (Knapp et al., 2003).

Engaging External Environments that Matter for Learning

The third area of action is engaging external environments that matter for learning. This can be done by visiting families and community groups as well as promoting the students learning through the media. You can also bring your most outspoken critics into the school by involving them in the improvement efforts (Knapp et al., 2003).

Acting Strategically and Sharing Leadership

The fourth area of action is acting strategically and sharing leadership. Creating positions that share the principal's leadership responsibility can do this. The district can achieve this by evaluating the current curriculum and assessment and their ability to promote student and teacher learning. You must then make the necessary adjustments to meet your needs (Knapp et al., 2003).

Creating Coherence

The last area of action is creating coherence. Developing professional development around data on student learning can create coherence. As a principal you must then follow-up with the staff to ensure they are using what they have learned (Knapp et al., 2003).

These five areas set the framework for reflection. This framework will then guide you in your self-assessment, planning, and professional development. These reflective tools help leaders take stock of their situations and create new possibilities for action. The tools then help leaders map out strategies for

improvement then engage the leaders and their colleagues in discovering more powerful connections between leadership and learning (Knapp et al., 2003).

I feel this would be a very helpful tool for me as a leader. The authors have done extensive research to come up with a guide for reflecting and improving your school. I feel that by following the steps that they have laid out I would have a successful school. If I were to make a commitment to the five areas of action I would be reflecting not only on myself as a principal, but on the rest of the school as well. After reading and reflecting on this research I will be putting this into my personal toolbox to use when I am in my own leadership position.

The definition of reflection used by Cooper and Boyd is mirrored by Reeves (2006) as he states, "Reflective leaders take time to think about the lessons learned, record their small wins and setbacks, document conflicts between values and practice, identify the difference between idiosyncratic behavior and long-term pathologies, and notice trends that emerge over time" (p. 49). This is a great definition for me to have as I begin my administration experiences. My feeling is that I will learn the best by taking charge and actually doing administrative duties. No matter how much I do as a principal, or even as a teacher, I will not learn anything if I do not reflect on what I have been doing.

A connection can be made between the current research on reflection and ISSL standard 1, visionary leadership. To be a visionary leader you must be able to not only collect data, but also reflect on that data to help you in your planning.

You must also be constantly reflecting on your own views and beliefs in order to promote the success of every student in your school. A visionary leader is also constantly reevaluation school improvement efforts. The means thinking about what has worked, what has not worked, and what has been learned. This is the continuous cycle of reflection.

Leader's Role in Educational Change

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2006), change means many things. The definition that I feel best fits educational change is "to give a different position, course, or direction to." As an educational leader, it is important to know the direction you want, or need, to go and work hard to get there.

Change in a school will normally mean a change in the school culture. As an educational leader, I feel you must be able to lead cultural change. Fullan (2002) suggest 5 components essential for a cultural change principal to possess.

The first component Fullan talks about is moral purpose. Moral purpose is a social responsibility to others and the environment. School leaders possessing moral purpose seek to improve the lives of students. Not only does a principal with moral purpose try to improve their own school, they are also concerned with the improvement of other schools as well. The main goal of these principals is student learning, and they work hard with all to obtain this.

The second component is understanding change. A principal could have great ideas and be ready to try them, but without understanding change and the change process, they will be bound for failure. The first thing to remember, as a principal is that it is not to change everything, but to pick a few areas of focus. “The cultural change principal knows the difference between being an expert in a content innovation and being an expert in managing the process of change” (Fullan, 2002, p. 18).

The next component is improving relationships. When relationships are positive the school will be better, but when relationships fail, the school will become worse for it. Establishing good, positive relationships with the faculty and staff around will help you when you are trying to change or improve the school.

Fullan’s fourth component is knowledge creation and sharing. The cultural change principal knows that teachers become better by learning. The only way we learn is by sharing information. Without the sharing of information no one would benefit from it. As a principal, we need to create opportunities for the staff to share with each other, as well as those in other schools. This creates learning and more effective teaching.

The last component is coherence making. A cultural change principal must be the one to make sense out of all of the parts and help the faculty put them together. Without someone there to do that, change would not happen.

I feel that these five components of a cultural change principal are very helpful. It lays out for you what you need to do to begin to be effective when implementing a change. However, I would like to go deeper into effective change and understanding all of the parts of the system you are trying to change.

In the book *Implementing Change: Patterns, Principles, and Potholes*, Hall and Hord lay out twelve principles of change. I would like to highlight a few of these principles.

The first is change is a process, not an event. This means that change takes time. As a principal, you cannot give an announcement and offer a three day professional development opportunity and expect everyone to change immediately. Most changes in education take three to five years to be implemented at a high level (Hall and Hord, 2006, p. 4). When plan a change, you must look at it strategically. What resources do we need now, next year, four year from now? What types of professional development opportunities do we want to offer to our teacher? What are we going to do to ensure it is working? These questions are only a few that an administrator and school should be asking when thinking about the process of change.

The next principle is an organization does not change until the individuals within it change. As a principal, you can offer as many professional development days as you want, and tell the teachers they need to do these things, but until the individuals accept and understand the change the organization as a whole, will not

change. People will be at different stages of the change at different times. As a principal, you need to know this and continue to push and guide those “laggards” in the right direction.

The third principle I wish to talk about is there will be no change in outcomes until new practices are implemented. “In order for change to be successful, an implementation bridge is necessary (Hall & Hord, 2006, p. 10). To go from current practice to changes in practice, you must provide support. Without providing tools for change, you are asking the faculty and staff to make a giant leap to change.

The last principle I am going to share is one that I feel is very important. Facilitating change is a team effort. In order for change to take place everyone needs to work together. This means that students, parents, teacher, and administrators need to work together to successfully implement change. These may be the most important pieces of the puzzle, but it would not be complete if the school did not work with the community, the state government, and the federal government. With all of these pieces working together, towards a common goal, you will be successful.

In the book, *Sustaining Change in Schools: How to Overcome Differences and Focus on Quality* (2005), the author, Daniel P. Johnson, talks about five steps to follow in the change process. The five steps are, the quality profile, asking quality questions, making quality a habit, focusing on success, and managing

tasks and leading people. I want to focus on the first step, the quality profile. This first step focuses primarily on the four P's: purpose, parameters, principles, and priorities.

Purpose is why something is important and focuses on people. Find a purpose in anything is natural to all humans, which makes purpose very important in change. Parameters are the rules of engagement. All people want to know what is expected of them and how these expectations compare to those around us. By following these parameters all people could make it through any change.

Principles are about how to make it work. You can think of principles as the rules of the game, and some people see the rules to entrenched to change them. The last P is priorities. Priorities, in the context of this book, focus on whether or not the change will make a difference.

These P's are important when thinking about change, and it is important for a school district to think of them in the following way:

- The purpose of learning
- The parameters people use to decide what success looks like at any given time in any given setting
- The steps people follow to align daily classroom learning practices with organizational principles
- The priorities people establish to promote the greatest likelihood of success for all students

By thinking of these in this way, you will be able to implement a change and sustain it long enough to make a difference.

Educational change can be a very difficult process. As a future school administrator, I need to understand every part of the change process and work hard to lead the school and the community in that change. A principal cannot longer sit in their office behind their desk and expect to have a successful school. They must get out there and work hard to develop the strategies, initiate the development, and push people in new directions. Change can work, but not on its own.

Leader of Learners' Role for the Improvement of Learning for Both Students and Adults

“Student achievement is the cornerstone of the success of principals, and teachers are a key factor in the area of student performance. If the principal’s success depends on teacher and student performance, the principal’s approach as an instructional leader is crucial to promote student achievement” (Zepeda, 2004, p. 12).

Principals are responsible for much of what happens in a school, whether they want to be or not. One of those responsibilities is to improving the learning of both the students and adults. This means that a principal not only has to improve the learning of all of the students in a school, but they must also improve

the learning of the faculty, staff, and parents. This is a huge responsibility, but one that must be done for a school to be successful.

Research conducted by the Southern Regional Educational Board, was published in 2004. The title of the document is *Preparing a New Breed of School Principals: It's Time for Action*. The paper lays out three items that a future principal will need to do. They are:

- Have a comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement;
- Know how to work with teachers and others to fashion and implement continuous student improvement; and
- Know how to provide the necessary support for staff to carry out sound school, curriculum, and instructional practices (Bottoms & O'Neil, 2001, p. 8)

The paper continues to elaborate on these three points. One that I found interesting and feel is important to any principal using data to initiate and continue to improve in school and classroom practices and student achievement (Bottoms & O'Neil, 2001, p. 11). Collecting, understanding, and using data is a very important skill for principals, especially now with the emphasis on testing and the accountability that principals must face. The data you collect is very important in improving the learner of students. By properly analyzing the data, you will be able to pinpoint some areas of concern. The data you collect can also

be used to help improve classroom practice as well as inform parents on the progress of the school and their children. By helping teachers understand the data, you are helping them learn how to improve their teaching.

Once you collect and analyze the data, you will need to decide the route you are going to take, you will then need to lead the staff in professional development. Professional development is the way that schools improve the learning for the adults in the school. In the book, *The Principal as Staff Developer*, Richard P. DuFour talks about the principal's role in staff development. The first point I wish to elaborate on is school improvement means people improvement (DuFour, 1991, p. 7). The only way that you can get to where you want to go is through staff development. You can spend as much time as you want talking about rigor and relevance or differentiated learning, but until you give your staff the time and the tools it will do no good.

The principal is a key figure in determining the ultimate success of any effort to develop school personnel and thus plays a major role in school improvement (DuFour, 1991, p. 8). Research has consistently found that schools with high achievement were influenced greatly by the principal. The principal is the person who guides the staff and keeps them on track. The principal plans the in-services and decides which path is the best for the school. Without this guidance, many of the projects would never get off the ground and the school, and those in it, would never improve.

School culture is an important part of improving learning. The culture of a school reflects what the members' care about, what they do, and what they talk about (Zepeda, 2004, p. 23). As a principal you must understand the culture of the school if you wish to improve what is in it. If you do something that upsets the culture or goes against the values of the school, you will have a hard time doing it. If you work within the culture you will find improving learning a much easier task.

School climate is the perceptions that people have the school and how people interact with each other (Zepeda, 2004, p. 37). The climate of the school has more to do with the teachers and administrators of the school. As a principal you must have a good understanding of how the staff interacts with the students. You must help improve school climate by improving the adults in your school.

There is so much talk about increasing rigor, raising the standards, and getting the students to do more. The best way to improve student learning is to give them exceptional teachers (Whitaker, 2003, p. 35). You can give them exceptional teachers by hiring them or improving the ones you already have. Most teachers will do the best that they know. Unless given other tools, they will continue to use the ones they have. As a principal, you must get into the teachers classrooms to ensure that they are doing what is expected of them. Another option for a principal is to let teachers get into other teachers classrooms. By letting them observe themselves, they may get a chance to see interventions put into practice.

You want your teachers to continually strive to be the best, but you it all starts with the principal.

Improving the learning of the students is the ultimate goal of any school. It is not going to happen on its own. As a school you must work hard to achieve the goals set forth during the planning stages. There are many factors to be constantly aware of, as well, when improving learning. You must consider the culture and climate of the school, which could cause an idea to die by them selves. You must consider the teachers you have in you building or district. They are the ones that can make or break the intervention. They have the direct, everyday contact with the students and are able to carry out the interventions. Even with all of these parts involved in the improvement of learning, the sole responsibility will always fall back to the principal. They are the ones ultimately responsible for the learning of the students.

Role of the Leader of Service

A school administrator has many roles, and must be able to switch between these roles everyday. Many of these roles are centered on administrators and what they need to do to improve the school or the situation. People often do not see the administrator as the leader of service or a servant leader.

To begin to describe servant leadership, Keith (1994) starts with the meaning of life. According to Keith, "in most countries, cultures, and centuries, people have discovered that love is the meaning of life" (Keith, 1994, p. 3). What

does the meaning of life have to do with servant leadership? "When we love people, we care about them and what they do. As our love continues to grow, it starts to encompass more people. We feel compassion for them and want to help them if we can" (Keith, p. 4).

"A servant leader is a leader focused on serving others" (Keith, p. 4). A servant is always working to help people and organizations get what they need in order to improve and become better. They do not care about fame or power; the only goal is to help others. I believe an administrator needs to be a servant leader. They are in the position to help the school improve. Administrators use their abilities to make those around them better.

To some administrators power is the ultimate goal. They want to control the students, the teachers, and the parents. "Servant leadership is not about power, it is about service" (Keith, p. 4). A principal who is a servant leader does not make people do things or overuse their power. They are always looking for ways to help meet the needs of others. As an administrator, I need to remember that having the power does not make me the leader. When there are so many groups involved and invested in an organization, such as a school, power must be used wisely. Also, I will need to be ready to switch roles and leadership types depending on what group I am addressing. A servant leader are not a weak people or a people who avoid confrontation; they are people who become angry for others, not themselves.

“Whether servant or steward, on thing is sure-the school leader’s passion is what sustains him and nourishes him when all else fails” (Patti & Tobin, 2003 p. 171). An administrator who is a servant leader will always have the accomplishments of the school and those in it to talk about and share, even when there is nothing else. A servant leader will share good things that are happening in the school, even when they themselves may be under attack or under stress. A servant leader will take the blame and give the credit.

“Socially responsible leaders make every effort to stay close to those they serve-to determine their needs and figure out how to be of service” (Marx, 2006, p. 14). A servant leader needs to be worried about others needs. We are used to putting our own needs before others, it is a basic human instinct. A servant leader will continually fight this instinct to put others first. Once the needs of others are determined, a servant leader can than begin to help. As an administrator, I need to remember to not jump into a problem or situation without first collecting “data” on the situation. I must talk with those involved in order to understand what has happened and how I can help. If I do not gather information or “data,” I could end up make the situation worse.

Robert Greenleaf writes the following about servant leadership:

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests

itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and most difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived?

I truly feel that as an administrator I need to find a way to make those I serve stronger and healthier than before. If you are not getting better, you are getting worse. If I am leading in such a way that people are becoming more autonomous or growing as teachers and individuals, than I am doing my job. I want those that I serve to serve others as well. I know I can do this by leading by example and helping them to understand servant leadership.

Servant leadership is a style of leadership that is unique and difficult. In order to be a good leader, the qualities of a servant leader must be embraced. The needs of others must come first. Instead of focusing on personal needs, a servant leader needs to focus on what others need in order to get their work done. For most people, this will require them to reform the way they think and act. Most people are not ready to put others first and to put their own needs last.

I feel that servant leadership ties in well with ISSL standard number 2.

This standard addresses creating a climate and culture that is conducive to learning. In order to create this culture a leader must be willing to advocate for students as well as nurture them along the way. School leaders will not be able to advocate for the students needs unless they are willing to set aside their own needs and focus on the needs of the students.

Being a servant leader is necessary to being an effective school administrator. Mohandas Gandhi said, "Look below the surface and identify the hidden and unarticulated needs that others cannot see, and create a bond with those you are trying o serve." As school administrators, we need to find the needs of those in our schools and create a bond with all of them. Then we will have a successful, quality school.

Throughout this paper, I talked about many parts of being an educational leader. In order for me to be an effective leader, I need to make sure I am bring all of these parts together. If I do not have them all, I may be a good administrator, but I may not be a great educational leader. By gathering feedback and then reflecting on my practices, I will continue to improve as an educational leader.

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