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## What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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## What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

### Abstract

What do I believe about leadership and education? In order to answer that question, I must delve into my past experience with education, examine why I became an educator, and what I have come to believe about educational leadership. When I ask myself when it was that I knew I wanted to be an educator, I do not believe I can pinpoint an exact moment. In fact, I do not believe I ever gave any real consideration to any other career. For as long as I can remember, teachers were people I admired and education was something I valued. I was a good student and I loved going to school and learning new things.

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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by

Kathleen M. Walech

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What do I believe about leadership and education? In order to answer that question, I must delve into my past experience with education, examine why I became an educator, and what I have come to believe about educational leadership.

When I ask myself when it was that I knew I wanted to be an educator, I do not believe I can pinpoint an exact moment. In fact, I do not believe I ever gave any real consideration to any other career. For as long as I can remember, teachers were people I admired and education was something I valued. I was a good student and I loved going to school and learning new things.

Although learning was easy for me, I was aware from an early age that learning was not easy for all people. As a child, one of my best friends had a severe learning disability. Watching her struggle, and seeing the very different way in which she perceived education was a real eye opener for me. Even though learning was not as easy for her as it was for me, she wanted to do well and she wanted to learn. She had the same expectations for herself as I had for myself. The only difference between us was the amount of effort we had to put forth in order to achieve.

I watched her toil at length to accomplish tasks that took me less time; however, I also saw how the knowledge gained from completing the assignments leveled the playing field between us. Knowing someone who struggled with education and learning so much gave me a greater respect for my own ability and

the educational process. This relationship helped to develop my belief that education should be available to all students, and that every student, no matter what his/her natural ability can and will learn if given the opportunity. These beliefs led me on a direct course to a career in education, with an emphasis in special education.

The experiences I have had as a special education teacher have reinforced my belief that every student can learn if given the opportunity. As a special educator, the majority of my career has been spent working with students who have learning disabilities. I have found these students to be very determined and courageous. Although they have great difficulty learning, they do want to learn and they persevere so they can learn the same things their peers are learning.

As a special education teacher I value the ideal of an individualized education for each student to meet his/her needs. Through the IEP process, I have been honored to help students set goals for their own education. Being a part of this process has taught me that these students, who have a difficult time learning, value education and see it as important to their future. Perhaps they value education because it has not come easily to them, but whatever the reason, these students have helped to strengthen my belief that all students can learn and be successful, and that all students deserve and benefit from a quality education.

In addition, I believe education is a collaborative process. In my experience as a special education teacher, I have been afforded the opportunity to

collaborate with many teachers at many different levels and stages in their careers. I can honestly say I have learned something from each teacher I have collaborated with, and I hope they can all say the same after having worked with me. Working so closely with so many different teachers has not always been easy; however, it has made me see education, at its best, is a collaborative process.

I love teaching and the gratification and sense of fulfillment supplied by the spark in a student's eye when a connection is made. I love teaching students for whom learning is not easy because I feel I learn as much from them as they learn from me. Teaching has become an important part of my life, and being a teacher has become a part of my identity. I had to do much soul searching before I was ready to commit to entering a program for educational administration that would take me out of the classroom I love.

When I graduated from college seven years ago and got my first teaching job, I thought I would be content to teach for the rest of my career. I believed, like many other teachers, that teaching was the noblest of professions, and the most important position in the "educational chain". Administrators were a part of an educational bureaucracy that I wanted no part of. I perceived principals not as educators, but as "sell-outs" who had given up their positions in the classroom for an office and a higher salary.

I became aware of “a great divide” that existed between many teachers and administrators. Teachers viewed administrators as people who lost touch with the classroom and took pleasure in justifying their positions by creating more and more bureaucratic red tape. Administrators seemed to look upon teachers as people who were shortsighted, capable only of seeing the needs within their own classrooms and schools but not able to see the “big picture”. I didn’t want to be one of those administrators. I bought into the “us against them” mentality that sometimes exists between teachers and administrators. However, as I matured into my own role as a teacher, my experiences, beliefs and values regarding education evolved, and my perception of the role and importance of a strong administrator and leader changed dramatically.

I began to see the valuable role the principal played in setting the tone, direction, and vision of the school community. A strong, passionate, decisive, organized and visionary leader can make great things happen in a school for both the staff and students. An effective principal can generate the nurturing environment that gives rise to a school community that is productive for all the students in the school, not just the students in one classroom.

Although the principal is removed from the classroom and does not have the same daily contact and direct influence on students as a teacher does, it has become apparent to me that the principal is more than a figurehead and bureaucratic paper pusher. I have come to believe the principal is the

instructional leader that makes it possible for the daily contact teachers have with students to be productive and influential. The leadership the principal provides forges the foundation of the school community as well as the necessary organization, support and resources for the operation of the school to run smoothly and efficiently. Most importantly, the principal acts as steward of the school vision that brings the staff and school community together as a cohesive unit working toward the same goals

My altered perceptions about the importance of a strong administrator made me realize educational administration was something I could not only do, but more importantly something I could be happy doing. I no longer view anyone in an administrative position as less committed to education than a career teacher. Administrators must focus their talents to improve education for an entire community of learners. I do not feel ashamed, or like a “sell out” when I tell people I am working to become an educational administrator. Administrators, like teachers, are educators; committed to the role they play in the education of our children and our future.

I believe that the learning I have done over the past two years as a member of the UEN Leadership Academy has increased my understanding and respect for the role that a principal plays within the school. This deeper understanding combined with my positive perceptions regarding educational leadership, have bolstered my personal commitment to a future career in the field of educational

leadership. As I move closer to the possibility of undertaking my first principalship I find myself reflecting upon what I believe to be the most important aspects of educational leadership, instructional leadership, collaborative leadership, maintaining a positive school culture, and visionary leadership.

### Instructional Leadership

As education and the role of the principal in educational leadership continue to evolve, one tenet has remained constant for more than 30 years, “the principal must serve as the instructional leader” (DuFour, 2002). But, what is an instructional leader? What are the specific qualities or behaviors that an effective instructional leader must possess? Is an instructional leader more accurately described as a “learning leader?” (DuFour, 2002).

Over the course of the past two years, through the coursework that has been a part of this degree program as well as personal experience and research, my understanding and definition of the role of principal as instructional leader has been challenged and changed. At the beginning of the program, I learned that the importance of instructional leadership in the role of a principal was highlighted, as it is included as one of the six ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) Standards for educational leadership. An instructional leader, is defined in Standard Two as, “...an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and

instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development” (Wilmore, 2002).

As I delved deeper within that definition of an instructional leader I focused in on the words, instructional program. If it is truly the responsibility of the instructional leader to sustain an effective instructional program, then the role of the instructional leader should be guided by the questions, “What are the teachers teaching, and how can I help them to teach it more effectively?” (DuFour, 2002). Perhaps the way to be a successful instructional leader from this perspective is to be an excellent evaluator of teachers, who places emphasis on the way teachers implement curriculum and apply instructional strategies within the classroom.

However, I believe there is more to being an effective instructional leader than providing suggestions for teachers about improving the quality of instruction. As I pondered the additional responsibilities of an effective instructional leader, I reflected back upon my own personal experience as a Data Coach and Instructional Strategist within my district. Within these positions, I worked with teachers to help analyze student data, review student progress, and plan interventions or adjust instruction to ensure student progress.

This work of analyzing student data to ensure student achievement is not new to education, however it is becoming more and more important as schools face sanctions for an inability to show student achievement gains in this era of No

Child Left Behind. The use of data has become necessary and part of the way we do business within our schools, “it’s not just about the quality of teaching, but about the quality of leadership” (Shorr, 2003). In fact, data driven decision making in its essence, instructional leadership, which “succeeds if the educational administration can model the habit of mind involved in data inquiry” (Shorr, 2003).

Perhaps the questions, “To what extent are the students learning the intended outcomes of each course? And What steps can I take to give both students and teachers the additional time and support they need to improve learning?” could serve as an a starting point for the data driven conversations we must both initiate and model in the role of the instructional leader (DuFour, 2002). The focus of the instructional leader in this instance shifts from a focus on teaching to a focus on student learning, based in data, in which the principal functions as a learning leader rather than an instructional leader (DuFour, 2002).

This begs the questions, is instructional leadership intended to focus on teaching or learning, and is being a learning leader mutually exclusive to being an instructional leader? In my opinion, an effective principal must be both. Over the course of the past decade, the changing face of education in the era of No Child Left Behind, the role of principal as instructional leader has had to change. These changes have resulted in the role of the principal as instructional leader expanding

to include not only a focus on teaching and learning, but also on professional development, data based decision making, and accountability (King, 2002).

“With leadership for student learning as the priority, instructional leadership might simply be described as ‘anything that leaders do to improve teaching and learning in their schools and districts’” (King, 2002). That definition of instructional leadership then seems to give way to the notion that instructional leadership may, and in fact should, look different in different communities and even in different schools where the data indicates different needs for increased levels of student achievement (King, 2002).

The responsibility for improving teaching and learning within a school is a daunting task, and one that is unable to be achieved through the work of a single individual. This means that the educational leaders of today must work to build capacity by developing instructional leadership skills in others, so that “leadership resides with the whole school community rather than solely with those who hold formal positions of authority” (King, 2002). This capacity for instructional leadership within a school community, could then result in the role of principal shifting from instructional leader of teachers with a focus on teaching to an instructional leader of a professional community with a focus on learning (DuFour, 2002).

## Collaborative Leadership

Building capacity for educational change requires collaboration, which at best is synergy, where

...the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It means that the relationship which the parts have to each other is a part in and of itself. It is not only a part, but the most catalytic, the most empowering, the most unifying, and the most exciting part (Covey, 1989).

The role then of the collaborative leader must be to create, nurture, and harness the catalytic power of synergy within a school.

ISLLC Standard Three charges principals with the role of collaborative leader as "...an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (Wilmore, 2002). This role of collaborative leader must exist in conjunction with, and serve to support, the other leadership roles that the principal must undertake. Perhaps the most effective way to build collegiality of substance, is to create and support a professional learning community within the school (DuFour, 2004).

Professional learning communities are built within a culture of collaboration in which "teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice" (DuFour, 2004). This model of the professional learning

community seems to mirror the Iowa Professional Development Model, which requires peer coaching in the implementation of programs such as Every Child Reads (ECR).

As a teacher within a school that utilizes peer coaches, I was able to see the impact that peer coaching had upon the culture of collaboration that existed within our building. Prior to the implementation of peer coaching, most teachers in our building considered collaboration to be working together to plan school events or having an overall feeling of community throughout the school. Most teachers still planned and presented instruction within the confines of their own classrooms, isolated from colleagues by the closed door that separated their classroom from others. Peer coaching requires that teachers open the doors to their classrooms, and collaborate with their colleagues in the sharing and analyzing of student data, planning of effective instruction and implementation of research based learning strategies that enhance student achievement.

With the current levels of accountability for student achievement within districts and schools, it is virtually impossible for teachers to remain isolated as they have in the past. They must work in teams as members of a professional learning community, pooling their resources and talents to be used for the common goal of increased student achievement for all.

Just as there is “strength in numbers” for teachers as they collaborate in the school improvement process, principals are also not able to remain alone in

their quest for instructional improvement. Professional development should focus on building capacity of skills, particularly within the areas of student data analysis and instructional decision making. These new models of professional development require peer coaching, and more and more team structures are being implemented within schools to aid and support the instructional decision making process.

This level of “powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning (DuFour, 2004). I see this move toward the implementation of professional learning communities within the schools where I work as an instructional strategist. Within these schools, teachers meet in grade level teams to have ongoing conversations about student achievement and instructional interventions that can be implemented to increase the overall student achievement of the school, and ensure learning for all students. As a future educational administrator, it is my full intention to use this experience in my role as collaborative leader by working to build a professional learning community within my school.

## Culture

Effectively implementing and sustaining reforms of any kind within a school requires a healthy school culture. “A school’s culture is a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (Barth, 2002). It is this culture, these attitudes, norms and beliefs that affect the way that reforms are implemented both positively and negatively, because “The school’s culture dictates, in no uncertain terms, ‘the way we do things around here’” (Barth, 2002).

With that in mind, it is essential for educational leaders to take the culture of a school into consideration prior to implementing changes as an instructional or collaborative leader. Sometimes it may be necessary to work to change the culture of a school prior to initiating systemic changes so that the new initiatives have a better chance of being successful in long term implementation. However, in order to work to create positive school culture, it is essential to know what is it that makes the culture of an urban school positive. Research has shown that positive culture in urban schools is accompanied by the specific characteristics of “caring connections, positive behavioral supports, and social and emotional learning” (Osher & Fleischman, 2005).

Caring connections within an urban school stress the importance of the feeling of “connectedness” students have with their teachers and peers within the

school. Research on positive behavioral supports indicates that harsh discipline or punishment works against the feeling of positive connections that students feel within a school. Behavioral supports that help students meet school expectations and self monitor their progress through the direct teaching of social and emotional skills combine to help in the creation of an overall positive culture (Osher & Fleischman, 2005).

Changing school a school culture that is not positive “requires that more desirable qualities replace the existing unhealthy elements” and “clear personal and collective visions are crucial for this enterprise” (Barth, 2002). However, changing existing school culture seems to be a daunting task, that requires a courageous leader willing to address the toxic elements of a school’s culture, rather than remain victim to them (Barth, 2002).

In my personal experience over the past two years I have worked in two buildings. Each of the buildings has a very different professional culture, which distinctly impacts the success or failure of change efforts. This year in particular (2004-2005) has been one in which I was able to see the effects of school culture on leadership and change initiatives, as both schools in which I work have new principals. In my experience, one school has a more positive culture in which teachers work together collaboratively to ensure high student achievement, and function as a professional learning community in the implementation of new changes initiated by the principal, and instructional leader. Changes are much

more easily introduced and implemented within this school. At the second school, a more closed culture exists, where teachers have worked in isolation for many years without having authentic conversations about student achievement. The new instructional leader in that particular building has had a much more difficult time implementing change that affects instruction or collaboration within the building.

As a future principal I will build a positive culture within the building that I lead by working to “transform the elements of school culture into forces that support rather than subvert the school’s purposes” (Barth, 2002). In order to affect this change in culture, it is not only necessary to be able to identify the poisonous aspects of the school culture, but also to identify healthy cultural norms that I can set as goals to reach.

“Educators Saphier and King identified a dozen healthy cultural norms: collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust and confidence, tangible support, reaching out to the knowledge bases, caring celebration and humor, involvement in decision making, protection of what’s important, traditions, and honest and open communication (Barth, 2002).

I firmly believe that transforming the school culture will result in amazing changes in the way people think and how they act. Incorporating these positive and healthy cultural norms will have a great impact on the power of the principal

to implement change, the willingness of the staff to implement the change and the increased levels of student achievement that will be the result.

### Vision

Although educational leaders need to be effective instructional and collaborative leaders who implement change through building and maintaining positive school culture, the most effective school leaders are visionaries. Without vision, there can be no goals for improved student achievement, professional learning communities, or positive changes in school culture. Vision is the common sense of purpose that a leader works to develop within the school. It is the vision that serves as the foundation that supports the efforts the learning community makes toward overall school improvement.

Vision is perhaps the most important aspect of leadership because “vision leads the leader” (Maxwell, 1999). Vision is so important that is the first ISLLC standard for leadership. Standard One states, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community” (Wilmore, 2002).

When reading this standard for leadership I find myself taken by the magnitude of the task of creating, implementing, and sustaining a vision that leads the work of the school. However, it is essential to remember that the vision is not

the responsibility of the principal alone. In fact, the vision should be created with the input of stakeholders, and supported by the school community as a whole. It is the responsibility of the principal to steward this vision, or maintain the focus and redirect as needed if it seems that the school is somehow veering of course.

Despite the need for the principal to maintain focus on the vision in its stewardship, it is also important to remember that a vision must also be monitored and measured to ensure that it is still the appropriate focus of the school's time and resources. This monitoring is necessary because "the vision may in fact have been the right one at the time it was formulated, but rarely is it right for all time. The world changes, and so must the vision" (Nanus, 1992).

As a future educational leader, I know I must have expectations and goals that I am striving to meet on a school wide basis. However, this vision must not be mine alone. True vision unites the learning community as they strive to focus their effort to meet shared school goals. As a visionary leader, I plan to develop a shared vision in conjunction with other stakeholders in the learning community. It will be my responsibility to communicate this vision effectively, and steward the vision, as the learning community takes strides toward making our shared vision a reality.

Instructional leadership, collaborative leadership, positive school culture and visionary leadership, the aspects of educational leadership that I believe are key in creating positive and effective professional learning communities, with a

shared sense of vision for making data based instructional decisions that positively impact student achievement. The work of the principal is challenging at best, but results in the greatest of rewards, knowing you made a positive impact on the education of children.

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