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A question of leadership: A reflective essay

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A question of leadership: A reflective essay

Abstract

Born of the fire, called by God, and tried by the war. Why am I here? How often I ask myself that very question and come up short with the answer. It is a search that is worth the effort and will be continued to the day I leave this profession. I was a product of the postwar baby boom. I attended elementary school in small classrooms with a minimum of 34 students until I was through fourth grade. Management was the dominant concern of most of my teachers, and it was easy to get lost in the shuffle.

A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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John C. Rothlisberger

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Born of the fire, called by God, and tried by the war. Why am I here? How often I ask myself that very question and come up short with the answer. It is a search that is worth the effort and will be continued to the day I leave this profession.

I was a product of the postwar baby boom. I attended elementary school in small classrooms with a minimum of 34 students until I was through fourth grade. Management was the dominant concern of most of my teachers, and it was easy to get lost in the shuffle.

My fifth- and sixth-grade experience was little better, with a teacher who taught through intimidation and fear. I learned more in those 2 years than in any other 2 years of my education, but it created a mindset about education that I still compensate for today. The significance of this lies in the fact that it also did more than any other one thing to motivate me to want to make a difference for children in their learning experiences. I felt, and still feel today, that we must make a positive difference for the children we serve and do it with a large measure of compassion.

Four years of military service provided me with a wealth of experiences and the opportunity to work in

some Department of Defense schools. I look at that time as a time of search and exploration. When I spoke of "fire" at the beginning, I was referring to this time in my life. The dangers were great and the potential for poor decisions was ever present. I came through the fire of the late 60s and early 70s knowing what I did not want for my life.

The search for purpose continued until I met and wed one of the key guiding forces in my life. Together we discussed and asked for direction and guidance about my future. My need to serve directed me toward the field of Christian education.

I began to use my veteran's benefits for a degree in elementary education as precursor for seminary. Within our church, there is a requirement to explore all areas of service as a preparation for seminary. This process focused me on children and their special needs in a world that often does not give them adequate care and concern. I believe that, in the order of this universe, some of us are directed to make a difference in the lives of children; thus, the "called by God" phrase in the opening statement.

My family and I came to the conclusion that the skills I obtained would best be used in serving

children in the public sector. Each passing year has made that point clearer. The struggle to keep children as the focus and center of our business has been the target of my professional direction.

Working on an advanced degree, focused on administration, is one more step in my attempt to serve. The need to move schools in the direction of student-centered curriculum is referred to as the curriculum war; thus, the "tried by the war" phrase. I believe the reason I have come to this point in my career is grounded in my need to make a difference. If that will be done most effectively in administration, then I am moving toward the place where I belong.

Personal Characteristics

What characteristics mark my personality? The dominant trait usually recognized by my new acquaintances is an overwhelming drive toward altruism. As I considered this section and its various components, I realized this still to be true.

I see three key elements as I examine the issue of values. The first is the need to be a contributing part of supportive relationships. The second is the need to sense importance in the activities of life. The third is the need to provide those around me with an emotionally safe environment. These three values--

supportive relationships, a sense of importance about the activities of life, and an emotionally safe environment--drive many of the decision of my life.

Supportive Relationships

Supportive relationships are of paramount significance to me, especially in the educational setting. The young lives we touch need to see us as major advocates for their welfare. They need to sense support is there regardless of the pressures of the world outside the school setting. Along with the students, we need to maintain supportive relationships with the adults we encounter on a regular basis. Guthrie and Reed (1991) wrote of our role with professionals in the educational setting:

Recognition and reward of staff members for achievement, inclusion in participatory decision making, providing opportunities for professional and personal growth, development of a school climate in which feelings of belonging are enhanced, and manifestation of respect for others are illustrative of means by which higher needs may be met. (p. 247)

All people face many pressures in this fast-paced world and knowing that a caring someone is there often makes a problem into a possibility.

Activities of Life

Sensing importance in what we do is a critical need for all people, regardless of age. This goes double for the education we provide the children in our care. The student must sense the importance of learning to have the best chance at the retention and application of this key work of youth. Schlechty (1990) said the following;

Rather than viewing the curriculum as a body of lore to be passed on to neophytes (usually with the neophytes in a passive, receiving role.), rather than thinking of the curriculum as an assembly line down which students go, different tracks for different qualities of raw materials (students being the raw material), and rather than thinking of the curriculum as a prescription to be administered to each student depending on his or her needs and deficiencies, in the knowledge-work school the curriculum becomes a body of material to be worked on by students, processed by students, molded and formed by students. In effect the curriculum becomes the raw material for the knowledge-work process. (p. 42)

Learning out of context drops significantly the sense of need one has for that learning. We touch many

lives, youth and adult alike, as we go about our daily activities. If we would take time to acknowledge the importance of these people and their work, it would make all our lives better and more rewarding.

Emotionally Safe Environment

Productive work is seldom accomplished in an unsafe environment. Safety is a sought-after value in at least part of every person's life. Children have a difficult time accomplishing or even concentrating on a task if they feel threatened or intimidated.

Furthermore, a safe environment can encourage an individual to move to a higher level of risk taking. When this happens, it often produces innovative and creative thinking. A sense of safety should be an element we all try to provide each other, those being educated and educator alike.

Personal Beliefs

When I examine my beliefs, I see three key elements that move to the front. The first is that every child is a unique gift and should be treated as important. The second is best described by saying people come first. Knowledge is the key to everything is the third major belief I hold. These three form the base from which all my professional decisions are made.

Every Child Is Unique

Learning needs to enhance the unique qualities of each learner, not stifle them. We also need to build in them a sense of being a key contributor to the group. We increase the likelihood of success for all when we recognize the strength obtained from drawing on the combined knowledge and abilities of each individual. The uniqueness and importance of each child and our willingness to acknowledge this will do much to lift the level of education in this stressed society.

Student interests represent another area of important individual differences. Many factors from a child's life affect interests in school. Only a portion of a child's interest is created within the school environment; the balance is generated from the home environment, the community, and differences in children's basic nature. (Hughes & Ubben, 1989, p. 102)

Believing this requires us to deal with children as individuals with differing interests, which does not often happen when we focus on curriculum and not the learner. This would tell us that curriculums which do not take into account the different interests of the learner will likely do a poor job of creating new

learning. Strong, Silver, and Robinson (1995) emphasized the importance of understanding this key point.

People Come First

In the business of education, we must never lose sight of the fact that people make it happen. We should center our actions on what makes it the best place for each person to do their work. Job satisfaction plays a key role in the success of any business. Addressing the aspects that interfere with that satisfaction strengthens a person's belief that he/she matters. Bracey, Rosenblum, Sanford, and Trueblood (1990) in their chapter, "Acknowledge the Greatness Within Me," presented the importance of recognizing the potential all people have within themselves.

Knowledge is the Key

This applies to all of us from the youngest to the oldest. When we enhance the process of learning and make it an activity that people find desirable, we enhance our society as well. With the rapidly changing level of knowledge always increasing, what was important to know yesterday may not hold the same importance tomorrow. Because change is the only

constant, it makes the desire and willingness to learn imperative.

In bringing this section to a close, I will address my philosophy on life itself and why altruism has usually been at the front of my decision-making process. Early in my education, I was introduced to Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs." "The theory, simply stated, is that people have a series of sequential needs, which, when the most basic ones are fulfilled, actuate them to strive to fulfill the next higher need in the sequence" (Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1985, p. 16). When we refuse to acknowledge the basic needs of all people, we condemn ourselves to a disinterested constituency who may be unwilling to accept our lofty goals and possibly even incapable of understanding them. Although this philosophy is sometimes seen as being in conflict with many religious groups, I see it as identifying the very foundations for human existence and giving a much-needed focus to the efforts of the religious sector of our society.

Role of Educator as Leader

What is an effective administrator for a district to do? Looking over the studies for an administrative degree as well as the experience of being in education for more than a decade brings areas of focus to mind.

The position of instructional leader stands out as the first to consider. This is closely followed by the role of child advocate. A staff cheerleader also appears to be very important if the institution is to move forward. The last area that should be addressed is being a community promoter. Other areas will be woven into the fabric of administering, but these stand out as the ones in need of the greatest attention at the beginning of a career in this field.

Instructional Leader

An effective administrator should look to the staff he/she is surrounded with to find the beginning knowledge base from which to build. What training does your staff have? What are the awarenesses of best current practices in education? What are the overall and individual levels of education? When you, as an administrator, can obtain this insight into your staff, you can begin to help make plans for the most effective use of current knowledge as well as identifying the areas in need of staff development. Covey (1989) addressed the importance of first understanding your staff before attempting to have them understand your designs and plans for them. It would serve us well to

remember this when dealing with the children as well as the adults in our lives.

An important area to develop in leadership is the connection to outside supporting agencies. Guthrie and Reed (1992) explained the advantages obtained by pooling the services needed in a school under the control of entities like area education agencies. They are usually thought of first when this is taken into consideration. This is an important area to develop and should be linked to other educational organizations and individuals. Look for potential mentors in the immediate vicinity that are showing signs of legitimate success. Ask yourself what professional organizations can provide you with literature and learning opportunities that will strengthen your own leadership skills and be a resource for your staff as well. Look for quality, not just quantity. Covey (1989) discussed the need to avoid having the limited time educators possess taken up by ineffective and unfulfilling linkages.

Evaluation is a critical component of a school's efforts to provide direction in the improvement of its educational programming--not just a way to critique the quality of the leadership and instructional practices of the staff. Leadership within a school needs to find

effective ways to identify constructive direction and help all staff pinpoint the skills they will need to support the district's movement in that direction. Quality professionals want to be given the opportunity to improve, and a wise administrator will use the important skills identified by the district as a means to support the staff with the development of their competencies. Henderson-Sparks, Ehrgott, and Sparks (1995) looked at some of the sound practices to consider when attempting to assist those teachers who would be considered as marginal. "The intervention strategies identified as most useful involved systematically working with marginal teachers to provide specific feedback and suggestions. Examples of these include continuous classroom observations, providing special instructional materials, and peer coaching" (p. 33). Knowing what is expected and how to improve oneself makes it a win-win situation for all involved.

One of the biggest dangers faced in the business of education is to believe that an administrator can effectively operate in his/her own little world without the support and cooperation of others who function at the same level of responsibility. Hoyle, English, and Steffy (1985) discussed teaming that results from the

effective building of communications between administrators. Quality programming in this age needs to have some commonality between different levels within the institution and at the same grade levels. Taking the time to make a check with others in the administrative role within the system helps to assure better cross-level coordination. There is no good excuse for isolation in this age of change and adaptation. All must seek to be seen as coworkers and collaborators within their administrative teams.

The need for long-range planning and the coordinated implementation of identified plans is a key component of the administrative role. Two vitally important areas are the development of a competent and skillful staff as well as a meaningful and significant curriculum. A staff that is confident and knowledgeable builds a positive learning environment. To obtain this component in a school, instructional staff need leadership that helps them to come to consensus about the best practices for instruction and learning. Obtaining quality training to support that consensus should be a strong focal point of a thoughtful administrator. When done well, a healthy team effort becomes evident. In an interview by John

O'Neil in the April, 1995 edition of Educational Leadership, Peter Senge put it this way:

Learning always occurs in a context where you are taking action. So we need to find ways to get teachers really working together; we need to create an environment where they can continually reflect on what they are doing and learn more and more what it takes to work as teams. (O'Neil, 1995, p. 20)

Child Advocate

Fear of any innovative educational practice, This Year's New Thing, becoming a trap can have a paralyzing effect on a school. Its efforts to move toward best instructional practices and the development of a truly child-centered curriculum can be thwarted. Continually moving a school toward the focus of what are the important elements for learning in a contemporary world and how we can create ways to support a child's desire to develop that learning will reduce the lack of direction felt by educators. Past practice is not always best practice, just as new concepts which are not put through the filters of contemporary need and child centeredness can lead to frustration and disillusionment. Quality administration will keep this focus clear. Christ (1995) stated:

Students who ask, "When are we gonna need this?" may not simply be complaining; they may actually be looking for the utility of the topic at hand. In fact, by presenting information in a meaningful context, a teacher greatly increases the likelihood that students will retain the information over the long term. (p. 32)

This is further supported by Berliner and Casanova (1993) in their chapter on "Use What Students Already Know To Teach New Things."

To assure the best learning opportunities for all children requires a willingness to support the child outside as well as within the school setting. No one entity can be totally responsible for the welfare of a child. Children learn quickly whether or not the adults in their lives can be relied on when there is help needed. Usdan (1994) discussed this with an emphasis on the value of a collaborative effort between and among all agencies concerned with the social and educational needs of children. Connections to community support systems and government agencies are a must. An administrator should seek to create these linkages and work to maintain a level of trust with the people in each. Knowing the people in these resources, their attitudes and beliefs, will serve to strengthen

the ability to respond in a timely and positive manner when the need arises.

Along with agencies and community support systems focused on the welfare of the child, we have the most important element to consider, the child's family. Support for the family by building a sense of shared responsibility by all who know and care for the child can lessen the negative effects in a time of crisis. In times of death, separation, divorce, financial difficulties, or strife at home an administrator should foster the belief in the school as a vital support system. Sergiovanni (1992) talked about the need for educational leaders to be seen in the role of stewardship and service to those in our charge. Leadership should strive to set the standard for our interaction with the families we serve. The school should always be seen as a caring, safe place for the child by the family as well as the child. The potential for schools in this area is great (Daleo, 1994).

Staff Cheerleader

Having a staff with a strong sense of community does much to build the kind of quality program educators want in a work environment. Sergiovanni (1992) emphasized the need for strong collegiality in

the educational workplace. The administrator who works to develop a sense of trust and teamwork among his/her staff increases the likelihood of this happening. This is best accomplished by the example set by the administrator. When staff know an administrator is open to hearing their concerns, the ability to identify problem areas is enhanced and allows for breaks in the team effort to be avoided. Strength comes from all employees feeling they are a valued part of the team. Sergiovanni (1994) noted:

At root, school leadership is about connecting people morally to each other and to their work. The work of leadership involves developing shared purposes, beliefs, values, and conceptions themed to teaching and learning, community building, collegiality, character development, and other school issues and concerns. (p. 7)

The accomplishments of students, education staff, and the community are often left unacknowledged. For this reason, celebration is something to intentionally find time to do.

In quality schools the morale is high. Students are enthusiastic about learning, teachers are enthusiastic about teaching, and parents are eager to become involved in school activities. The

achievements and contributions of all persons within the school are consistently and appropriately acknowledged and celebrated.

(National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990, p. 18)

Positives sometimes just become expected and are overlooked as a means for building a quality workplace. An administrator who identifies legitimate ways to celebrate the successes of his/her staff encourages employees to seek more and better ways to perform their responsibilities. Blase emphasized this by describing the principal in many different aspects as one who is "leading by standing behind" (Blase & Kirby, 1992, p. 65).

The opposite also applies. When the effort to improve what is done for children results in something less than desirable, it should be seen as a chance for growth.

Evaluation and assessment in quality elementary schools are handled with care and sensitivity. They are used to facilitate progress, and all concerned understand not only the purposes of the evaluation but the particular processes and instruments involved. Evaluation in such a school is as commonplace and acceptable as the program of

instruction. (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990, p. 21)

Fear of failure is a paralyzing emotion. An administrator can help his/her staff recognize that the attempt to move forward provides the opportunity to learn as much from the failures as is learned from the successes. An attitude should be fostered that both success and failure are a necessary part of moving forward.

Bracey, Rosenblum, Sanford, and Trueblood (1990) emphasized that employees cannot function well and efficiently in an environment where they are seen as a tool to fulfill the needs of the institution. As leadership within an institution works to achieve the success of their charge, it is foolhardy to lose sight of the complete wellness of the employees for whom they are responsible. This most certainly includes both the physical and emotional health of those under the leadership of an administrator. A respect and concern for their private needs at home and within the community enhances their committedness to the institution they work for. The whole person is employed (e.g., not just the teacher, secretary, custodian).

Community Promoter

The last area to be considered is the wisdom of making the school an integral part of the community and the community an integral part of the school. A quality administrator should make sure the activities of the school are before the public eyes. The greater the interaction between these two entities, the less mystery there is about what the school is and is not doing.

Making ties with the media is an important first step. "The relationship between the schools and the media is important. Schools need the media to help get their messages out to the community" (Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1985, p. 58). With their support, many of the needs of a school will have a greater chance of being met. Coverage of the programming being done and the needs to enhance the programs will keep the public aware and interested. Many times awareness is all it takes to get things accomplished, and the media will provide the best chance to achieve this awareness.

An awareness of the power base within your community should never be overlooked (Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1985). Without the unspoken support of this element, little can be accomplished. An administrator is forced to fight fires set by unknown arsonists when

this component of your community is ignored. The opposite is true when their input is sought. Access to the resources they represent can do much to enhance the quality schools we all seek.

In closing, to describe the job of an administrator without referring to it as a juggling act would be a mistake. Everyone in education should be able to recognize and appreciate the uniqueness of each child, and no one should forget to value and acknowledge each person they come in contact with. No one person can accomplish all that has been discussed in these pages. The key lies in being able to identify people within your institution who have strengths, talents, and knowledge within at least one of these areas and encourage their growth. Instructional leadership can and must be shared. All people involved in the education of children must be child advocates. Acknowledging and promoting the accomplishments of each team member makes a stronger team, and the business of education can only truly be successful when it becomes a collaborative effort of the entire community, inside and outside the school doors. The administrator who guides his/her actions by these principles can meet with success.

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