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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

Educating our children is the most worthy, rewarding, and influential profession obtainable. Educators join the profession to improve our society and because they care about children. The task educators face is immense. Every child can learn. I believe good teachers can positively impact the lives of children and their families.

Teaching is an art and good teachers teach children how to learn. Good teachers provide a variety of resources and tools a child can use in several situations to enhance learning. Good teachers ask thoughtful, and purposeful questions that leave a child a curious learner. Education should be a highly reflective process and that process should be as individual as the learner.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

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The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Masters of Arts in Education

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by

Valerie J. Daily

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Dr. Greg Reed

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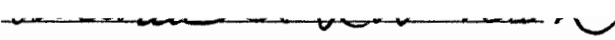
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I believe that educating our children is the most worthy, rewarding, and influential profession obtainable. I believe educators join the profession to improve our society and because they care about children. The task educators face is immense. I believe every child can learn. I believe good teachers can positively impact the lives of children and their families.

I believe teaching is an art and good teachers teach children how to learn. Good teachers provide a variety of resources and tools a child can use in several situations to enhance learning. I believe good teachers ask thoughtful, and purposeful questions that leave a child a curious learner. I believe education should be a highly reflective process and that process should be as individual as the learner.

I believe a good teacher cares deeply about children and understands developmental stages of children and adolescents. An effective teacher uses student data to drive educational decisions. An effective teacher also has a vast repertoire of instructional strategies and behavior management techniques. Good teachers communicate with parents about a child's academic achievements as well as social interactions, and learning styles. Good teachers share the good, the bad, and the ugly. An effective teacher makes observations, documents observations and shares information articulately so families have the necessary information to make sound decisions as they plan for their child's educational growth.

I believe children learn by doing. Good teachers provide meaningful opportunities for children to learn. I believe teachers are responsible for helping children recognize their learning styles and understand the accommodations that can be made to maximize children's learning. I believe children are eventually responsible for understanding their individual learning styles and sharing this information as needed.

I believe a school organization should focus on increasing student achievement and decreasing failure for each student. A school must increase the opportunities for students to achieve the goals of the curriculum. It is important to enhance the classroom climate for learning. It is also important to align the teaching processes and learning activities with theory and student needs. An effective principal facilitates the creation of a common aim or shared vision for a school and continually focuses all stakeholders towards that aim.

An effective principal identifies barriers to achieving a school's common aim and works to remove those barriers. I believe an effective principal engages in cause and effect thinking. She poses problems and engages herself and colleagues in problem solving. She creates and seeks novel approaches to different situation. An effective principal uses a participatory management style.

A good leader must be trustworthy and treat all individuals with fairness, dignity and respect. All students and staff must feel valued and important. Celebrating the accomplishments of students and staff is an important part of a

strong school culture. A successful principal models and encourages life long learning.

I value integrity, honesty, ethical behavior, collecting and using data, respecting different perspectives, building relationships, and positive thinking. These are simple words to write, but difficult to live. I hold these in such high regard because of their complexity and because the people I most admire share similar values. Integrity and honesty are values that must be taught, modeled, and reinforced at an early age. Children born into families who possess these values are fortunate.

Educators must behave ethically. Our families and children watch our behavior and we must walk our talk. To hold the profession in high regard, and then destroy it with unethical behavior is dishonorable. Good teachers care about children and recognize each child is a unique individual. Good teachers are tolerant people who value different perspectives whether they are spoken from a child, colleague, parent or community member. There is strength in diversity and there is much to be learned from others. An effective principal uses consensus-building skills. A school staff will benefit from participating in and contributing to healthy professional relationships. An effective administrator or teacher must be willing to create and build relationships.

The school leader must have behaviors that align with her values. An effective school principal must walk her talk as our families and children learn by

watching. An effective principal acts intentionally and purposefully. Thinking proactively and positively is important in a leadership role. Effective leadership is a constant work in progress. Good leaders reflect on their learning and learn from experience.

My interest in leadership began about five years ago. A group of citizens started working on a revitalization project for our downtown. This group was passionate about their vision and worked tirelessly. I assumed a leadership role with this group. I considered this work a life-changing event as it shifted my energy into a challenging role. I was involved in long-range planning, educating an entire community, working closely with different professionals, community based decision-making, and controversy. This process was an exciting journey. The content of the journey was vastly different from educating children. Initially my enthusiasm piqued because this was a topic out of my area of expertise and it was a learning experience. However, as we continued to complete the project and struggle through the process, it became apparent that the process was indeed similar to the improvement process used in education. As a group focused on a vision and heading in the same direction, we made a successful impact on the community. The leadership role I assumed throughout this lengthy project was exciting and challenging. I have the capacity to make a difference through my teaching or my administrating and I am willing to take the responsibility to do so.

There are many critical elements that are essential for exemplary leadership in our schools. Four of those elements that are discussed in this paper are ensuring accountability and improvement in the system, building leadership capacity, managing conflict resolution, and designing and leading effective professional development.

<p align="center">Ensuring Accountability and Improvement in the System</p>

Student achievement and performance data has come to center stage with the high stakes accountability attached to the No Child Left Behind legislation. The Iowa Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) requires that school districts collect data, analyze it and make decisions based on the data. I believe data should drive decisions. Successful principals should use improvement models that support the data collection process. Schools that use improvement models systematically and believe in the process will increase student learning.

It is critical that a successful school leader ensures accountability and improvement in the system. Professional development course information for teachers, "Requisites of Leader" (n.d.) states:

> Unusually successful school leaders view accountability
> and improvements as positive and energizing rather than as "a
> necessary evil". These leaders know that true accountability – the
> knowledge of how we're doing relative to our goals and the
> personal ownership of the responsibility that comes from that

knowledge - meets several important human needs: the need to be autonomous and self-determining, the need for efficacy, and perhaps most importantly, the need to be invested in an enterprise as an owner rather than as just a hired hand.

Collection of a multiple types of data is important to a school's success. School climate surveys, student performance or achievement data, implementation logs, and information regarding the impact of outside factors on student learning are just some of the many types of data that can be collected. As stated by Hansen & Showers (n.d.), "the key to data collection, however, is to focus on the students in a classroom, school, district, and/or state." Collecting this data, analyzing it and using it to drive decisions have far-reaching implications for your staff and community. Too often we support teachers in beginning new initiatives based on the teacher's enthusiasm for the new strategy or materials or just because it "sounds good".

The staff development decisions administrators make must be based on data. Teacher performance impacts student performance. Improving the performance and motivation of teachers is important. Herzberg (1987) made the distinction between intrinsic motivators (ones that lie within a human being) and extrinsic motivators (ones that lie outside a human being). Keeping your staff motivated over the long-term is a continual challenge for administrators. The intrinsic motivators as defined by Herzberg (1987) are as follows:

1. Information, so that people understand what it is they are being asked to do, and how it fits into a series of larger units, such as a school, a school district, or a state strategy for education of children.

2. A modicum of control over their work, particularly as it relates to information about goals and measurements, and the individuals' direct delivery towards those goals.

3. Respect, for them as individuals, for who they are and what they do. This probably is linked deeply to the first two motivators, information and control.

4. The chance to grow as a human being, according to one's spirit and one's own pace, as a human being in one's work.

Many of our school administrators in the smaller districts in Iowa equal as curriculum directors and school improvement facilitators. Decisions that are made regarding new curriculum or new initiatives must be based on educational research reviews. All materials on the market are research-based. We must be wise and careful practitioners and learn to follow educational research steps and practices to be sure we are meeting the needs of the children in our district.

Successful leaders use systematic processes in their organizations. The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) process has been used successfully in schools. Jenkins (1997) discussed the steps of a PDSA cycle as: Plan; determining the

current system, analyzing data of the current system and envisioning improvement; Do, deciding which improvement theory to try and implementing it; Study, examining the results of the experiment; and Act, establishing changes then starting over. Jenkins (1997) stated, "The PDSA cycle is critical for school districts determined to improve. An improvement-oriented school district that uses the PDSA cycle has few personnel problems, wastes little time on blaming, and focuses on making the future better for children" (p. 134).

As a principal, I will first research if an improvement model is in place in a school and its effectiveness. The CSIP process has strong data collection elements in place. This information is important for staff. They must be aware of the contents of the district CSIP and must understand the direct connection to their classroom and students. It will be important to begin using an improvement model that is understood and valued by all stakeholders. Staff development will be critical throughout the year as the building staff chooses one area of instruction to implement the improvement model. As an instructional leader I will convey the message that collecting data and using an improvement model is the way we do business.

The standard of instructional leader is met here as I will be promoting the success of all learners and directly connecting effective staff professional development to increased student achievement. My broad base of knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment as well as the change process will be

evident. All stakeholders will realize my core value of using a process for planned improvement. Stakeholders will be involved in collaborative activities designed to research current practice. School staff will be consistently working towards improving student learning and celebrating our accomplishments along the way.

Building Leadership Capacity

Building leadership capacity in a school is a critical element of a school's success. Linda Lambert (2003) defines leadership as "reciprocal, purposeful learning in a community" (p. 2). Lambert (2003) also asks us to keep in mind these assumptions as we envision leadership (p. 4):

- Everyone has the right, responsibility, and capability to be a leader

- The adult learning environment in the school and district is the most critical factor in evoking acts of leadership

- Within the adult learning environment, opportunities for skillful participation top the list of priorities

- How we define leadership frames how people will participate in it

- Educators yearn to be purposeful, professional human beings, and leadership is an essential aspect of a professional life

- Educators are purposeful, and leadership realizes purpose

Reading, believing, sharing, and valuing these assumptions are different entities. This is a great list to access, it takes awhile to absorb and then to

appreciate. The purposeful administrator will share these assumptions with her staff and consistently model these in a variety of ways. In many of our school buildings we have small pockets of teams that truly epitomize collegiality and consistently focus on improving student achievement and best practices. A focus of our professional development must be towards building this type of environment.

Blankstein and Noguera (2004) stated "Our combined experience as teacher, researchers, consultants (as well as school board service for one of us) has taught us that the attitudes, skills and beliefs of the adults who work in a school are the most important factors distinguishing schools where high levels of academic achievement for all students is the norm from others. School professionals who succeed in elevating student achievement accept responsibility for student outcomes. They avoid attributing student performance to factors they cannot control and pointing their fingers at others (p. 31)." These attitudes, skills and beliefs must be a part of the school community. It must be the way the school does business on a regular basis. Maintaining and sustaining this culture is a massive undertaking as well. The change in culture must be so embedded in the school that it is able to continue rather than disintegrate with a change in leadership.

During my career which spans more than two decades, I've yet to meet an administrator with extraordinary abilities to lead. I have also observed that

administrators constantly struggle with balancing the role as manager and the role as instructional leader. It was music to my ears to discover that McLaughlin & Talbert (2001) examined organizational context effects on teacher community, teaching, and teachers' careers and found no instances of administrative leaders who created extraordinary contexts for teaching by virtue of their own unique vision; nor did the study reveal any common patterns in strong principals' personal characteristics. Successful principals were men and women with varied professional backgrounds who worked in collaboration with teacher leaders and in respect of teaching culture. It truly is all about hard work, perseverance and collaboration. Putting a learning culture in place has to create an environment where the "little things" (which can overwhelm an administrator) either become moot points or are skillfully delegated. Steven Covey's (1989) framework for personal growth comes to mind as a powerful resource at this point.

Now, making this happen is another story. Many researchers have examined high-performing schools and much has been written regarding this topic. Blankstein & Noguera (2004) found these schools share six elements. Linda Lambert (2005) stated personal attributes and behaviors displayed by principals as well as how effective principals participate with community members and how formal authority is used. Barkley, Bottoms, Feagin & Clark (2001) explored three specific strategies that effective leaders employ in schools that are increasing student learning; modeling learning, providing compelling

reasons for others to learn, and creating a coaching environment for continuous growth. All of this information makes sense. Through my research I have not found conflicting information. Some information is much more detailed and specific. I believe the bottom line is, be purposeful. The traits displayed by effective leaders are a part of who they are. I believe these traits can be learned and there is a continuum for each of these traits or behaviors. The first step in obtaining these traits is self-realization and assessment. That must be followed by on-going education and a reflection process for learning.

In discussing professional learning communities, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek (2004) ask us to concentrate our effort and energy on three critical questions:

1. What is it we want all students to learn—by grade level, by course, and by unit of instruction?

2. How will we know when each student has acquired the intended knowledge and skills?

3. How will we respond when students experience initial difficulty so that we can improve upon current levels of learning?

Initiating a process for answering these three questions and working toward what Marzano (2003) refers to as a "guaranteed and viable curriculum" is a logical beginning. Part of that process should be a collective study of and

dialogue regarding the current reality in a school. Then an administrator will help the staff come to consensus on next steps and an assessment process to make sure we are making the intended progress.

This is intense, continuous and visionary work. Modeling this learning for our students and community will make a difference.

The standard of visionary leader is met here. Attention to detail is one of my strengths. Collecting and analyzing data with staff and designing strategic plans for continuous improvement will be a part of how we do business. Many elements of a continuous improvement plan can and will be conducted by staff. As we are constantly examining our structure and instructional practices, we will make the necessary changes so student learning is at an optimum level.

Managing Conflict Resolution

Another critical element to a school's success is having procedures and policies in place to handle conflict resolution. As well as those policies and procedures, an effective administrator must have a strong repertoire of strategies of dealing with conflict and a strong understanding of her inner self.

The word conflict can assume several meanings and connotations. Maurer (1991) noted that "conflict is not a state of being, but, rather an active process, which over time takes on various dimensions and dynamics." Recognizing the type of conflict at hand and choosing an effective process for resolution can

become an administrator's greatest strength. Johnson and Johnson (as cited in Michlowski, 1999) stated that "managed positively, conflict becomes a constructive experience resulting in a win-win situation. When schools foster a positive climate, conflicts become opportunities for growth."

Participating in these "win-win" situations and being a recipient of a "win-win" situation is powerful. I believe one of the most important ingredients to this success is patience. Taking time to reflect and consider possible solutions is time well spent. Also knowing when to reflect autonomously and when to incorporate a group of people is fundamental.

Dr. David Else (personal communication, June 15, 2005) outlined his "Foolproof Formula for Resolving Conflict." I have had opportunities to use this formula and it certainly works. Dr. Else's formula includes five steps:

1. Listen without interrupting

2. State, "If I had the same information you have, I'd be upset also."

3. State, "Let me share some information you may not have."

4. Ask, "What would you like me to do?"

5. Get back to them in 24 hours.

There is patience involved in using this formula. The tone of voice that is used and the rate in which you speak are also important components of using this formula effectively.

My mother always told me, "Never say never." I realized the importance

of this once I began raising my own children and began sharing my philosophy of

child-rearing whether it was solicited or not. Every child is unique. It is critical

that an educational system has the opportunity to analyze each situation for each

child exclusively. Established policies and procedures are guidelines which are

the first protocol to be consulted. When a situation does not follow or "fit"

protocol, the administrator's responsibility is to assemble and facilitate the

appropriate team of professionals for resolution. An example of this would be a

district's policy to determine placement or support in the Talented and Gifted

program. Procedures are in place for identification and support to begin in the

third grade year. However, a Kindergarten student enrolls who is able to read.

This child is identified as needing additional support and those support services

begin right away. "Never say never."

O'Meara (1997) stated the following:

>In philosophy, Socrates summed up the beginning of
>
>philosophy as the search for self-knowledge when he said that the
>
>only thing that I know is that I don't know. Socrates was the
>
>Athenian philosopher who was put on trial and condemned to death
>
>because he taught young men philosophy. He was charged with
>
>impiety to the Gods and with corrupting the youth. Both charges
>
>reduce to this: He had taught the young to question values and

religious beliefs. When he was on trial, he explained that a friend of his Chaerephon had gone to the temple of Appollo, the god of wisdom, to the oracle at Delphi. Inscribed in this temple were the words "know thyself." Chaerephon had asked the oracle if there was any man wiser than Socrates, and the oracle's reply was that there was no man wiser. When Socrates heard this from his friend, he was greatly puzzled. How could he be the wisest man if the only thing that he knew was that he didn't know? He thought surely there must be men wiser than he. So he went around the city questioning different people. These people knew about their trades and professions but when he asked them about values, he discovered that they didn't know what they thought they knew. The wisdom of Socrates consisted in this that he knew that he didn't know; the foolishness of his fellow Athenians consisted in this that they didn't know that they didn't know. The wisdom of Socrates was not a theoretical, abstract thing; it was a living, practical commitment. Aware of his ignorance, he committed himself to trying to overcome that ignorance. He summed up this commitment in the most famous statement of all philosophy: "the unexamined life is not worth living." Philosophers call this the Socratic commitment.

This has become more relevant to me as I watch leaders in my community and my school district. Each of these leaders' movements is scrutinized and I have asked myself if this is a position in which I want to be placed. Not surprisingly, the answer changes. I believe that "knowing thyself" becomes more important as you accept more leadership responsibilities. It's one thing to understand the structure and procedures of an educational institution and to be willing to uphold policies that are in place within that structure. Making a stand in voice and print during moral dilemmas and controversy that involves emotions and feelings is another. I have searched to know myself and the quest continues.

The standards of organizational leadership and ethical leadership are met here. Organizational leadership is supported by dealing with procedural, safety and security issues within the school. It is also met by accepting the responsibility to make management and organizational decisions for optimal student learning. However, the heart of this section lies within ethical leadership. This is where I have to bring my ethical principles to the table. This is also where I may be accepting consequences for upholding my principles and actions. This is where an effective administrator walks her talk.

Designing and Leading Effective Professional Development

My final critical element for success is the administrator's ability to design and lead effective staff development. This issue has come full circle with the passage of the State of Iowa Teacher Quality Legislation and the Federal No Child Left Behind Legislation.

As stated on the Iowa Department of Education Website (2005)

The Iowa Student Achievement and Teacher Quality Program sets standards for how to plan, provide, and evaluate professional development for Iowa's teachers. Professional development, as described in this legislation, is for the purpose of increasing student achievement. Professional development includes learning opportunities that are included in the District Career Development Plan and the Individual Teacher Career Development Plan. These professional development structures address district student achievement goals and the Iowa Teaching Standards. The Iowa Professional Development Model provides guidance and technical assistance for implementing district and school-wide professional development to accomplish gains in student achievement.

The Iowa Professional Development Model, Administrator's Guide (2005) is a great reference for principals. This outline includes many resources to implement

quality professional development. This is the first reference for administrators. There are many other important elements to providing effective professional development. Once the content has been established (which is a process in itself), the process, planning and implementation for delivery are essential.

Marcia Tate (2004) notes,

>   Theories abound from researchers such as Howard
>   Gardner, Robert Sternberg, and Bernice McCarthy (as cited in
>   Tate, 2004) related to the variety of ways that individuals acquire
>   and retain content. An exciting sign of our time is the fact that
>   brain research now provides neurological rationales as to why
>   some strategies simply work best not only for student brain but for
>   adult brains as well.

Tate's book (2004) should be a resource for every single professional development activity. As the content is developed, strategies that are used to implement the content should come directly from this book. Why create something new? All of these strategies are ways our brains learn best.

Todd Whitaker (2003) states, "the only ways a principal can improve a school are to hire better teachers or to improve the teachers who are already there" (p. 35). Whitaker (2003) outlines modeling effective interaction, getting teachers into each other's classrooms and the talent exchange. Whitaker's ideas aren't difficult; they are simply purposeful and planned.

Planning is critical. This has appeared to me to be the easiest element of professional development to disregard. The most effective professional development sessions I have attended were almost seamless. A clear objective was stated, activities varied and time flew. I walked away with a sense of accomplishment and a desire to engage in more dialogue and to learn more about the topic. The amount of planning involved in these effective sessions was not apparent to me until I was involved in delivering professional development. Planning is critical. The amount of time that is spent in planning is not evident unless very little planning took place. In that case, it becomes crystal clear.

Linda Lambert (2003) discusses faculty meetings and notes, "We all know that poorly designed meetings can be deadly. Well-designed ones, on the other hand, can constitute an articulated series of learning experiences" (p. 13). She goes further to outline criteria for these learning experiences to occur. The delivery of professional development to an entire staff is one aspect of moving your staff towards new learning and implementation of new instructional strategies. Working with teams of teachers as grade level groups, study groups, action research teams, vertical learning communities or leadership teams is an entirely different component of effective leadership.

This can not be accomplished alone and it should be a collaborative effort. Here's where the beauty of placing the right stakeholders in the right spot

at the right time can make a difference. Using distributed leadership practices and working collaboratively are ways good leaders can create more leaders.

The standard of instructional leadership is met in this final section. This is where teacher learning takes place which in turn improves student learning. Professional development must be an integral part of the school community. This is where a strong administrator facilitates processes that engage staff and where opportunities to work collaboratively are continuous.

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