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

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

### Abstract

The job of a principal has endless responsibilities and expectations. Knowing what your convictions are, morals, philosophy, expectations, and your vision of the future are key components in becoming a principal. Having an understanding of technology and where it can be used to enhance learning will help students become prepared for the future as well as getting the parents and community to support the school district will help in all areas of the school; such as academics, athletics, and the fine arts. Having all of the areas become successful in their own right, will give any principal the feeling of having a successful job. But any principal knows they cannot rest on past successes. We need to keep moving forward towards the future.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Post Secondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

of Masters in Education

by

James R. Cook

May 2006

Dr. David Else

This Research Paper by: James R. Cook

Entitled: WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Master of Arts in Education.

**Dave Else**

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Date Approved Advisor/Director of Research Paper

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The ability to lead an organization or a school building is a task that an individual should not take lightly. The position of being a leader can be traced back to the Egyptians centuries before Christ (Owens, 2001). The overall approach has not changed much with someone being the leader on the top, then the rest of the chain of command trickling down and branching out to the subordinates.

During my first year as an educational leader, in a secondary building, I hope to become familiar with and learn from many different organizational systems, which are available to me. I truly believe I would prefer to have a collaborative approach, where I can gather information as I need from other staff members and use the information to make a decision. A collaborative approach keeps a close working relationship with staff members. Working closely with staff members allows you to know the staff better, become comfortable in dealing with the staff, and have an understanding of how the staff would respond to different types of directives or situations.

I still have a sense of the top-down organizational theory in me. I believe there must be someone at the top giving directions to subordinates. There will always be someone who is in charge in any organization. The leader must have the charisma, integrity, and the ability to lead his/ or her organization. As the power shifts down from the top, the organization needs to spread the power among the teachers into a team approach. The teachers must work together and

form a trust among each other in order for the organization to run efficiently. If the top-down approach is used today, it must be used correctly. The leader cannot rule with an iron fist and control the teachers to the point of telling them what to do every single minute of the day. The top-down theorist must listen to subordinates and take in suggestions and try to incorporate those ideas into the strategy of the organization. If the teachers feel they are important, then their work will continue to prosper.

My personal philosophy of leadership is a combination of the Human Relationship Theory and Contingency Theory. In the 1920's, Mary Parker Follett's (as cited in Owens, 1987) comments and writing on leadership, power, law of the situation, conflict integration and circular behavior, empowerment, teams, networked organizations, importance of relationships within and among organizations, authority, and control were way ahead of her time. She examined the creative group process, crowd psychology, neighborhood and work, governance, the self in relation to the whole, and ideals of integration, synthesis, and unifying differences (as cited in Boje & Rosile, 2001). Many of her ideas and thoughts are widely used today. She saw that the administrator has three choices in handling conflict: (a) by the exercise of power, (b) by compromise, (3) by "integration" or bringing the conflict into the open and seeking a mutually acceptable, win-win resolution (as cited in Owens, 1987). In education, an administrator would possibly use all three choices in any given day.

Administrators make final decisions on issues, compromise decisions with students and have win-win situations concerning students and/or staff.

The Human Relations Theory is designed to develop interpersonal relations, group dynamics, boost morale, and focus on behavioral concepts of motivation. A leader should be there to encourage staff, develop personal relationships with staff and students, keep morale up, and impose a democratic way of supervision. Influential leaders in the Human Relations Theory were Robert Bales and Jacob Moreno. (As cited in Owens, 1987), Bales developed a systematic technique for analyzing the patterns of interaction between the members of a group. Bales were the first to document that successful groups tend to have people in them who play key roles. One individual or several individuals is needed to keep the group focused on accomplishing its task, and at the same time, it is necessary for every successful group to have someone to see that the group pays attention to maintaining productive human relations within the group.

The early work of Jacob Moreno (as cited in Owens, 1987) illustrates the development of sociometric analysis. Moreno sensed that within groups there are informal subgroups, formed essentially on the basis of how much they like or dislike one another. Information was gathered from the members as to the attraction they had for one another. From the information, sociograms were developed which portrayed the dynamics of the informal social structure of

human groups. These studies laid the groundwork for better understanding the nature of human groups and how they function together.

Based upon my own personality and the way I do things as a teacher, I believe the Human Relations and the Contingency Theories will work the best for me. I would also be considered a Soft X theorist. A Soft X theorist is someone who is fair and flexible but still has authority and control over all situations. I do not want to be too soft where kids and staff can do whatever they want. I want to be firm and deal with situations that need toughness when needed and have the students respect me first and like me second. I want the students and staff to respect me because I am a fair, honest, trustworthy, and dependable person who is willing to do almost anything to help them. Everyone must work together as a team to boost morale, develop personal relations with staff, and also be there to analyze situations and react to them. It is my job to create a productive environment as well as creating an environment where teachers teach and students learn.

I believe children can be molded and shaped to an extent. The principal and the staff are there to be the molders and sculptors of the students. People can be controlled by external forces such as rewards and punishments, a crucial factor in the motivation of people lies within the individuals themselves (Owens, 2001). I would like to be a motivating factor in the well-being of students. I would use



some of my experiences as a coach and try to get students excited about being at school and doing the work required to graduate.

Children come to school to be social as well as coming for an education. The environment must be conducive for both. Academics must come first, since it is an academic setting, but the social aspect is very critical for student success. I want to create an atmosphere where both are important. Learning social skills is important for all students.

I want to come to work everyday excited about being there. Through my excitement and enthusiasm, the students and staff will also be excited. I will do my best to have every student succeed at something, whether it is in athletics or academics. The students need to have an accomplishment to remember from high school. If students do not have anything to feel excited about, then their motivation to come to school will diminish and absences will increase.

Another part of my leadership style will be based upon my principles and morals. I know who I am and what I am about and I will hold to my principles and morals. I believe motivation comes from within and if there is an intrinsic motivation with staff and students to do their best, then half the battle is done. It is up to me to get the other half to be productive. If students and staff are not willing to meet me halfway on motivation, then I believe I can not be the one to motivate them entirely. I can not be the only one concerned if the student isn't

willing to do the work. The student as well as the parents needs to be involved in the child's education.

Four critical elements I believe are important to any educational leader are shaping school culture, inviting parent and community involvement, utilizing technology, and moving from an average principal to a good principal. All these elements play a key role in any principal's success on the job.

### Shaping Culture

The first critical element I believe is important to an educational leader is the culture of the organization. A place where one works or goes to school should be a place that is welcoming and free of negative overtones. But many school buildings and school districts are faced with a school culture that is constantly in need of improvement. Changing those negative feelings will only take time. But who is the one to make that change? I believe it is a combination of various people working together. It includes the students, staff, and the administration. The leader of the change should be the principal. Staff and students alike, take cues and directions from the leader, so it is vital the leader be in the forefront leading the way.

What is "school culture"? Wagner defines culture as "how we do things around here" (as cited in Delisio, 2005, p. 1). He also explains school culture as shared experiences both in and out of school, such as traditions and celebrations, sense of community, of family and team. A school's performance never will

improve until the school culture is one where people feel valued, safe, and share the goal of self-improvement. "Schools that have improved have put the emphasis on culture. Culture always should precede programs. If teams of people do not improve, a school never will" (p. 1). Dr. Kent D. Peterson (cited in Cromwell, 2002) notes "School culture is the set of norms, values, and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the persona of the school"(p. 1).

I believe school culture has a tremendous impact on how the school operates on a daily basis. If the culture is positive in nature, then students and staff alike want to succeed. Then if the culture is negatively-based, the staff does not feel energized and the students do not become energized about being in school. School culture has an impact on student achievement. Students who are positive about school will also have higher tendency to succeed on tests and assignments. If I think positively, then positive things will happen.

Researchers have compiled some impressive evidence on school culture. Healthy and sound cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation, and with teacher productivity and satisfaction (Stolp, 1994). Leslie J. Fyans and Martin L. Maehr (1990) looked at the effects of the five dimensions of school culture: academic challenges, comparative achievement, recognition for achievement, school community, and perception of school goals. The study of over 16,000 fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth grade students from 820

public schools in Illinois found support for the proposition that students are more motivated to learn in schools with strong cultures. Yin Cheong Cheng's study (as cited in Stolp, 1994) of teachers' attitudes towards their work, found stronger school cultures had better motivated teachers. Cheng suggests in environments rich with strong organizational ideology, shared participation, charismatic leadership, and intimacy, teachers experienced a higher job satisfaction and increased productivity.

A part of the school culture is how well the school feels welcoming for the community and visitors. I would think principals want their school to feel warm and welcome for new and old visitors when they come through the doors. When someone comes into the building, how does it make them feel?

Principal Deborah Harbin and her staff at Duryea Elementary School in Houston, begin each day welcoming everyone with a handshake and a friendly comment such as "I'm so glad you are here today" (Hopkins, 2005, p. 2). These friendly statements make the students feel good about being in the school. I think if students feel good about being in school, then their test scores and grades will benefit from the positive atmosphere surrounding them.

Changing a school culture would be a very hard thing to do, especially if the culture has been negative for many years. The longer it has been negative then the process of change will take more time. Initiating the change must come from the principal. When beginning this initiative of change, he or she must

bring on as many teachers and staff as possible. Getting your staff onboard with this change is a critical part of the process. If the staff does not feel as passionate as you do about changing the culture then you will have difficulty in making your desired change. Having the administrators and staff collaborate in this process will foster an opportunity for learning. Giving ownership to the teachers and staff will aide in your vision of a positive and flourishing school culture.

I believe by being proactive with staff, students, and the community in gaining their trust will go a long way in improving the school culture. I will be visible in the hallways, classrooms, gymnasium, auditorium, and in the community. I want the parents to know I truly care about their child's education and their child's personal endeavors. By my actions and words, I will serve as a role model for staff and students to follow. Getting all parties to trust me will be the first thing to accomplish. I will do my best to let students learn and teachers teach. In order to do this I must follow through on things such as discipline, work deadlines and personal contacts will show I care about the students and the school.

Shaping a school's culture follows Standard 2, Instructional Leadership, by facilitating success of all students through advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (Wilmore, 2002). I also believe by

nurturing a culture you are also using Standard 1, by being a visionary leader (Wilmore, 2002). A leader must be able to develop a vision of where he or she would like education to go. Building and sustaining a positive culture will aid in the implementation of a vision of learning.

#### Inviting Parent / Community Involvement

Involvement in a child's education is one of the most important things a parent, guardian, loved one, or a community can do to show a child they care. Students who succeed in school generally have a family who is very supportive of them and the school. The research is clear. When parents and communities are involved in schools, education improves (Brown, 2000). Studies have indicated that children whose parents and/or other significant adults share in their formal education tend to do better in school. Some benefits that have been identified that measure parental involvement in education includes: (a) higher grades and test scores, (b) long-term academic achievement, (c) positive attitudes and behavior, (d) more successful programs, and (e) more effective schools (Hickman, 1999).

All parents want their children to become successful, caring adults. Similarly, many parents want to be involved with the formal education of their children. In some cases they do not know where to start, when to find the time, or how to go about making positive connections with the school. At the most basic of levels, parents can begin encouraging the education of their children by showing that they truly value education themselves.

The term "parent involvement" means many different things to each individual parent. It includes different forms of participation in education and with the schools. Parents can support their children's schooling by attending school functions and responding to school obligations (parent-teacher conferences, for example). They can become more involved in helping their children improve their schoolwork--providing encouragement, arranging for appropriate study time and space, modeling desired behavior (such as reading for pleasure), monitoring homework, and actively tutoring their children at home. Outside the home, parents can serve as advocates for the school. They can volunteer to help out with school activities or work in the classroom. Or they can take an active role in the governance and decision-making necessary for planning, developing, and providing an education for the community's children. Whatever the means of involvement, parents need to be doing something for their child and for the school. No matter how small, some form of involvement by parents is better than no involvement at all.

I believe schools can be on the proactive side of encouraging parents to become involved in the school. Schools are in desperate need of volunteers to help in the classrooms and in other areas as well. The more adults watching and helping students, the better it will be for the children. This reduces the stress on the teacher if they know there are capable adults in the room to assist them. Parental involvement increases when the administration and staff of a school

communicate a genuine desire to involve parents by considering their needs (Parental Involvement, 1999). Both parties can benefit when parents engage in joint learning activities. Parental Involvement in Education (1999) identifies several interventions both schools and parents can implement to increase communication and involvement: (a) train teachers to work with parents and view them as partners in education, (b) encourage mothers and fathers to attend and speak out in committees, (c) encourage an active parent teacher association, (d) establish a home/school coordinator to develop programs and act as a liaison between parents and school.

Before teachers and parents can work together, the fears and misunderstandings of each group need to be broken. Parents are often hesitant to become involved in school; mostly because of the fear of judgment and criticism from school and staff. Principals are also reluctant to involve parents because they are used to being the ones in power (Parental Involvement, 1999). Getting the teachers trained in best practices as well as effective ways to involve parents can and may open the lines of communication between the two groups.

Studies from Ballen and Moles (1994) have proven child performance has increased when their parents become involved in their education. It is up to the parents on how involved they become. School officials, staff and parents must work together to form an alliance to break down the barriers long associated



between the groups. When those barriers come down, student achievement shall go up.

When involving the parents and the community into the educational process, Standard Four is addressed, the building and using of the collaborative process. The community and parents are a critical part on the wheel of education. Without the parents and communities support, the educational process of teaching and learning will not take place.

### Leading Technology

Since its inception in the late 1970's, the personal computer has steadily been a driving force behind education. The use of technology has increased tremendously over the past decade with the continuous decline in prices and the use in the job market. Almost every job in some direct or indirect way uses technology in its daily function.

I can vividly remember my first use of a computer in the seventh grade. It was 1984 and our school had just received the brand new TRS-80 machines. Using simple programming we could make our names scroll across the screen from top to bottom. By the time I got to be a senior in 1989, our computer science instructor, who hailed from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and knew Bill Gates, had the top of the line IBM computer, a 286 processor with 2 MB of RAM. We learned how to write programs, binary code, and play the best game out at the time, King's Quest. From that point on, I have always been

interested in the computer and other related electrical devices. During the early 1990's the computer exploded onto the scene of education because of the drop in prices to where schools could purchase large quantities of computers. With this influx of computers, students began learning more about them, often knowing more than some teachers.

One of the greatest influences in this movement is the role of the principal. I believe the principal will be the building leader when it comes to staying with the changing world of technology. He or She will be instrumental in deciding and choosing when computer labs, teacher workstations, and software will be upgraded. Current and future principals must stay on top of technology and understand when the time comes to make changes. If schools stay close to the technological curve of the ever-changing technological advances, it will be to the advantage of the student. The more classroom time devoted to and learning how software programs work, the more prepared the students will be for college or the work force. To me, the job of the high school is to prepare students' for the future. The more prepared and experienced the students are in using technology and the various software computers run, then their skills will be wanted in the workforce.

Teachers of today will either embrace the information age or be reluctant to move forward. Michael Warren, (as cited in Morrison, 2002) the Secretary of the Michigan State Board of Education and Chair of the Board's Task Force on

Embracing the Information Age, is a leading advocate of using information technology tools and learning practices in K-12 education. He has played a major role in developing, drafting, and advocating information age education reform proposals that have been implemented into law and policy in Michigan. Warren believes current educational standards and traditional ways of schooling have become obsolete. Public education looks much like it did 100 years ago because it is slow to change. For students to be prepared for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they need a technology-rich, learner-focused environment.

Today's children are growing up in a much different world than the baby boomers. Donald Tapscott (as cited in Kashmanian, 2000) advocates technology and wants educators to rethink the teaching and learning process to take full advantage of all it has to offer. Teachers can become facilitators of learning in a resource-rich environment as opposed to disseminators of information.

Schools must embrace the rapid rise of technology. In order for their students to prosper in and after school, money will need to be budgeted for the future. Computers, software, digital cameras, and many other devices cost money. The principal must sit down with the district's technology coordinator and the building's technology committee and devise a plan. The plan should include short and long-term goals, where you want the school/district to go and how you will get there. The technology plan should be integrated into the school culture and vision.

I will lead the use of technology by doing my best to ensure the school is keeping up with rapid changes. Teachers need to be provided training on software and the use of technology. It is my job to find out what those needs are and make accommodations to meet those needs. I will also need to work closely with the district's technology director so I can receive training on our latest software improvements. I would make a list of labs and all teacher computers writing down when they were purchased and what kind of software they are running. This will make it much easier to prioritize who is next in line to receive new machines or software. A part of your decision-making should be based on what the machines are used for. Some machines will get used twice as much as some others and generally those computers will break down faster. Know your yearly budget for technology purchases. This will also help in setting aside money for large quantity purchases if you know in advance that a lab is next in line.

The use of technology in education connects to the standards in many ways. Technology relates to Standard One because *the principal is the educational leader who promotes the success of all students (Wilmore, 2002)*. Some students will use the computer to succeed in their academics. The principal must be one of the many who facilitate the districts' vision of learning. As in Standard Two, *the principal promotes creating a culture that values enhanced performance (Wilmore, 2002)*. Technology will assist greatly in student and staff development. Principals will communicate with parents, teachers, and the

community via email, which involves using the computer and the internet. This would coincide with Standard Four, *building collaborative partnerships* (Wilmore, 2002).

Technology will continue to improve and be a large part of a school's vision and curriculum. Principals need to be an integral part, if not the leader in the vision of incorporating technology. Without principals taking the leadership role, the staff and students will have no one as a leader to look up to follow.

#### Moving From Average to Good

What do great principals do differently? The book *What Great Principals Do Differently*, by Todd Whitaker (2003), has great thoughts and ideas about the job of being a principal. It illustrates what ineffective principals do. By giving both the good and bad sides of a principal, you can understand the differences and comprehend them.

One of the best traits a principal can possess is the ability to lead. Without this ability, very few schools will function as they should. Effective leaders will lead people to accomplish the important work of schools (Whitaker, 2003). Adapting to change without losing the vision of what truly matters plays a vital role in the success of the principal. An individual must have the panache of a great general to lead his or her building.

One of the things I have learned within the past five years of teaching is to surround yourself with good people. Early on I was mainly concerned with just

keeping the students busy and learning as much as I possibly could. As you get older, you notice who the good teachers are because you learn what is good and what is bad. You emulate the good teachers and stay away from the negative ones. Once you learn what is good, you associate yourself in school and outside of work with those positive people. Continuing to improve the school system is to hire and maintain those good, positive people. Those “good” people will eventually become the next set of leaders in education.

One of the more important sayings I have learned from participating in sports and I now preach to my athletes is “Respect your opponent, Fear none!” Something similar is true for education. As teachers and leaders of education, we must treat everyone with respect, every day all the time. I try my hardest not to hold grudges against students who disrupt or are discipline problems in my classroom. It is hard to do sometimes, but to be fair to all you cannot hold grudges. I believe it clouds your judgment when dealing with individuals who continually break the rules. If you show staff, students, and community member’s respect, you will in turn be treated with the same. When it happens, a sense of happiness follows. Happiness makes for a better school climate.

An important factor in making schools and students achieve is to focus on their behavior, not their beliefs. If you can change a behavior, then in turn you possibly might change a belief. Behaviors are easier to change because you can model or praise the behaviors you want or punish the ones you do not. I have had

good experiences with parents when dealing with their son or daughters education. It is the age old problem of one story being brought home and another being told by me. Parents play an integral part in shaping children's behavior. The majority of students' behavior will change if the parents are spoken to by the principal and in turn the parent speaks to the student. When hiring new staff, educational leaders should hire who is best for the position. Especially spots where athletic coaching is involved. School districts should hire who is best for the academic side as opposed to the athletic side. Some schools have a tendency to hire athletics first then worry about the academics second. I disagree with schools who hire athletics first. In the long run which school is going to succeed? The academic side, of course will succeed.

Another point Whitaker (2003) makes is to make it cool to care. If you are an effective leader then this trait should come natural to you in your every day performance. Saying "Thank You", "Sorry", and "Good Job" are sometimes hard to do. Showing staff and students that you honestly care about them will make them feel good about themselves and in turn be willing to do things for you. Coming to activities or dressing the part for some after school activity, shows students that you care about them and want to see them succeed. Students recognize when the principals are there watching. It sometimes may encourage them to do better.

Being flexible in dealing with people in general, is one of the utmost qualities a principal can have. Teachers have feelings, problems, and sick children at home. So being able to deal with situations as they arise instantly is important (Hopkins, 1999).

Educational leaders must possess all the attributes listed previously in order to become a good leader. Without making progress in areas where there is weakness, the learning community will slowly suffer and become chaotic. Improving your skills, being innovative, enthusiastic, and a visionary for the school district will allow you the opportunity to become a good educational leader. Holding essential beliefs and values are the keys to becoming a great principal. Stay true to what you believe and do not let others easily sway you to what they believe is best for all children. Instilling, developing, and encouraging the things that matter most will in turn make for an enjoyable, pleasant, and rewarding time as a leader of children, teachers, and the school community.

The principal whether he or she is good or great must be able to possess all of the six standards in some form. Some areas will be a higher than others, but principals must be able to improve in areas which are deficient. Improving in all facets of the job is important to having any longevity in the job as a principal.

The job of a principal has endless responsibilities and expectations. Knowing what your convictions are, morals, philosophy, expectations, and your vision of the future are key components in becoming a principal. Having an



understanding of technology and where it can be used to enhance learning will help students become prepared for the future as well as getting the parents and community to support the school district will help in all areas of the school; such as academics, athletics, and the fine arts. Having all of the areas become successful in their own right, will give any principal the feeling of having a successful job. But any principal knows they cannot rest on past successes. We need to keep moving forward towards the future.

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