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A commitment to excellence in educational leadership: a reflective essay

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A commitment to excellence in educational leadership: a reflective essay

Abstract

The role of a principal is an overwhelming one – many faceted, imbued with great responsibility and strict accountability. I know the perfect principal does not exist. The "perfect" robotic leader would have little, if any, positive impact on her learning community. There are, however, some very human characteristics that, if practiced, would positively contribute to the community's educational success.

These practices and values are set forth in this reflective essay. I am confident that those who share my vision – that every human being matters and makes a contribution to the entire learning community – will experience the joy and immense satisfaction of helping others succeed as learners as well as caring human beings.

A COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts in Educational Leadership

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by

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Thomas H. Huxley (1825-1895), an English biologist, once said:

Perhaps the most valuable result of all education is the ability to make

yourself do the thing you have to do, when it ought to be done, whether

you like it or not; it is the first lesson that ought to be learned; and

however early a man's training begins, it is probably the last lesson that he

learns thoroughly.
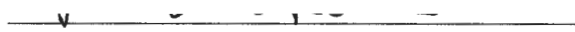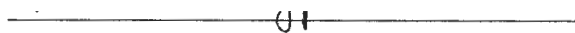
My graduate journey has been one of discovering just what it is that I ought to

do—what is my calling in the field of education? I have spent a great deal of time

reflecting on the qualities of an effective leader, analyzing my motives for

exercising that leadership, and clarifying my beliefs about education and people in

general.

As I prepare to complete the graduate experience, I find myself feeling

even more humbled than when I first began my studies. The role of a principal is

an overwhelming one—many faceted, imbued with great responsibility and strict

accountability. I know the perfect principal does not exist. The "perfect" robotic

leader would have little, if any, positive impact on her learning community.

There are, however, some very human characteristics that, if practiced, would

positively contribute to the community's educational success.

I am committed to the practices and values set forth in this reflective

essay. I am confident that those who share my vision—that every human being

matters and makes a contribution to the entire learning community—will

experience the joy and immense satisfaction of helping others succeed as learners as well as caring human beings.

The Educator

My journey toward the commitment to excellence in educational leadership began in my childhood. I was one of the many kids in the 1960's who grew up playing "school." I ran the school we played in at home during the summer, and during the school year, I thrived in the classroom—driven, as it were, to learn everything I could as quickly as possible. I experienced success, enjoyed my teachers, collaborated with my classmates on projects, and treasured every day of my school life experience.

While enrolled at ISU one of my three jobs was tutoring students in math, science, and English. The pay was good, but the time spent helping students understand concepts I had previously grappled with was phenomenal. I found myself taking on more and more students. There was no greater feeling than assisting them in their studies. I liked the idea of being able to build relationships with others while helping them learn. It was at this point that I officially embarked on the teaching adventure.

I student taught at the junior high school in Ames, Iowa. Upon graduating, I got a job teaching with my former junior-high and high-school teachers. I had learned so much from them as one of their students, now I was able to learn from them as a colleague. I am so thankful for those experiences. I

was able to assess the profession from so many perspectives—from extremely positive to downright negative. I was forced to formulate my own beliefs and philosophy of education.

In a nutshell, my philosophy of teaching centers on character—demonstrating and developing character. I am personally committed to integrity and trustworthiness. I have high expectations for myself in terms of academic growth and personal relationships. I also have high expectations for my students. Not only am I concerned with their academic growth, I am intent on strengthening their skills for success *outside* the classroom. The surest route to successful learning is one in which the teacher and parents are partners, where there is open communication, shared goals, and consistent and enforced expectations. As an educational leader, this philosophy will be foundational in structuring the vision for my learning community.

I have spent over 20 years in the classroom committed to these beliefs. Sometimes I rejoice at having attained success; at other times I am saddened when I fall short or students seem not to engage in the learning process. I have not reached the place where I feel I "have arrived" in the profession. I question whether one ever does get to that place. But it is my continuous goal to strive for excellence, rather than perfection.

Life-long learning is a passion for me. I am usually reading three or four books at a time. Currently I am reading *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive*

Through the Dangers of Leading (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), *The Other Jesus* (Ogilvie, 1986), *Les Miserables* (Hugo, [1862] 1964), and *Define Normal* (Peters, 2000). I soak up TLC (The Learning Channel) and Biography like an enormous sponge. I continuously glean something new from my students. Not a day has elapsed that I haven't seen information from a new viewpoint or understood a concept I had previously taken for granted in a new light. Acquiring a master's degree has always been a goal of mine. Deciding *which* master's degree to pursue has proven a challenge, however. In 1997 I began a program in Teaching English in the Secondary Schools. I enjoyed every moment of it, but I was looking for a different kind of challenge, one that would allow me to grow in ways not directly affected by language arts or literature.

At one point in my adult life I worked as a customer service manager and project manager for a publishing firm. The job required an enormous amount of energy and multi-tasking. I entered the business world very green and emerged fairly seasoned. Almost five years in the job afforded me the luxury of learning from my mistakes. I had the pleasure and challenge of managing people as well as projects. There were no dull moments. I learned a lot about myself and my capabilities. I saw that much of what I had employed in the classroom as a teacher worked well in the business realm. People are people, no matter where you go. They need someone willing to lead them with integrity, compassion, and patience. I endeavored to do this.

But I missed the students. I missed the daily interaction with my colleagues. Working with others all over the United States was wonderful, but the relationships were sometimes short-lived. While a project was "hot" I felt I could have a positive impact on those involved in the project, but after it was completed, those people could disappear from my life in the blink of an eye. I wanted to be a part of something more permanent. I returned to the classroom, once again committed to life-long learning and authentic relationships.

At that point, I looked at a master's degree in administration. Becoming an administrator would allow me to utilize the experiences and skills I had acquired. Teaching and managing have afforded me valuable experiences, but I have also attained some maturity. I remember what it was like to be a high-school student; I have also been the *parent* of high-school students. I am a teacher. I have trained others. I would love to expand my experience to include that of being an administrator with an inspirational vision.

Over the past two years, I have had the chance to do a substantial amount of reflection. I have reflected on my strengths and weaknesses, my beliefs and values, and my educational philosophy as they pertain to administration. While I am still formulating my thoughts in these areas, I have made some observations with regard to the six ISSL standards for school administrators. Each standard communicates an essential characteristic of an effective educational leader. First and foremost, though, an effective administrator must be a visionary.

The Visionary

An effective principal must be a leader who not only *possesses* a vision but one who also enables others to *realize* the vision. This means she must be able to communicate clearly and with inspiration. This means never giving up! But it also means being flexible and willing to alter methodology in order to realize the desired outcomes. The principal's task as a visionary is to *visualize* the mission, communicate it to others, and garner the support of the entire learning community in order to experience success. There needs to be room, too, for the evolution of the vision. An effective administrator must be able to see through others' eyes as well, be willing to revise the vision as the community evolves and experiences educational progress. At the outset this seems impossible. But I suppose that is the essence of a visionary—attempting what is seemingly impossible and ultimately experiencing the dream.

Being a visionary leader allows an administrator to continue in the learning experience. She will be able to exhort and encourage staff in becoming master teachers. As principals, we should aim to recreate the classroom on a larger scale. To do so will require an incredible amount of effort. We will need to be able to formulate a team to help us in this endeavor, even though it begins with each of us on an individual basis. For an educational leader, learning should be a life-long mission.

Staying focused on the vision while tending to numerous administrative tasks takes phenomenal organizational skills. A principal must keep in mind where he is going and *why* he is going there. He must keep crew members on task and focused accurately. The crew will listen to him and trust his judgment when it comes to sailing through fair and foul, because he is an expert as well as a clear communicator. The key is for the destination to be a shared decision among the crew. Once the course has been determined by the entire crew, both the captain and crew are responsible for ensuring the ship arrives at her destination in a timely fashion.

Of course, the principal cannot reach her destination single-handedly. It takes the entire learning community to attain success for all stakeholders. Making sure each voice has a forum is an admirable goal for the principal. Each voice may also have something to contribute to the educational process. But a collaborative leader goes further. She uses her own voice to express the school's needs. She exudes a positive representation of her learning community. She visibly participates in the community, whether that is through annual community events or a weekly commitment to a specific organization. The community sees her as a person who practices what she preaches.

To a person of integrity this comes naturally. This administrator is committed to what is right, but she is also focused on the "truth." If I believe I am exhibiting a life of integrity—based on humility, truth, and courage—then I feel I

will be able to stand under the pressure and scrutiny that necessarily come with the principalship. No other foundation will do. As a teacher, I echo this exhortation: Know why you do what you do; do what you do for the right reasons; hold fast to the truth; all other things will come in due season.

The Leader

I believe being a contextual leader is what sets the "good" administrative leaders apart from the truly "great" administrative leaders. There are laws that govern the educational world, and it is the principal's business to know them. Principals must be aware of these laws when formulating mission statements, proposing policies and improvement plans, and organizing others in the effort to achieve the vision. I don't see this being a one-man job. It takes cultivating partnerships in the community, organizing teams in the building, and creating trusting relationships with associate principals, guidance counselors, secretarial staff, and security personnel.

In the learning community, a respectable reputation must be earned— earned through honest dealings, data-driven decisions, sincere concern and respect for others, and a willingness to sensitively advocate for all its members. Respect is critical when it comes to interaction with others. When a school and its administrative staff possess a respectable reputation, the path is made clear for communication, collaboration, and continuous learning.

It is my sincere wish to be able to affect my learning community in a powerful and meaningful way. I am on a quest, not only for knowledge, but for the opportunity to encourage and inspire teachers. I envision my role as one of advocate—advocate for the teachers in my building, the students, the parents, support staff, community businesses, church and civic organizations, all those who somehow touch the learning community. I hope to build and nurture these relationships so that all may strive for and expect success.

While success in not a natural outcome of wishful thinking, it is impossible to visualize and strive for success without being a "reflective practitioner." Being a reflective leader entails taking the time to think about the academic, social, political, and emotional experiences that happen daily in the life of a principal. Whether or not an experience produced success, reflection allows a leader the opportunity for processing tough decisions, adopting proactive rather than reactive options, and continuously focusing on instructional practices and improvement. Jeffery Glanz (2005) sees reflection as "the heart of professional practice" (p. 26). Modeling reflective practice sets the stage for learning in the school community—for administration, staff, and students.

While there is a growing abundance of research promoting the benefits of reflective practice, how many principals are actually applying its principles in daily, or even regular, practice? According to Glanz (2005), all principals should be. He analyzes the integral role of reflection in teacher supervision. As a

principal one of my main concerns will be to regularly "engage teachers in

instructional dialogue so they are best equipped to improve the academic

performance of their students" (p. 17). Action research is a "cutting edge" way to

do just that. Action research entails getting teachers and principals involved in

the research process for the purposes of improving instructional practices in the

classroom. It allows for individual, authentic engagement; teachers and

administrators reflect on effective instructional practices and beliefs as well as

collaborate on continuous improvement for all aspects of the learning community.

Action research began with such educators as Hilda Taba. Taba and Noel

(1957) determined two reasons for this research: the production of evidence

necessary to solve practical problems, and the acquisition of various perspectives

regarding these problems. Action research began with problem-solving (Corey,

1953; Lewin, 1998), progressed to individual reflection (Elliot, 1991), was viewed

as a process to support staff development (Oja & Smulyan, 1989), as a

collaborative process to support teachers' professional development (Sagor,

1992), and as a strategy to guide site-based school improvement (Glickman,

1998). Most recently, however, action research has been viewed as a

"supervisory approach that not only engages teachers in reflection about their

teaching but also encourages them to examine pedagogical practices that directly

influence student achievement (Calhoun, 2002; Danielson, 2002; Marzano,

Pickering, & Pollock, 2001)" (Glanz, 2005, p. 19). There are four basic steps: 1)

choosing a study focus, 2) collecting data, 3) analyzing and interpreting the data, and 4) taking appropriate action.

Glanz (2005) presents two case studies where teachers and administrators implemented this four-step model. Several key observations are made from the studies regarding reflective practice. One of the most important findings is that time needs to be provided to teachers for reflecting on what happens in their individual classrooms. It is imperative a principal maintain and encourage effective teaching practices. Actions speak loudly. The teacher in the first case study felt that the research greatly improved the efficacy of her teaching methods. She noted a direct impact on her classroom practice (p. 21).

In the second case study the principal found that action research made it unnecessary for him to formally observe those teachers engaged in the process. Action research had "provided the means to encourage reflection to promote instructional improvement and student learning" (Glanz, 2005, p. 24). Following the implementation of action research, a principal may then link gathered data with discussion for improving student achievement. The principal must partake in the same kinds of reflections as his/her staff. He must ask questions such as: "What concerns me? *Why* am I concerned? Can I confirm my perceptions? What mistakes have I made? If I were able to do it again, would I do anything differently?" (p. 26).

Speaking of mistakes, as a reflective practitioner I will want to capitalize on those mistakes as much as possible. Rather than cover them up, deny them, downplay their effects, I would like to truly pick them apart. Can my failures (or those of the district, building, a specific department, etc.) offer me any future benefits? Colin Latchem (2005) thinks so. He cautions that "it can be dangerous to focus on success alone" (p. 665). While we usually interpret success as a sign of competence, that very competence is what can ultimately keep us from learning what we need to for maximum improvement. Researching our failures requires courage, but it also requires reflection. We need to be willing to ask the hard and ugly questions, even when things are going smoothly. Will we continue to repeat our failures because of our reluctance to face them and learn from them the first time around?

As a new professional I was co-advisor for Student Council. The students on the council were popular, honors-level, seemingly responsible kids. The council had accomplished some wonderful things for the student body. However, I discovered the candy inventory was disappearing. I was shocked. I couldn't believe any of the students I was in charge of would steal. I wasn't taking the candy, and only someone who had access to the storage room key would be able to get to the candy. Long story short, I had to ask some tough questions—to the council members as well as to myself. Now, I could have brushed the issue off with the thought that there were two very misguided kids on the council. But I

looked at this situation as an opportunity to put checks and balances into the system—in order to avoid similar situations in the future.

It's all about perspective. As principal, my willingness to reflect on poor decisions and to attempt to learn from them will exert a powerful influence on the teachers in my building. Helping teachers know the right questions to ask—in the event of success or failure (or even in those events difficult to evaluate)—is an exceptional tool for growth.

As a principal, I will play a critical role in mentoring beginning teachers. I understand that specific mentoring programs exist, but according to Tillman's (2003) research, she sites Brock (1999), who has noted that " the success of beginning teachers is critical to student success, and the success of both is largely the responsibility of the principal" (p.20). Tillman (2003) advocates using reflective practice through journaling as "a vehicle for socializing the new teacher to a new profession and a new school" (p. 228). This proactive approach is set-up in the form of dialogic journaling and personalistic reflection. Dialogic journaling is the "process whereby individuals have private written conversations with each other over an extended period of time" (p. 229). Individuals determine topics and reply as requested. In personalistic reflection, teachers "link their professional and personal lives, that is, how teaching helps them accomplish their goals" (p. 229). Through this process, Tillman notes recurring themes for new professionals—teacher professional competence and the teacher as a member of

the school community. How a teacher feels about herself and her abilities directly impacts student expectations, and thus how students perform in the classroom. The principal can reflect "on his role in helping the teacher experience professional and personal competence" (p. 231). As the principal and teacher dialogue about this issue, they realize the seriousness of the problem.

Tillman (2003) notes that oftentimes new teachers "experience difficulty in establishing positive relationships with their colleagues, students, and parents" (p. 231). The principal can aid in establishing these positive relationships by helping new teachers know "where they fit in," helping to "identify an activity, a space," where the teacher can feel comfortable and use her talents (p. 232). In Tillman's specific case study, structured dialogue with the principal helped the teacher feel she was a valued member of the school community and that he was committed to her success.

A principal committed to reflective practice supports ISSL Standard 2—Instructional Leadership. She leads by example, reflecting on strengths and weaknesses. Encouraging reflective practices that focus on instructional practices and connecting staff through collaboration is indicative of ISSL Standard 4—Collaborative Leadership. And finally, modeling authentic reflection is an example of ISSL Standard 5—Ethical Leadership.

Reflective practice naturally leads to decision-making—seeing the need for change and working through the specific logistics. The principal must be the

one who establishes an environment conducive to continuous improvement. An effective instructional leader, then, must be aware of how her staff will handle change, how transformative learning occurs.

Hunzicker (2004) discusses the role of change in the staff development process. Because we know adults can be averse to change, we need to take some tips from the field of marketing and advertising. Administrators need to "sell" ideas, strategies, philosophies, etc., to their faculty way before they hope to implement. They must *talk* about new ideas—what's happening in the field of education. They should *share* success stories from classrooms in the building, *invite* speakers to spark a desire for change in the hearts of teachers. As an administrator, if I am inspired by a particular success story "out there," I will share it with my associates, department chairs, and school leadership team. I want to build a desire for the implementation of positive change in the hearts and minds of my staff. This research aligns directly with ISSL Standards 1 and 2; the principal is helping create and realize the vision. The worst approach, but the one most often used, is to dictate a new idea/plan/strategy to the faculty at a staff meeting, declare it to be so, and expect obedience from all.

This *might* work with students (albeit against their wills), but it certainly doesn't work with a building full of independent adult thinkers. What sets the truly gifted administrators and teachers apart from the average? I believe it's the way they respond to and handle change. Those individuals who can find the good

in the midst of chaos, who risk self-analysis and welcome improvement, those are the individuals with whom I want my children to exist. Those are the individuals with whom I want to build school improvement teams, intervention strategists, effectors of innovative education.

Hunzicker (2004) explores the reasons teachers avoid change as well as the reasons behind their reluctance. Administrators need to be aware of these realities when designing professional staff development, which is one of the key focuses in ISSL Standard 2—Instructional Leadership. In fact, teachers should be involved in designing their own staff development. This would ensure ownership in the process, warding off potential rebellion from all staff corners. Just like developing the school mission/vision is a shared goal, so, too, should be the desire for continuous improvement in the classroom as well as the climate of the building. How is this climate most dramatically impacted?

True change comes about through transformative learning. King (2004) expresses the importance of adult learners concentrating on reflective processing. To begin with, educators are first and foremost *learners*. They have unique learning styles and specific needs that shouldn't be ignored when it comes to teaching them. Second, not all adults will understand or even believe they desire transformative learning. It's one of those things that must be experienced to really appreciate its benefits. It is the instructor's role to create an environment conducive to this type of learning. Zepeda (2004a) writes: "There is nothing more

visible than the work of the principal, and what the principal and the members of the administrative team emphasize, reward, and sanction come to symbolize publicly what is important" (p. 40).

And finally, it is on this solid cultural foundation that professional development should occur. If educators can come to a desired conclusion (perhaps with even more insight than hoped for) on their own, how much more of an impact would their learning have on their own teaching? And equally important, what is this impact on school climate as a whole? As Whitaker (2003) notes, "it is people, not programs, that determine the quality of a school" (p. 8). So the principal's focus should be on investing in *people* rather than implementing *programs*.

Effective administrators committed to the improvement of learning for both students and adults must be aware of what works and what doesn't with regard to staff development. They begin with the introduction of the role of reflection in the learning process. Once routine reflection has been established, the principal links staff development to authenticity. Finally, the principal must explore various ways to establish learning communities within the building.

When it comes to affecting school climate, an administrator must focus her attention on staff development. What she implements and how she implements are key factors toward success. Borko (2004) advocates organizing one's staff into effective learning communities, part of a building's daily routine.

ISSL Standard 3 speaks to organizational issues. It is within these learning

communities that motivation and enthusiasm for transformative learning is born

and nurtured. I continue to assert that teachers who feel supported, appreciated,

and empowered will be the most effective instructors. Effective instruction has

the greatest and most direct impact on student achievement. Whitaker (1997)

studied principals in effective environments. Their teachers reported that "their

leaders encouraged and supported individual staff development." Empowered

teachers are also the teachers who will be able to enthusiastically lead others

toward change.

So how should administrators demonstrate their support, appreciation, and

their willingness to empower teachers in their buildings? The answer lies in a

commitment to continuous school improvement. Between 1999 and 2004, five

important studies of school turnarounds were published. Duke (2006) identified

common characteristics among the studies. Among the 11 characteristics

associated with improving low-performing schools were data-driven decision

making, leadership, organizational structure, and staff development (p. 730).

Effective staff development is a critical component of school success;

ineffective staff development can have an adverse effect on the school setting.

Zepeda (2004a) shares Joyce and Showers' (2002) finding that

> selecting the content of staff development is one of the most critical
>
> decisions in the school improvement process. If you are to attain your

student achievement goals, the content of staff development needs to be aligned with those goals. And the content needs to be robust enough to effect the type of change envisioned. (p. 59) {Zepeda, 2004a, p. 131).

Teachers are lifelong learners who need intellectual, theoretical, and sociological input and support. They learn more from "sustained discussion on classroom practices, coaching opportunities, and the formal and informal mentoring they can provide to one another" (Zepeda, 2004b, p. 132).

It is difficult to disagree with actual findings regarding professional development practices. One supported finding is that "students learn only from teachers who are themselves in the process of learning" (McCall, 1997, p. 23). Abdal-Haqq (1996) characterizes effective professional development, among other things, as ongoing, reflective, school-based, collaborative, focused on student learning, and supported by adequate time and resources.

I first and foremost see the importance of creating the right climate conducive to effective staff development; that is, putting those learning communities into place, exploring actual teacher need and evaluating specific teacher learning styles. Next I would opt for a program that allows teachers from all ability levels, subject matters, and amounts of teaching experience to plug into activities with practical application. And then the program needs to range over a two- or three-year period. Training should be fairly intensive—allowing teachers to actually have a stake in their own learning and motivating them to use their

gained knowledge in their own classrooms. Success in the learning communities transfers to success in the classroom and, hopefully, to an increase in student achievement on both formal and informal assessments.

In addition to providing time for reflection and implementation, an administrator should function in a dual role, as proposed by Mai (2004). The principal should be both a critic and an innovative coach in order to promote this culture of renewal. She is the one who fosters this climate of collaboration, as emphasized in ISSL Standard 4—Collaborative Leadership—providing teachers with the opportunity for ownership and guidance in deciding which direction staff development will take. Decisions are data-driven; the principal as critic and coach keeps relevant data at the forefront of discussion and implementation.

I recognize the powerful impact staff development has on staff that has collaborated on its formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Staff development needs to be about who we *are* as a learning community, not just what we *do* on in-service days. It's like assuming a healthy eating plan: you don't just eat healthy foods for six weeks—eating right needs to become a way of life. The key is helping teachers see staff development in the same way. Sentiments like "We believe all students can succeed," "Let's get together and come up with a plan for Johnny," and "I'm here to help you figure it out" are examples of the collaborative spirit it takes to *live* staff development. As a principal, I hope to build a climate for constructive criticism and adopt the role of innovative coach to

lead my staff toward true and effective staff development—where the learning community lives what we believe.

Once a climate of trust and rapport has been established, these learning communities provide a stage for generative learning. Zepeda (2004b) advocates using teachers as peer coaches who will work alongside the principal when it comes to establishing individual goals for instructional improvement and teacher supervision. The practical applications of Zepeda's work really stem from the idea that "all teachers are learners, and all students are capable of learning" (p.151). Our zest for knowledge (and hopefully wisdom) can be rejuvenated through collaboration, intellectual discourse, and personal accountability.

Administrators who enthusiastically encourage staff leadership are noteworthy. Rather than see themselves as the solitary catalysts for educational change, they should be excited about the resources in their buildings—teachers who welcome leadership roles, whose experiences and practices have succeeded in creating successful citizens. Again, I recognize the power in guiding teachers toward change in the same way a teacher guides his students toward growth and understanding. I am more and more convinced—from the research to my own experience—of the need to create and foster collaborative learning communities in each building. The benefits are numerous; there seems to be no real disadvantages to that endeavor. If anything, the disadvantages lie in the

avoidance of tackling the negative culture. I hope that I will be able to forge

ahead with the help of surrounding leaders in my learning community.

Teachers need to see that their time and energies are spent on worthwhile

activities. A principal who makes decisions based on integrity and fairness is

committed to ISSL Standard 5—Ethical Leadership. Teachers need to connect

new learning to their current knowledge base—by being exposed to innovative

and applicable instructional practices, provided accompanying rationale, and

given suggestions for implementation in a generative setting. Only under these

circumstances can authentic transformational learning occur (Davis & Krajcik,

2005). In an article by Cranton and Carusetta (2004), this concept of

transformative learning is encompassed by the ultimate goal of teaching what

these researchers term "authenticity." They write that when we as teachers

> bring our sense of self into our teaching, or in other words, work toward
>
> becoming authentic, we are able to critically question that which is right
>
> for us from the literature, develop our own personal style, and thereby
>
> communicate with students and others in a genuine way. (p. 6)

This goal of authenticity is comprised of four parts: "being genuine, showing

consistency between values and actions, relating to others in such a way as to

encourage their authenticity, and living a critical life" (p. 7). We need to come to

terms with our own limitations, ask questions, and cultivate relationships with

others in order to foster this authenticity. Along the way, teachers must make

decisions about what teaching is—what fits into our expectations we keep; what doesn't fit we reject. In relation to context, "a person who has awareness of the context of teaching will be more likely to see how the subject area, the classroom environment, the departmental and institutional norms, and the cultural expectations influence the teacher, the students, and their relationship" (p.20).

An administrator who is an instructional leader is committed to the education process and the success of that process for both students and staff. But even more importantly, she recognizes the value of each individual's contribution to the process. For without collaborative effort, the learning community is built on sinking sand.

Ultimately, the road to success for any learning community is forged by a leader committed to continuous improvement. I agree with Whitaker (2003) that "outstanding principals know that if they have great teachers, they have a great school" (p. 7). In order to remain on the road to continuous improvement, then, principals must not only hire great teachers, they must also contribute to the improvement of the teachers they already have. Whitaker continues, "It is people, not programs, that determine the quality of a school" (p. 8). Investing in people...that needs to be the focus of a truly effective leader of service. Building a healthy climate and culture, encouraging leadership among teachers, and fostering authentic learning communities are the key elements in implementing and maintaining continuous improvement.

An underlying premise in school improvement is that if school leadership improves, learning improves; if learning improves, student achievement will increase. One case study in Kentucky bears this out. Tricia Browne-Ferrigno (2005), Project Director of the Principals Excellence Program (PEP) at the University of Kentucky, shares her findings regarding principal training in rural schools in Kentucky. Principals trained in the PEP program saw great strides in student achievement as well as teacher job satisfaction throughout the two years principals participated in this closed-cohort, collaborative, experiential training program. The program consisted of a series of "seminar-workshops, clinical experiences guided by trained mentors, comprehensive school-based research, and structural reflections" (p.9). The goal of the program is to create a "professional community of visionary educational leaders who have the disposition to be change agents; commitment to be lifelong learners; skill to be effective decision-makers and reflective practitioners; and desire to remain or become principals in the district" (p. 9).

Being an agent of change—change for the sake of improvement, not just change—begins with establishing a healthy school culture and climate. A principal must promote conditions that "foster collaboration, trust, and care" (Zepeda, 2004a, p.23). By understanding the culture of the school as well as what decisions need to be made and why, a principal's values and beliefs can guide and motivate the learning community toward positive change—actual improvement.

School climate is a complex organism. And the principal directly impacts (positively and/or negatively) that organism. Zedpeda (2004) has identified several principal behaviors that are evident in healthy cultures. Among those behaviors are: being visible to all stakeholders, communicating regularly and purposefully, being passionate about their work, being organized and positive, empowering others, and taking pride in the school environment (p. 41).

Whitaker (2003) asserts that great principals are those who "understand they are the filters for the day-to-day reality of school" (p. 27). Principals set the tone for their schools. Because of this, they should remember to remain calm at all times, defuse anger, spare others unnecessary bad news, and keep a positive outlook. Whitaker writes, "By consistently filtering out the negatives that don't matter and sharing a positive attitude, we can create a much more successful school" (p. 33).

An effective leader of service also sees the exceptional value in fostering leadership among his staff. Zepeda (2004a) quotes Frost and Durrant (2002, p. 157) in their research conclusion that "the nurturing of teachers as leaders is fundamental to effective school improvement. The development of teachers' leadership skills, the exponential growth in confidence and self-esteem, and the release of creative energy have a powerful effect" (p. 49). Teachers as leaders are especially effective in developing the instructional program, making positive changes in the school, sharing their expertise with others, and shaping the culture

of the school (Zepeda, 2004a, p. 50). Whitaker (2003) notes, as well, that those teachers sought after as leaders (referred to in his book as "high achievers") need two things "to make them content and motivated: autonomy and recognition" (p. 83). Maslow's (1987) theory of human motivation corroborates this assertion. Highly motivated teachers are effective change agents. As they share and collaborate with other staff members through focused and organized learning communities, innovation, creativity, engagement, and inspiration reign.

Jose L. da Costa (2006) traces an elementary school's development as a learning organization. He specifically notes the impact of collaboration on improving classroom instruction and job satisfaction. For more than 20 years, researchers in education have observed the isolation of classroom teachers (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Little, 1987; Gresso & Robertson, 1992). Little (1987) has exhorted teachers to work in small teams in order to "break the isolation of the classroom" (p. 494). It is the learning that takes places within groups—social learning—rather than within individuals that is the focus of da Costa's article.

Facilitating social learning requires a leader who is not just a "charismatic decision-maker," but also a "teacher, a designer, and a guardian of the change process" (Senge, 1990). Promoting collegial and collaborative relationships among teachers is key in fostering the conditions necessary for school improvement (Zepeda, 2004a, p. 44). Zepeda points out Lunenburg's (1995, p.

41) finding that collaboration is the "key schooling process variable for increasing the norms of student achievement" (p. 45). Teachers as mentors, observers, co-planners, decision-makers, data analyzers, and action researchers infuse the learning community with life. As long as teachers continue to learn, teachers will continue to inspire others—colleagues and students.

In order for this collaborative environment to function successfully, the principal must be encouraging, risk-taking, and willing to share power and responsibility. According to da Costa (2006), the leader must have "a firm vision of the direction in which the organization will move, and the ability to articulate that vision" (p. 11).

As a member of the instructional coaches' leadership team, I have experienced the truths of effective collaboration first-hand. We worked with each other to clarify ideas, plan and implement staff development activities, and act as authentic sounding boards for administrative communiqués. We also worked directly with teachers as colleagues, promoting reflective practices in career development plans and effective implementation of instructional strategies. The power of the collaborative process was palpable. An end-of-the-year survey showed that all teacher respondents value the collaborative process. They correlate collaboration with job satisfaction, continuous improvement, and ultimately an increase in student achievement.

The Committment

Because of my own experiences, my commitment to excellence in educational leadership has intensified. I know the power of teachers working with other teachers to improve instruction, build camaraderie, and strengthen the learning community. All stakeholders benefit.

When I take the time to think about and picture what the "perfect" school would look like, I find myself yearning for that realized vision. What foundational values and beliefs under gird that utopia? What is the final destination of the school journey? I was fascinated by the utopian musings of Carol Hotchkiss (2005). She postulates that the curriculum and focus of education should be in redefining what it means to be civilized. We need to "address the key issues of human development" (p. 20).

She lists five components of this curriculum that comprise this redefinition: 1) having a personal sense of balance and wellness, 2) redefining and recommitting to the human community, 3) exhibiting empathy and a respect for diversity, 4) practicing sophisticated methods for resolving conflict, and 5) formulating an ethical and philosophical structure for the transcendence of self. She purports that our emphasis in education should be to help students learn how to live effectively and joyfully in the learning community and beyond.

As I reflect on each curricular focus, I am increasingly convinced that my vision as an instructional leader is in synch with this utopian view. In accordance

with ISLL Standard 6—promoting success of all students by understanding,

responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and

cultural context, I am committed to this utopian vision. While I don't want my

tenacious idealism to blind me to the realities and practicalities of the

principalship, for the sake of this reflection, allow me to paint the picture of

students in my building who embody the tenants set forth in "the curriculum of

the soul", as I like to refer to it.

Picture students who have learned how to prioritize their goals, values,

and actions. They understand the importance of moderation in all things. They

are committed to physical, nutritional, and academic wellness. Students would be

able to raise their hands and speak out honestly in a safe environment. Self-

confidence would not be superseded by arrogance; they are people who humbly

pursue truth and excellence in all they do.

These utopian learners would employ those elementary human dignities—

things like sharing with others, kindness, personal responsibility, honesty—basic

evidences of the civilized human. They would be able to envision their global

contribution, striving to help others realize their potential while simultaneously

fulfilling their own.

They would celebrate their individualism, but not at the expense of

exclusion. They would see diversity as the fabric of the grand tapestry. Each

student would recognize at least one specific strength he/she had to offer, but each

would also see at least one disadvantage he/she possessed. In that way students would understand the need for the strengths and abilities of others, fostering a climate of empathy and respect. Justice would once again take precedence as a guiding light, rather than an illusion to be ridiculed and manipulated.

This utopia would not be without conflict, however. We would require conflict to sharpen us, to motivate us toward continued improvement. But our curriculum would include tools for conflict resolution that would help students handle issues maturely and effectively. We would focus on "restoration and not revenge," as Hotchkiss (2005, p.25) writes. Students would act from empathy and not from the vantage point of entitlement.

Ultimately hope and joy are restored, because all students (and stakeholders) would see their unique purpose and place in the big picture. We would see students active in community service; they would exhibit integrity, regardless of their circumstances; they would pursue ethical, spiritual, and philosophical ideals. Then they would be ready to leave the fold and enter the next stage of their journeys.

So there you have it. This is what I see when I take the time to envision that utopian school setting. Notice how I neglected to describe the actual physical environment. I didn't mention technology, program offerings, the educational background of staff members. Not once did salary get mentioned. Zepeda (2004,

p. 15) quotes Fullan (2002) when she asserts that building relationships must occur prior to improving schools:

> The single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, schools get better. If relationships remain the same or get worse, ground is lost. Thus, leaders build relationships with diverse people and groups—especially with people who think differently. (p.18)

I would echo those sentiments. Not only do principals need to cultivate diverse relationships, but as instructional leaders we should create climates where the curriculum embodies this foundational truth about change and ultimately success.

Finally, without a commitment to ethical leadership, it seems the best-laid plans and most innovative ideas will be for naught. Teachers, students, parents, counselors, custodians, food service personnel, the community at large—all want to believe the principal is a person of integrity. She is undoubtedly trustworthy, exhibiting strong moral character. As I stated at the outset of this essay, I will strive wholeheartedly to practice the characteristics of effective leadership I have herein highlighted. I won't strive for perfection, but I will pursue excellence. That is my pledge.

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