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What I believe about leadership and education : reflective research

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What I believe about leadership and education : reflective research

Abstract

In the field of education, having a great leader is very important. The principal is like a captain of a ship. He can lead that ship right down the middle so that his students and staff can see things from both sides or he can run aground and really cause some problems. Leadership is something that must come from within. You can definitely tell when you are around someone that is a natural leader and someone who is trying their hardest.

A leader is someone who is well read on the new and innovative changes in education. They are caring, organized, always ready to listen, good communicators, visible in the community as well as the hallways, and they are in this profession for the students that they are working with.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

REFLECTIVE RESEARCH

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

And Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

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by

Trent A. Jeffrey

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Dr. Greg Reed

This Research Paper by: Trent Jeffrey

Entitled: WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of

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To teach or not to teach, that is a question that we are all faced with at least once in our lifetime. Is teaching a profession or is it a way of life? It is a decision that we must make that will impact the rest of our lives. For me, the answer was easy and throughout this paper I will fill you in on the reasons I have chosen to become a teacher and just how it has impacted my life.

When I was in Elementary school I had a Physical Education teacher that went out of his way to make everyone feel like they were a very important part of the class. He never put anyone down and we always had a great time in his class. Because of his caring and fun-loving spirit, I decided that I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to put a bright spot in my students' day.

After I graduated from High School I loaded up my car and went to Nebraska Christian College in Norfolk, NE. to start my schooling. Nebraska Christian College has a coop program with Wayne State College in which students can attend six years of school and graduate with two four year degrees. Due to this, I have one degree in Biblical Theology and another degree in the Physical Education and Health K-12.

As soon as I graduated from college, I began sending out application letters and resumes to various places and I was hired at the Norfolk Middle School to teach over four hundred seventh graders. I had a blast teaching and coaching with these young adults and they taught me a lot about myself along the way. I worked very hard to help them be successful in the classroom and on the playing field. However, I soon realized that not all of my students wanted to be successful.

Some of my students were very challenging and I wanted to know how I could better serve them so I decided that I needed to get a Masters Degree in counseling to help these students become successful. I believed this degree would also help me in the classroom to figure out my students and to understand a little better about where they were coming from. Boy was I wrong. The degree did help me but I still could not motivate some of my students to be successful and to want more for themselves. By going through the counseling program I realized that my counseling theory is one like William Glasser. My theory is very much reality based. Is what you are doing now getting you what you really want? If not, what can we do to change it so you are getting what you want? By doing this, it brings the students reality and their true desires to the forefront and put the responsibility back onto them.

As my family grew, my wife and I decided that if we were ever going to move back to Iowa, to be closer to family, which we needed to do it before our children got ingrained in a school. In 2000, I accepted a counseling job at the Vinton-Shellsburg High School. As a counselor I began to have more input into the direction that the school was going and I was able see first hand some of the issues that a principal is faced with everyday. I was a sounding board for our principal and quickly became a second person for all the meetings. I was able to sit in and share my feelings and thoughts with the principal and I felt like he really listened and was appreciative of the time I put into my work.

In 2001, I took another counseling position in my hometown of Anamosa and I am currently a High School Guidance Counselor and teacher there. It has been nice returning to my home town and knowing that I am making a difference in the lives of my students. A lot of my roles from Vinton-Shellsburg have carried over to Anamosa. I am still a sounding board, I am involved in meetings, and I am doing more and more of the principal like roles. I have had some experience in interviewing, scheduling, budget, school improvement, and may other things that will strengthen me as I someday make the move to principal.

For me, becoming a principal is just the next step to where I want to be in the future. Someday I want to be a building facilitator to help our teachers see that learning can be fun. I want teachers to look outside of the box and see that teaching doesn't have to be just lecture. I want teachers to have fun in their classroom and make learning fun for their students. One problem that schools are facing is the problem with motivation. Students are dropping out of school because they can learn in the "lecture format" or because school is just not set up for their learning style. We as teachers need to incorporate different teaching techniques in our classroom so that more of our students can grasp what we are trying to teach them.

In the field of education, having a great leader is very important. The principal is like a captain of a ship. He can lead that ship right down the middle so that his students and staff can see things from both sides or he can run aground and really cause some problems. Leadership is something that must come from within. You can definitely tell when you are around someone that is a natural leader and someone who is trying their hardest. A leader is someone who is well read on the new and innovative changes in education. They are caring, organized, always ready to listen, good communicators, visible

in the community as well as the hallways, and they are in this profession for the students that they are working with.

The decision to teach for me was a very easy one because of the support that I received when I was in school. Becoming a teacher has been a very life changing experience for me. It has shown me that I can't do everything for everyone and that not all people want help. My students have challenged me and caused me to grow as a teacher, counselor, and as a human being. I got into this profession so I could shine some light to my students, little did I know that they would be returning that light with rays of joy. I am not sure just where I'll be, or what I'll be doing in the future of education but I do know, that education is where I'll be. The rest of this paper is designed to highlight personal philosophies and strategies I hope to implement one day, as an administrator.

As a principal, you can really get yourself into trouble by doing your own thing, and by not including your staff, students, and community in your vision planning. By not including your staff, students, and community you are setting yourself up for a very short stay. One thing that can help a principal is Systemic change.

Systemic change, in a nutshell, is the process of making changes in a way that allows all stakeholders to participate in

the process. What is the process or how can we start to make some changes in our schools by ourselves? Doing this by one's self is not an option. The stakeholders must sit down and come up with a plan or a vision for the school. What this vision is, is basically a plan of where they want their school to be and what they want it to look like in the future. That plan should define what the roles of the teacher, principal, superintendent, and school board will be. How will the community play a part and what will their part look like?

Next, the stakeholders must take stock in the current situation. If the stakeholders don't believe in the school and where it is at now, how are they going to be motivated to see their vision through? They may not like what they see, but they need to be willing to work closely with the staff and administration to begin the process of change.

The next step in the process is to identify your strengths and weaknesses. This can be done individually or as a group, but the goal is to sit down and make a list of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Once this is done, stakeholders come back together as a large group and share these. Begin talking as a group about what direction the school should head based on the outcomes. From this, target several priorities that to focus on and begin planning for these priorities. How will

these issues be address and what is needed to do to begin making some changes. Realize that some of these changes are going to be difficult and are not going to happen over night. One of the most difficult things in making change is to get others to buy into it. Talking to one's staff and keeping them informed is a very large part of making a smooth transition. Once this process has begun, assess progress regularly and revise actions as needed, and to once again take stock and use feedback to revisit the vision (www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/whatsc.html).

A big benefit to be gained from the systematic change approach is involvement of players from throughout the system from the start of the initiative
(www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/whatsc.html).

Once stakeholders get together and see what they have come from to where they are, they begin to see the whole picture. Once they see the whole picture they are more likely to stick with this and see it through. Through this process it is essential that the stakeholders are involved in the decision-making and change process. This will also help their invested interest to grow and become stronger.

The principal's role in all of this is to help their staff, their students, and themselves to take more responsibility. They want to move from managerial roles to instructional

leaders, working collaboratively with all to create shared vision, team building, delegation, mediation, and problem-solving.   Through this, teachers should become coaches and mentors to their students, develop into master teachers, participate as team leaders, and help direct district wide staff development (www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/whatsc.html).

In a 1989 study, researchers found that schools that used systematic change practices outperformed traditional schools by 30% in mathematics, 24% in reading, 29% in history, and 20% in science (based on the gains in % correct between the 8th and 10th grades) (www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/whatsc.html).   Another study was done in Sitka, Alaska and they also found systematic change to be positive.   These are some of the findings from there study: At the classroom level instruction is guided by a preplanned curriculum; students are carefully oriented to lessons; instruction is clear and focused; personal interactions between teachers and students are positive.   At the school level everyone emphasizes the importance of learning; administrators and teachers continually strive to improve instructional effectiveness; staff engages in ongoing professional development and collegial learning activities (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis/1990 Update*).

As a principal it is very important to be on the same page with your staff, superintendent, and school board. I want to look at the mission statement and vision plan of the school and make sure that it is something that I believe in and can live with. If I don't believe in it, it is going to be very hard for me to promote it. I want to make sure that the mission statement is something that my staff all buys into and that it is something that we can all achieve together. I realize that as a principal I will be responsible for the decisions that are made in my building and for all the actions that take place. I know that I will have to make some decisions but I would like to get as much feedback from my staff as I possibly can. I want them to know that I will hear them but that I will have the final say in the matter. Just because I ask for their advice, does not mean I will be able to follow everyone's advice.

I want my staff to know that they can always come and talk to me about concerns or positive feedback that they have received.   I have an open door policy as a counselor and I don't see myself changing that as a principal. I value everyone and their input. "Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort. It is the will to produce a superior thing" (Cotton).

Systemic change is a process that can be connected to more than one of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. Standard one deals with facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the community schools. Systematic change is one way to get everyone together to create a vision, put steps into place on how to get to your vision, and then making sure that the vision is carried out. By doing this systemically, everyone is involved and makes sure that the vision becomes reality.

Standard two, advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth, is also met through systemic change. Staff plays an important role in the development of professional growth to help meet the needs of our vision. Staff will become educational coaches and mentors to their students. Stakeholders need to advocate for the vision and make sure that the school culture is one that is positive and conducive to learning. Stakeholders are a huge part of this process and the vision will be very hard to achieve without their drive.

As I stated before, a principal can really get into trouble by doing your own thing and not including your staff, students, and community in your vision planning. By not including your staff, students, and community you are setting yourself up for a very short stay. I want to stay for a very long time and I want those around me to feel that we are in this process together. I want their input and that is why I feel systemic change is an important characteristic to have as a principal.

Another important characteristic to keeping everyone consistent and up to date is communication. One of my goals as a principal is to make sure that we/I have good communication within our staff and with our parents. Without it, problems are going to be on the rise because no one is on the same page. "Former Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley declared that parents are the essential link in improving American education, and schools simply have to do a better job of reaching out to them" (Lunts, 2003).

How do we reach out to these families? According to Lunts, there are several ways in which schools and parents can communicate. One way is for schools to incorporate a "hotline" or a helpline. This is a dial up system that is run with teachers and trained volunteers who can answer questions about specific assignments. This is a great way for parents to help

their children with homework and to find out what they are really learning.

Another system that can help with communication is the voice message and voice mail system. This is a where students and parents can call any time of the day and get assignments that they may have missed. There may also be a short explanation of what was covered in the class. This information is probably not too detailed but would at least include the chapter that was covered. One nice thing about this is that parents can call and leave messages or just touch base with the teachers. Not only is this a great system for parents and students but it also works great for the teachers. Principals can leave messages that are reminders of meetings or even of special events that are going to be taking place on a certain day. "Bauch (2000) emphasizes that schools apply voice message systems have on average a 500%-800% increase of interactions between teachers and parents" (Lunts, 2003).

Another great way to communicate is through e-mail. E-mail has taken the world by storm and most of our parents will have an account either at home or at work. One nice thing about e-mail is that some companies are making attendance programs for schools that allow parents to check up on their children. There are programs that allow parents to log-on with a password and

view their child's grades. There are also some other programs that will allow teachers to send out progress grades via e-mail. This is a quicker and cheaper way to send reports. These programs also increase the frequency of reports.

Another great way for schools to communicate with parents is through a school web site. This web site can contain everything from the lunch schedule to future meetings and parent/teacher conferences. When a school is considering a web site, here are a few topics that they should consider; A welcome message for parents, a What's new section, school history section, how to contact section, extra-curricular activities, library media center, and possibly community information.

"The evidence is now beyond dispute. When parents are involved in their child's education at home, their children do better in school (cited in National PTA, 1998, the "research findings" section)" (Lunts, 2003). I realize that education is a very important tool in the lives of our youth, but we have to get the parents to buy into it as well. One way we can do this is by actually listening to them. They have to feel like we are really interested in what they have to say. "To have a complete communication, each person must both "get" and "give"" (Foster, June 2000).

I don't want my school's parents to feel like we don't listen to them, however, I do want them to know that we are the professionals in our field and that we will make the final decision.

Communication is a very important tool. The only problem with communication is that it works both ways. There has to be a respect for each other to make sure that we are doing what is in the best interest of the child. Parents must feel comfortable in approaching their children's teacher or principal and vise versa. Communication is the key to keeping everyone up to date and full of information.

Wouldn't it be great if there were no conflicts in the work place? In the field of education there is bound to be conflicts because there are so many different people that play into each child's education process. I am talking about teachers, administration, counselors, parents, and possibly even bus drivers to name a few. If we struggle with getting information out and keeping it accurate, then we are going to have conflicts.

According to Ford, there are several things that principals and educators can do to help deal with conflicts. He says that staying centered in the situation. "When we lose self-control and restraint the situation does not improve. Decisions that

are made in the heat of the moment are seldom the best, and lack the benefits of our creativity" (Ford, 2001). We need to take our time and make sure that we are thinking through our decisions. "We forget that it takes two to make things worse" (Ford, 2001). Basically we need to keep our cool and try to make sure that each person is staying level headed.

Another thing that we need to do is a reality check. Is it the behavior that is really causing the problem or is it something else? We may have to do some more research to find out what is really going on or has caused this situation. "It is also important to consider the impact of the behavior on others and not just ourselves" (Ford, 2001). We may need to look outside the small group that is meeting and see if anyone else is having the same issue. If so, how are they handling or dealing with it?

Along with doing a reality check we also need to focus on the behavior that is causing the conflict. As Ford says, "we must separate the person from the behavior it enables". We have to remember that we are really not picking on a specific person, but rather their behavior.

I talked earlier in this paper about communication and being a good listener. It is no different here, we need to let the other party know that we are listening and trying to understand

their side of the situation. If we totally close them out or shut them off, we will get no where. We must give them the opportunity to voice their opinions. By doing this and showing them that you are really listening, they will allow you the opportunity to voice your thoughts. By doing this, hopefully it will allow them to work through this situation and move beyond it.

Being a good listener goes right along with providing feedback. This is not an opportunity to get down and dirty and to really escalate the problem but to try and work through it. "A common problem with a difficult behavior is that the person is unaware that their behavior is causing the problem. By giving timely feedback about specific behavior misunderstanding can be avoided and expectations clarified" (Ford, 2001).

If one goes through all of this and there is still no good conclusion, a mediator may be called in to help out. This is a neutral person who will listen to both sides of the situation and do their best to help you come up with a situation. If this doesn't work then the last resort is going to someone with authority to make the final decision. The problem with this is that someone will always win and someone else will always lose. Because of this, hard feelings may come and this could possibly cause some more problems in the future.

Conflict resolution is an essential skill for me to possess. As a principal, I must be able to help people resolve their conflicts and move on with their lives. Sometimes we tend to focus on the person instead of the behavior or conflict at hand. I need to listen, stay centered, do a reality check, and help work through it. Another important part in conflict resolution is parental involvement.

As a parent, do you want to be apart of your child's education process? This is a question that every parent needs to ask themselves. As a principal, I want you to answer yes. Parents must realize that their philosophy of school is passed down to their children through their actions and their body language. As a principal, my goal is to let parents know that they have a vital role in their child's education. We need to get parents plugged into our schools and help them to feel like they are a part.

Why do we want to get parents and the community involved in public education? "The research evidence is overwhelming that when parents and communities are involved in their children's public schools, student achievement increases and school morale improves" (NCSC Fordham University, pg.1). There have been some studies done by the National Center for Schools and Communities,

Fordham University that showed when parents get involved;
their child's academic performance rises.

What will it take to make parent and community involvement
work? To begin with it takes a commitment from the top.
Without this support your program will go by the wayside. As a
principal you want your superintendent involved, to provide you
with support on your endeavor. Outreach is something else this
program will need. You need to be able to reach out to the
parents that are not involved in the school and invite them into
your school. Even if the parents don't come the first time we
invite them, we need to keep trying. We need to realize that as
we begin these new programs, our participation rate may be low.
Don't get discouraged, the longer one tries and the more the
word gets out about what you are trying to do, the greater the
dividends you will see. As time goes along, the school will
form some great relationships with families and the community
through involving them in the education process. But remember,
this will not happen overnight, be patient,

One way I want to get parents involved is to have a weekly
or bi-weekly coffee. I want to sit down with parents and talk
to them about their feelings and try to get their input on our
school. I want to get parents into the building and help them
to feel comfortable. If they feel comfortable they will return

and hopefully they will get more involved in the education process.

"Educating children is a partnership between schools and parents. We are working to make our schools more welcoming to parents and to give parents the tools they need to be fully involved in the education of their children" (J.S. Solochek, 2003, pg.1). This is exactly what I have been talking about, getting parents into your school and allowing them the opportunity to get involved in their child's education. "Parents involvement and quality teachers are the two pillars of success for a child's academic career" (J.S.Solochek, 2003, pg. 2). "Research shows a direct correlation between student success and parental involvement" (J.S.solochek, 2003, pg.3). If we can get parents involved in our children's education, our students will get more involved themselves.

Another area of parental involvement that I really want to focus on is communication. I know that there are grading programs that will e-mail parents grades from their child's classes. Communication is a great tool and with out two way communication, there is no involvement. Schools need to utilize technology and stay up to date with new innovative ways to communicate. "Parents are the essential link in improving

American education, and schools simply have to do a better job of reaching out to them" (J. Lunts, 2003, pg. 1).

Education is a very important tool in the lives of our youth. Parents need to realize this and get onboard and get involved in the school system in which their children attend. Parents can make a huge difference in the education of their child, they just need to get involved.

A principal's job is not a job that is to be taken lightly. Throughout this paper I have talked about some skills that I know are important skills for a principal to have. My goal is to implement each of these skills to fullest of my ability. I know that along the way I will face some difficulties and I know that I will be able to overcome them. I am sure that I will be challenged but it will be those challenges that make me stronger. The job of a principal is not about what I can get for myself, but what can I give my students to help them to be successful in this ever changing world.

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