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ECI 508 (Spring 2013)

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My Leadership Log

***January 15, 2013***

As I begin to ponder the nature of leadership in schools, I have to first admit my skepticism and unveil my preconceived notions. Throughout my time in education, I have often heard the term leadership thrown around as a buzz word with very little meaning attached. I have often wondered why schools want to teach everyone to act as leaders. If we are all leaders, does leadership really work? Although I am skeptical of the authentic results that leadership training has to offer, I am open to taking an active role in the discussion on teacher leadership. I hope that my experiences in this course will reshape my current notions of this concept and bring new dimensions to my life as an educator.

I would first like to reflect on my initial experiences with Barth’s work. When I read, “We’re doing some things well-and just doing some other things,” I physically nodded my head in response. I think that this statement accurately describes the current state of education in the United States. I see Barth’s description acted out in my school on a daily basis. I constantly hear about or witness teachers and administrators making impressive strides toward providing a quality 21st century education to our students. On the other hand, I often see colleagues going through the motions of teaching with no heart and little effort. Of course, I also see achievements and shortcomings in my own work. Despite our weaknesses, I agree with Barth that we are capable of reforming education from within the field. I expect that neither government, businesses, nor academia will be able to facilitate the change necessary to revolutionize American education. We have to be the change. I guess this reality precipitates the need for teacher leadership. Now, we just have to figure out how to take leadership past buzz word status and delve deeply into the true meaning of the term.

I found the first chapter of the Katzenmeyer and Moller text relevant and convincing. First, I was impressed with their definition of leadership. They claim, “Teachers leaders lead within and beyond the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership.” I found that these authors offered a comprehensive and effective framework for the concept of teacher leadership. They made a few points that especially caught my attention. First, they discussed how teachers can expand their influence without leaving the classroom for an administrative position. This spoke to me because my students are the most important part of my life as an educator. While I want to do everything I can to benefit students, I do not want to sacrifice direct and constant contact with them in a classroom setting. I am glad to hear that the ultimate goal of teacher leadership is not to cultivate future administrators. In addition, I agreed that teacher leaders must be held accountable for their roles. I think that persistence has to be one of the necessary attributes for a leader in any field. Finally, I used Figure 1.1 to assess my readiness for teacher leadership. I was surprised to find that although I am only a first-year teacher, a majority of my existing ideas relate to teacher leadership. I look forward to shaping my definition of the term and assessing my own potential.

***January 21, 2013***

Throughout the readings for this week, I began to visualize the many dimensions of school culture. Barth defined this concept when he wrote, “The school culture is the complex patterns of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (p. 8). I respect Barth’s definition and appreciate his direction for shaping school cultures. I have always been intrigued by the idea of culture. As I studied and lived abroad, I began to understand how much of our lives are dictated by cultural standards. After reading Barth’s work, I can now see how schools represent unique cultures unto themselves. Barth recommends that teachers must first assess the prevailing cultures in their own schools. Teachers can begin to examine these cultures by reflecting on the numbers of “nondiscussable” subjects that exist. Barth claims that healthy schools have only a few “nondiscussbles.” I found that Barth’s approach provides educators with a concrete way to reflect on school culture. Naturally, I used this technique to assess my own school environment. I can only think of a few “nondiscussble” issues that I have encountered so far. Although no school is perfect, I think that my school has an unusually positive school culture.

Katzenmeyer and Moller also offered some instructive insight on school culture. They described how healthy schools should exhibit a democratic school culture. A democratic culture allows teachers to become authentically involved in the decision-making process. A democratic model allows educators to feel empowered as professionals and leaders in their schools. I think that these authors effectively described an ideal school culture. In addition, Barth focused on two critical goals of school culture. He summarized these goals when he wrote, “If the first major purpose of a school culture is to create and provide a culture hospitable to human learning, the second major purpose of a school is to make it likely that students and educators will become and remain lifelong learners” (p. 18). Although Barth’s standards for school culture are extremely broad, I think that he effectively articulated what should be at the core of educational reform in the 21st century.

Finally, Katzenmeyer and Moller addressed some of my initial concerns with teacher leadership in this week’s readings. When I read their argument that all educators should exercise leadership, I felt my skepticism rise to the forefront of my mind. Then, to my surprise, they offered a very sound rationale for this assertion. They wrote, “When power is shared, leadership is no longer defined within a person; rather it is an attribute that moves from person to person within the workplace depending on the situation and who holds the power.” I was relieved to read that these authors do not expect all teachers to lead all of the time. Instead, they conceptualize teacher leadership in a more communal way with school members rotating who exercises leadership. Although I cannot say that I am completely convinced of the necessity of teacher leadership yet, I have to admit that my mind is starting to change.

***January 27, 2013***

This week Barth’s work really spoke to me. In the third chapter, he continues to expand on his ideas for transforming education. He describes the “at-risk educator” when he writes, “any teacher, principal, guidance counselor, or librarian who leaves school at the end of the day or the end of the year with little possibility of continuing learning” (p. 21). He talks about how teachers continue to learn consistently as they enter the field, but the learning drops off as educators become comfortable in their positions. After teachers acquire two or three years of experience, they stop seeking new learning opportunities. This phenomenon creates a surplus of at-risk teachers, which in turn leads to an increase in at-risk student populations. Barth’s description of this cycle alarmed me and expanded my understanding of teacher leadership. I now see that teacher leaders are necessary to stop this cycle and build authentic learning communities. Barth imagines a transformed educational environment when he writes, “What if every citizen of this “school” were committed to the same goals: to be a lifelong learner, to discover new knowledge, to help design and construct the learning organization, to share in the decision making, and to live and work as colleagues?” (p. 27) I understand that teacher leadership will facilitate these changes, and I definitely want to be a part of the force of change.

As I explored the possibilities for school reform, I began to realize how I can facilitate my personal transformation. I completed the Resource A survey in the Katzenmeyer and Mollertext. This experience allowed me to reflect on my practice in a formal way. I had the highest score in the diversity scale, which really pleased me. I definitely emphasize diversity in my classroom and try to identify with as many perspectives as I can. I scored the lowest in the continuous improvement category. As a first year teacher, I have been so focused on survival that I have yet to contemplate how I will sustain growth and development throughout my career. Luckily, Zemelman and Ross’s reading for this week gave me some ideas. They provide some practical strategies for prioritizing reflection and self-improvement. For example, they emphasize the need to document personal development. They suggest a journal of daily practices as an informal way to provide a snapshot of personal growth. They also encourage teachers to seek more formal ways to reflect on their practices, such as the National Board Certification process. I look forward to pursuing these reflective strategies in the future. I realize that reflection and continued growth are integral parts of teacher leadership, and I would like to make this an area a priority for myself.

***February 6, 2013***

I found Barth’s reading this week especially interesting and relevant. In chapter six, he discusses how educators can transform so-called “war stories” into critical “craft knowledge.” As I read his analysis, I envisioned how this transformation could take place in my work place. Fortunately, my colleagues do not obsess over war stories often but they definitely get told. Barth describes how teachers can take those war stories past entertaining tales and actually evaluate the lessons present in these challenging situations. He argues, “One thing is sure: if we expect academics and policymakers to value what school people learn from experiences in the schoolhouse—our craft knowledge—we first must take ourselves seriously and value our own craft knowledge” (p. 63). I think that Barth’s words are both powerful and true. As teachers, we must first ourselves seriously before outsiders will recognize what we have to offer. We must have confidence in our personal knowledge and experiences. Zemelman and Ross explored ways that teachers can develop their confidence in their third chapter. They discuss teacher research and the importance of ongoing academic engagement for educators. After taking Dr. Manfra’s action research class, I definitely see the value of teacher research and hope to pursue it throughout my career. Overall, this week’s readings gave me some practical advice for embracing teacher leadership. I look forward to actually implementing my new perspective on leadership.

***February 9, 2013***

Dr. Pope’s (1999) article entitled “Reflection and Refraction: A Reflexive Look at an Evolving Model for Methods Instruction” really stood out to me in this week’s readings. In this work, Dr. Pope describes how educators can move past reflection and challenge themselves through the refraction process. She explains, “I use the term refraction in my pedagogical process to describe how I turn my own reflection, challenge my initial reaction, re-interpret the language and behavior of my students, and get past my own defensiveness to find a new view using the oblique light from my students’ responses from our various dialogues (p. 180).” In other words, refraction requires teachers to become self-critical and examine their practices from new perspectives. She claims, “I have to do more than hold a mirror to myself and the class; I have to turn the mirror and see the class from different angles (p. 180).” She encourages teachers to examine their instruction from the perspective of students. In order to achieve this new level of reflection, we have to challenge our assumptions and admit mistakes. Refraction adds new dimensions to the age-old reflective practice and leads to the development of craft knowledge.

Barth also ties reflection to craft knowledge in his seventh chapter. He argues, “A precondition for generating craft knowledge is that we must reflect on practice and find meaning in it. It is through reflection that we distill, clarify, and articulate our craft knowledge” (p. 65). Although he does not use the term refraction, he similarly pushes teachers to take their reflection to new levels. He describes practical methods that teachers can effectively reflect on their practice, such as observation, writing, and dialogue. Additionally, he encourages teacher leaders to help their schools embrace differences among educators. He claims that although the field of education has come to value uniformity, schools should embrace diversity among educators. I also think that teacher leaders must push diversity and help challenge the forced uniformity of 21st century school cultures. Finally, Barth makes the bold assertion that all educators can and should take leadership roles. As I read chapter eight, I felt my original skepticism surface in my mind. Barth swayed me when I read, “Leadership is making happen what you believe in. Everyone deserves an opportunity for school leadership” (p. 85). I cannot disagree with his argument, and I have to admit that I am starting to change my mind about the universal potential for teacher leadership. I am open to challenging my own assumptions, and I know that my experiences in this class will positively change my perspective.

***February 11, 2013 (Leadership Board Observation)***

-Observing School Improvement Team meeting (2:30-3:30 pm)

-Meeting takes place in the leader’s classroom

-There is a member of central office present

-Leader sent information before in an email and has a report projected at the front of the classroom

-There are 14 members present, two parents, principal, 2 assistant principals, younger to older teachers, multiple disciplines represented

-The leader sets a clearly stated purpose and desired outcomes

-The agenda for the meeting includes what, how, who, time, and notes

-The meeting has a very organized and formal feeling

-The SIT writes the school improvement plan and develops goals for the school and tracks our progress as a staff

-It is a quarterly data review, leader shows meeting for the last meeting, motions to approve the minutes

-Principal update: he overviews the data and interprets some of the numbers for the team, speaks very knowledgeably with a personal touch, points out what we can be happy about and what we need to work on, addresses questions from the central office representative, admits his own struggle about data interpretation, gives a positive perspective on the situation, focuses on helping teachers help their students, allows teacher to justify a low score

-Learning rounds update: Principal discusses how the learning rounds program is progressing, presents purpose of the program, very clear explanation, county representative gives some detail and meaning of the program (not evaluative, meant to be a snapshot of the school, value in the discussion) and explains ultimate goal

-Literacy initiative: Principal introduces the successmaker program, differentiates reading and math instruction for students, gives very clear rationale for the program, shows data and interprets it, ESL teacher addresses some concerns, county representative adds supplementary information (time is related to return)

-SIT leader provides a transition to the Goal 1 follow-up, introduces a teacher (informal leader), discusses survey of the teachers, talks about areas for improvement, SIT leader fills in information for an absent member, transitions to another member’s presentation

-Goal 2 progress: AP asks a difficult question of the presenter, discussing how administrators feel “unsafe,” the communication is honest and direct, principal says he wants teachers to feel safe for feedback, open-door policy, teacher talks about feeling comfortable communicating with administration

-Parents present on their survey, data from the parents, changes needed, consistency needed between educators, principal discusses with the parents, a parent says that they want to support the teachers, parent wants to ask where do you think your child’s performance should be

-Leader gives plus delta charts, and concludes the meeting with discussion of the next steps

-Communication: principal presents from his seat but makes eye contact with everyone in the room, people are free to ask direct questions, parents ask questions without being recognized, communication is open and direct

-All members listen and many participate directly

***February 19, 2013***

In this week’s readings, Zemelman and Ross discuss how teachers can take active leadership roles in their schools. I especially appreciated their chapter entitled “Speak Up.” They write, “If you never speak up, decisions will be made by others—others who don’t fully understand how these decisions will affect you” (p. 75). I think that these authors make a valid point that should resonate with teachers today. During my interview, my department chair echoed their point in her discussion of leadership. She said that she found a voice early on in her career and stepped in when others refused. I believe that the abilities to articulate thoughts and take action are key skills for teacher leaders. I think that these skills are not only vital for educators, but also for students. As teachers, we should model leadership for our students. Zemelman and Ross mention some effective ways that allow students to take leadership roles in the classroom. For example, they encourage educators to teach students how to lead meetings. I completely agree with this approach, and I try to find opportunities for student-led activities. Tomorrow, I am holding a mock congressional debate in my Civics class, and I formed a rules committee to moderate the debate. I hope to continue to develop my students’ leadership abilities in the future.

In the Katzenmeyer and Moller text, the authors continue to explore the concept of school culture and how it impacts teacher leadership. They describe some qualities of school culture that help foster teacher leadership, such as emphases on autonomy and collaboration. In addition, they point out three important factors that define school culture. First, they discuss how relationships among faculty and staff dictate opportunities for leadership. They write, “Leadership cannot be successful with a single, heroic leader; rather, the leader must consider how to cultivate relationships so that all teachers, administrators, and parents work together to improve student outcomes.” This quote describes how I envision leadership in schools. Effective leadership develops through collaboration and shared responsibility. Although I agree that school structure and administrative actions definitely play important roles in teacher leadership development, I think that relationships represent the most critical piece of the leadership puzzle. Once again, this week’s readings have challenged my assumptions about leadership and helped me embrace the necessity of universal teacher leadership.

***February 27, 2013***

In this week’s readings, Zemelman and Ross offer some very practical advice for teachers attempting to address issues in their schools. They take educators through the process of forming a campaign and communicating with superiors. I found the information about talking to “the man” very helpful. I rarely communicate directly with my head principal. Although he has an open-door policy and seems approachable, I cannot imagine feeling comfortable confronting him about a problem. I know that as I become a teacher leader, I will have to change my perspective. Zemelman and Ross’s work helped me understand that I must build a pattern of one-on-one communication with my principal in order to further my leadership potential. I hope to put this into practice in the coming weeks.

In addition to communication skills, Katzenmeyer and Moller discuss other strategies that educators can use to influence decision-making in schools. Specifically, they urge teachers to develop effective listening skills using the FLEX model. The FLEX model calls listeners to focus on the presenter, listen and maintain positive body language, express empathy, and examine nonverbal language. I appreciate the FLEX approach and hope to try it out for myself. In addition to listening skills, teacher leaders must be able to work in groups and negotiate. As group members, we must be ready to take on a variety of roles that support collaboration. Teachers must also focus on positive negotiation rather than manipulation in order to work with diverse groups. I think that these strategies will prove extremely valuable to me as I begin to take leadership roles.

Finally, Barth emphasizes multiple leadership strategies in his ninth and tenth chapters. I especially connected with his discussion of leading by example. Since the beginning of this class, I have been attracted to the concept of leaders as models. Barth echoed this concept when he wrote, “Leading by example is perhaps the purest form of leadership-the one over which each of us has the most control. You can only lead where you will go.” (p. 102). I completely agree with this statement and believe that it is aligned with my personal definition of teacher leadership.

***March 13, 2013***

This week, Barth discusses the risk associated with teacher leadership. Barth asks readers, “How much are you prepared to risk?” He maintains that leaders must be able to answer the question positively. In addition to individual perspective, school cultures must allow for educators to take risks and fail. Barth claims that a culture of caution is detrimental to educational reform and instructs school leaders to embrace risk-taking. At the conclusion of his chapter, he wisely notes, “The trouble is, if you don’t risk anything, you risk everything” (p. 191). Barth’s arguments pushed me to reflect on my own ability to step out of my comfort zone. As a beginning teacher, I take risks all the time. I lack the gift of experience so everything is new and risky for me. I still feel like I am figuring things out, and I think that much of the profession remains unknown to me. Although I am very familiar with risk-taking, I can see how it would be easy for educators to become comfortable and avoid risk. I want to avoid this practice in the future. I hope to continue to take risks that benefit my students and further my personal development.

Katzenmeyer and Moller also explore the risk of teacher leadership in their seventh chapter. They claim, “Moving from the security of the classroom into collaboration with administrators, teachers, and others is risky for many reasons.” They explore four different challenges that teacher leaders encounter. In order to meet these challenges successfully, the authors maintain that teachers must be willing to take initiative and risk failure. After reading Katzenmeyer and Moller and Barth’s works, I understand how fear can stand in the way of authentic educational reform. I now see teacher leaders as individuals that can easily step out of their comfort zones and embrace change.

***March 14, 2013 (Meeting a Stranger Exercise)***

Today, I took a risk by engaging a complete stranger in a conversation. I approached a friendly-looking man in Bruegger’s Bagels and introduced myself. I told him that I was participating in an activity for my class and started to ask him some general questions. I asked introductory questions about his connection with NC State University and personal background. He told me that he is completing his Master’s degree in social work. He expressed his desire to change the world and build a career for himself in the non-profit world. As we talked about his goals for the future, he was very open and comfortable with me. After talking for about five minutes, I thanked him for his time and we parted. This activity really challenged me to listen without judgment and maintain an open-mind.

***March 20, 2013***

In this week’s readings, Zemelman and Ross argue for the value of “distributed leadership.” They discuss how everyone working within a school can collaborate to create and pursue a common vision. They claim, “Plenty of schools operate simply as a collection of individuals, each operating with no real sense of shared purpose, running on the inertia that long-established organizations acquire” (p. 139). Although this description may be the norm, they imagine an innovative learning community that creates and commits itself to an authentic goal. In order to maintain this goal, the school must have a group of people committed to tracking school improvement. They suggest the formation of “instructional leadership teams,” which focus on evaluating teaching practices. I found this discussion interesting after my recent observation of a school improvement team meeting. Zemelman and Ross’s description does not mirror what I saw in my school improvement team. Instead of focusing on data and administrative tasks, instructional leadership teams aim to help teachers improve their instruction. I would like to see my school improvement team embrace these values.

***April 4, 2013***

In Barth’s final chapter, he discusses how school-based leaders can create a vision for their schools. He argues, “The few schools I visit that have a vital, courageous, demanding, uplifting vision—where most educators and students are familiar with the vision, where day-to-day behavior is constantly scrutinized for evidence of congruity with that vision, and where the school is incrementally approaching that vision—are schools where school-based educators have succeeded in *growing* their own vision” (p. 203). I agree with Barth’s assertion that the best visions are homegrown and I hope to contribute to my own school’s vision in the future. Throughout graduate school, I have honed my own vision of a successful school. Now, I look forward to merging my perspective with my colleagues’ ideas and creating a collective vision.

Katzenmeyer and Moller imagine a future for teacher leadership in their final chapter. They dream of long-lasting educational reform that increases student learning and enhances the experience of professional educators. They write, “Transformation must extend from the way universities prepare teachers, to the organizational structures of schools today, to the ways we develop and support teacher leaders throughout their careers.” They discuss how these changes can become a reality and what they mean for in-service teachers. I found their discussion of merit-based salaries interesting. I have heard a myriad of arguments against merit pay, but I found their discussion of teacher benefits compelling. I hope to continue to learn about these issues as the North Carolina General Assembly debates reform prospects.

***April 9, 2013***

This will be the last entry in my leadership log. Although the semester seemed to rush by quickly, I have come a long way since my first entry. I have transitioned from a skeptic to an advocate of teacher leadership. I now have deeper understanding of my own potential as a teacher leader. This week we read an article entitled “Managing Oneself” written by Peter F. Drucker. Through this reading, I learned how to evaluate my strengths, assess my values, and understand my potential. Drucker (1999) claims, “We need to know our strengths in order to know where we belong” (p. 100). I agree that a person must know him or herself before taking on a leadership role. Drucker helped me discover some qualities about myself. For example, I am what Drucker refers to as a listener. I focus on verbal communication and work better in groups. I know that this intrapersonal understanding will enhance my leadership abilities. Drucker advises, “Do not try to change yourself—you are unlikely to succeed. But work hard to improve the way you perform. And try not to take on work you cannot perform or will only perform poorly” (p. 104). I appreciate Drucker’s point and understand that leaders must hone their own skills. Instead of pushing myself to exercise skills that I do not possess, I hope to improve my natural abilities. Overall, I felt that Drucker’s article provided me with an excellent conclusion to my experience with the existing teacher leadership literature. Beyond this class, I know that I will continue to seek out readings that enhance my knowledge of this subject.