

Reflection Essay

MSUM ED 794-01

Fall Semester 2019

Brady Baxter

12/15/19

RUNNING HEAD: REFLECTION

I chose to go into education to make a difference in people's lives. I wanted to do my part to make the world a better place. I have since been fortunate enough to work in alternative education, where my efforts have had an exponentially greater effect. I began my graduate journey 6 years ago and now that I am within a few days of completion, I've been reflecting on my experience. Upon reflection, I realized I am truly ready to affect change at a higher level. I will expand on this realization below, as they related to a variety (not all) of the MSUM educational leadership competencies.

Leadership and Communication

I used to believe leadership was simply leading by example. Although this is a key component of leadership, I have learned there is much more to the role of an administrator. I agree with Schmoker when he said successful schools employ leaders that have an ability to simplify the process of education. In my classroom, I am constant simplifying the process of education by modifying assignments and ridding my curriculum of excessive reading. This practice of mine has improved student engagement immensely compared to my first years at my ALC when many of my assignments were too complicated, causing students to struggle. I also applied Schmoker's leadership principle when leading our ALC weekly staff meetings. I made a point to stop unnecessary conversations during the meeting by politely interjecting to get the group back on track. I also simplified our system of storing important documents by creating a Google Classroom class in which staff

RUNNING HEAD: REFLECTION

enrolled and could access all the documents they needed in one place. Leading these meetings also reminded me of the importance of creating opportunities that provide teachers agency in the work they do. An effective administrator does not simply bark orders, in a top down fashion. Instead they ask for the opinions of staff members. They identify strengths of individual staff members and utilize them to the fullest extent. By doing this, an educational leader sets the tone and creates a positive atmosphere, and that allows for the formation of a foundation on which an effective school is built. My work as a PLC leader really drove this point home for me. In this role, I worked hard to make my team comfortable with enacting change and even vulnerable to trying new things in the name of doing what was right for our students. The project based learning activities we created and implemented as a team forced us all out of our comfort zone. When my colleagues saw me “in the trenches” with them, they knew they were supported. They knew I had their backs. By taking this barrier away from the equation, we became a more cohesive unit that was able to better support our students.

As a teacher, I know all too well how professional development leaves much to be desired. That is why I put much thought and effort into the professional development sessions I create and present to my colleagues and to teachers across the State. From my MSUM coursework, I learned more about the importance of understanding my audience prior to planning a creating a professional development session. This led me to reach out to experts in fields related to the topics I presented, and it led me to communicate with teachers at the appropriate grade

RUNNING HEAD: REFLECTION

levels and in the appropriate subject matter as I created various professional development presentations for those particular audiences.

Lastly, and in my experience lobbying lawmakers and presenting information about the importance of alternative education to my school board, I gained insight into the importance of understanding issues affecting education and clearly communicating priorities in the context of stakeholder needs. My efforts during my practicum weren't purely theoretical in nature. For example, through the Detroit Lakes ALC students' and my lobbying efforts, we helped convince lawmakers to assure alternative education is funded fairly in the future. The power of our efforts is not lost on me. Effective leadership truly matters.

Organizational Management

In Neila A. Connors book, *If You Don't Feed The Teachers They Eat The Students* included a number of research-backed indicators of a effective administrators. One of those indicators stated, "effective leaders continuously ask for input from staff members". I completely agree with this statement from Connors book. As the PLC leader in my building, I have been leading efforts to improve literacy skills of a student population that is at extraordinary risk of falling behind or, worse, failure. Through this leadership role, I have worked alongside my colleagues to identify the needs of our students and establish procedures and that regulate various activities and projects aimed at improving literacy skills of alternative learners. Under my leadership (and following the advice given in Connors book) every staff member had

RUNNING HEAD: REFLECTION

a voice during this process. Allowing input from my colleagues proved beneficial because every person sees problems from a different perspective.

Aside from leading meetings, I was also able to exercise my organizational management skills during the planning process for our project based learning (PBL) activities. The project based learning projects I led helped me not only understand the importance of delegating tasks to my colleagues (a concept mentioned in many of the MSUM coursework readings), but of the power of choosing the right tasks for each individual team member based on their strengths, when possible. I experienced the positive effect of empowering teachers through delegation during my practicum, and it was incredible to see what is possible when a team works together toward a common goal.

Diversity Leadership

Every team is made up of diverse individuals, and the team I led was no exception. Some team members required more attention and assistance than others. Some team members thrived when given autonomy. What's more, and from my practicum experience, I learned a teacher might require assistance during one project, but yearn for autonomy on the next project. A leader must constantly be aware of the constant change in dynamics amongst the group they lead, in order to maintain a positive working environment for all team members.

As an alternative educator in Detroit Lakes, I have been immersed in a multi-cultural setting. Currently, our student population is made of over 40% Native American

RUNNING HEAD: REFLECTION

students. The most important lesson I have learned through my experience working with Native American students is the importance of authentic relationships. This cross-section of the American public has historically been lied to; causing trauma that has been passed on from generation to generation. Through my practicum and my teaching experience, I learned that every positive interaction I have with my Native American students removes a theoretical brick from the wall that acts as a barrier to success for these students. Over the past year, I have promoted multi-cultural harmony by bringing in more Native American speakers than in the past. I have also worked with my colleagues to provide for our students more multi-cultural field trips and virtual lessons with other schools via webcam. These actions are planting a seed for the creation of a more understanding school atmosphere and I look forward to reaping the benefits from the efforts in the coming months and years.

Policy, Law, Political Influence, and Problem Analysis

Prior to my practicum, I had experience with educational policy and law. I was part of a team that worked with Representative Paul Marquart to draft an education bill that was introduced to the Minnesota legislative when I was 16. Additionally, I have lobbied State lawmakers annually with my students on behalf of alternative education. What I learned during my practicum was the importance of these civic actions and how they affect the day-to-day successes of school across the state. This past year, the lobbying efforts of ALC students and teachers from around the state helped secure existing funding for alternative schools that had previously been

RUNNING HEAD: REFLECTION

shifted to general fund spending in many districts across the state. As a result of this accomplishment, ALCs in Minnesota have been able to retain staff members, and even add vital services to their schools. Our school has since been able to pay for a part time mental health worker within our building. Students can now consistently talk with a licensed professional about their problems without leaving our school. Before my practicum I would not have been able to connect the dots between lobbying efforts and vital school services. Looking back, I could have made the connection but my leadership experience allowed me to look closer at our efforts and our successes.

Community relations

Alternative educators are far more involved with the families of their students than their colleagues in a traditional education setting. This is not a judgment on traditional educators; it is simply the nature of alternative education. Our involvement in lives of our students is based on their needs, and alternative students have more needs than traditional students. On a daily basis, my colleagues and I perform tasks typically performed by counselors, social workers and, sadly, parents. Through these roles and my role as a teacher and a leader at my alternative school, I have immersed myself in the community in which I teach. I am in constant contact with service providers in my community to coordinate services and gain a better understanding of how my students can utilize community supports to help them achieve their goals. My MSUM coursework helped me gain a broader understanding of the impact I can make as not only an alternative teacher, but as a

RUNNING HEAD: REFLECTION

future alternative education administrator. I now approach my meetings with parents with a clearer goal of holding them accountable for their child.

Interestingly, I have been able to apply leadership skills from Whitaker's book, *Shifting the Monkey* (my favorite reading from my MSUM coursework), to hold parents and community service providers accountable for tasks that were once shifted to the backs of the staff members at our school. There was a time in the not-so-distant past when our ALC staff members would regularly go to the homes of our students to bring them to school. We were constantly securing paperwork necessary for students to access services. Many monkeys were shifted to the collective back of our ALC staff. We were doing the work of parents, social workers and truancy officers, and we made only a small impact because the primary responsibilities of our jobs prevented us from being consistent in our efforts. I saw a problem with this, and I took action by sitting down with my principal and formulating new strategies that began the process of shifting the monkey back to the rightful owner(s). Now, during the orientation meeting held with parents and service providers at the beginning of the year, we better promote an understanding that everyone in attendance is "in this together". We make clear the importance of consistent communication. We make stakeholders aware of the power they possess, and the affect they can have working in concert with our staff. As a result of my practicum, I now have higher expectations for students, parents, and service providers because I better understand what is at stake. Whitaker's strategies worked, as I knew they would!

Curriculum Development, Instructional Management, and Student Learning

Engaging curriculum can be the difference between a successful lesson and an epic failure and opportunity lost. Through the professional development sessions I have led over the past year (and during the previous 7 years), I have had the district privilege to work with teachers across the state of Minnesota to help them develop engaging curriculum utilizing powerful technology tools. Through these opportunities I have been able to help teachers implement evidence based teaching strategies in their classroom with the assistance of modern technology tools. My MSUM course work has expanded my knowledge base and truly transformed me into a more effective curricular and technology leader both in my school district and in the State as a whole. Namely, I agree wholeheartedly with Diane Heacox, and applied her strategies from *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom* to my Google Classroom presentation. I now dedicate a portion of this presentation to using Google Classroom to differentiate instruction. Teachers now leave my session knowing not only how to differentiate instruction, but how to mask their efforts in a way that is sensitive to all students in the classroom. I am not exaggerating when I say this work of mine has helped changed the trajectory of many students' educational experience. I take immense pride in knowing my work is helping teachers and students succeed. Apart from professional development, I have also had opportunities to create instruction and implement activities for students of all ages through project based learning initiatives, from creating escape rooms on topics related middle school subject standards, to creating age appropriate learning

RUNNING HEAD: REFLECTION

games for elementary students in my District. This work has been genuinely rewarding, as I get see students of all ages enjoy learning!

Conclusion

In conclusion, my practicum has made me realize the impact of the work I have been doing for nearly a decade as a secondary teacher. More importantly, it has provided a solid knowledge base of education, child development, and leadership that will make future efforts even more effective. Thanks to this experience, I have grown as a professional, and as a person. Through my leadership training, I am much more sensitive to the power I wield as teacher and the even greater power I possess as a leader. I am fortunate, as I was born with charisma that cannot be taught and I know how to use. But, my leadership training through MSUM has provided me with deep understanding of how to use my charisma in ways that or less self-serving. It has taught me how to use my innate talents to lift up others around me. I am now capable of moving mountains in education. In fact, I have already started doing just that.