Students’ Reflective Journals: National Standards for School Leaders and University Preparation Programs

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Available at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol3/iss3/6

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Academic Leadership Journal

Students’ Reflective Journals, National Standards for School Leaders and University Preparation Programs

Issues: Fall 2005 - Volume 3 Issue 3
Posted On 2010-09-16 08:42:03
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Introduction

The last twenty years have been characterized by a major reform movement in the field of education. Leadership issues were given center stage as the tool by which meaningful reform can come to fruition (Council of Chief State School Officers 1996). National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Educators (NCATE) required that all universities align their programs with a set of standards that will ensure that their educational leadership graduates possess the appropriate knowledge, skills, and performances necessary for the 21st Century schools (Greighton 2002).

Educational standards serve as guides to school improvement at the federal and state levels (Boeckmann 1999). They represent a fundamental shift in the role of school administrators (Murphy, Jost, and Shipman 2000). They reflect current main stream thinking in the field (Anderson 2001), which highlights the role of school administrators as facilitators of teachers’ and students’ learning.

The purpose of program assessment is to determine the quality of a program and to provide information on which to evaluate candidates as well as program for accreditation. Key components of performance-based accreditation are the standards that describe what candidates should know and be able to do and the assessment tools used to determine the candidates’ knowledge and their application of that knowledge in practice. Reflective writings can be used as one assessment tool utilized for program evaluation and improvement (University of Western Australia 2005).

The development of leadership standards was motivated by the perceived incongruence between the academic performance of today’s students and the skills of educational leaders in our schools (Kowal 1994). Iwanicki contends that effective school leaders must know a lot about teaching and learning and become a vehicle for the improvement of teaching in the schools (1998). The Council of Chief State School Officers (1996) offered the standards as “a common core of knowledge, dispositions, and performances,” which serve to improve schools.

In 2000, NCATE published a new document that called for a new direction in the accreditation of school leaders. University programs were expected to be assessed on how well their graduates can apply the knowledge they acquired in the program in real life settings. As a response to this call, a new set of standards were developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA 2002). The new standards, the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) guidelines, were developed to encompass the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) guidelines and
reflect the new trend in school leaders’ preparation programs. The ELCC standards were used in this study as the framework by which the authors were able to evaluate how well the program prepared its students to perform their administrative responsibilities during their internship experience.

Cheung, Rudowicz, Kwan, & Yue (2002) advocated the use of reflective journals as assessment tools for students’ mastery of cognitive skills in educational settings. Crystal (2001) described how a school district in Connecticut used reflective journals as a tool to assess school programs and teachers’ progress as they undertook a major reform effort in their district.

Similarly, Knoerr & McDonald (2005) reported on their use of reflective portfolios as an assessment tool for courses that teachers in higher education can use to better serve their students. The Center for Staff Development at the University of Western Australia in a published report on alternative modes of delivery contended that reflective journals can be used as a very effective assessment tool of formal programs. Reflective journals provide teachers with feedback on what students have learned at the end of their educational programs (University of Western Australia 2005). Uline, Wilson, and Cordry (2004) expressed the same notion by pointing out how valuable reflective journals can be in providing feedback for teacher preparation programs.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to determine the extent to which student’s reflective writings during the educational leadership internship indicated if students were able to understand and relate the ELCC standards to their schools practices. A second purpose was to use these reflective journals to evaluate how well the program prepared the students for their role as future school leaders by examining how well their experiences aligned with the ELCC standards.

Methodology

The writings from fifty aspiring principals/curriculum directors were examined. These students were participating in their internship, the final course of their degree program. Students were required to conduct an action research project and compile a portfolio of program and internship artifacts that demonstrate their understanding and mastery of the standards that serve as the frameworks for all program components. They were also required to write weekly reflections and a closing reflection. The writings included in this study were the closing reflections. Students were directed to consider the entire program of study in their closing reflective writings. They were asked to examine how well the program prepared them for their role as administrators and to comment on skills they have learned from participating in the program. The writings were collected over two semesters. Each student’s writing was examined for wording which describes the skills that they have learned from the program and were able to use during their internship that correlated with the ELCC Standards.

Results

In the following section, each standard is introduced with the authors’ interpretation of the skills associated with this standard. A number of narratives collected from the interns’ closing reflections that best relate with this standard are presented.

Standard 1.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the
knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision supported by the school community.

This standard emphasizes that the school leader must have a vision that is based on relevant knowledge and theories that promote the success of all students. The educational leader should be able to communicate this vision to stakeholders to gain their support. He/she must understand the culture and climate of the school in order to develop a vision that will inspire the community members and rally their support. The leader must draw on relevant sources of information such as assessment results, demographic data, and community needs to develop plans and processes to implement and support the vision. This vision must be focused on students’ success by allocating resources, time, and efforts in a persistent and clear fashion. In the following section, a number of interns expressed how their preparation enabled them to use such skills in authentic settings.

- My preparation has given me the ability to identify problems and then be able to obtain the means to arrive at a solution.

- This practicum has allowed me to experience the work done by a curriculum specialist. I have been able to organize and conduct some very productive meetings, I have been able to analyze data and discuss the results with the administration, and I have been allowed to help make decisions regarding the curriculum.

- Probably one of the most valuable lessons I learned during this project was that in order to gain the respect of others you must be clear with the facts you present and the rationale you give concerning your goal.

- This challenge has improved my communication skills, which has greatly enhanced my leadership abilities.

These reflections demonstrated students’ awareness of how their ability to articulate and promote their vision for schools is essential for school success. They also highlighted the fact that their visions must be based on research and data collections.

Standard 2.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective instructional program, applying best practice to student learning, and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff.

This standard focuses on the need for educational leaders to be knowledgeable about curriculum and best teaching practices. School leaders need to believe in the ability of all students to learn. They can help students achieve their goals by making sound decisions in regard to the curriculum, instruction and assessment. They must empower teachers to address students’ needs and overcome barriers to their learning. School leaders must be learners themselves who are always pursuing knowledge of best practices that make the most of students’ diversity and abilities. They need to use consistent methods of assessing school improvement, diagnose areas of improvement, and lead teacher efforts for progress.
In the following collection of interns’ narratives, they explain how they perceived the skills they learned in the program helped to achieve their role as school leaders.

· . . .allowed me to envision the particular problems associated with a school district and develop a curriculum to solve the problems. I enjoyed being able to assess the needs of the school and formulating a plan to meet those needs. I thrived on the ability to research the different methods that can be used in the program of the school. This data-driven field lured me into complete compulsion.

· As I reflect back over the semester, I can not only see that the improvement plan will help the students in the future, but it has already helped our staff. The other math teachers and I feel that we are more organized, more focused, and more prepared in our professions than ever before. The series of meetings between the math teachers allowed us to cooperate, brainstorm, and support each other. Before this semester, we all seemed to be teaching in our own worlds; however, since we have been meeting, I have noticed that we share more ideas, ask each other more questions, and give each other more advice.

· The action research part of the project helped to broaden my knowledge of the mathematics, reading, and English curriculum. The teachers were more than eager to discuss their particular subject area. They even gave me the opportunity to participate in some of their curriculum alignment work sessions. . . . I learned how important it is for the science and social studies teacher to work with reading and writing.

· Probably the most important thing that I gained from this project is confidence in my ability to address academic needs in my school. I will be more willing to wade into the academic realm of the school in the future.

· I think that part of the role of a teacher and that of an administrator should be to try and make a connection with all students in order to better understand each one’s situation and circumstances. It would be helpful to possess a variety of resources in order to reach that student, which is exactly what my preparation has given me.

In this section, many students expressed their understanding of how important for school leaders to be competent in their knowledge of the curriculum and teaching practices as well as their implications for students’ learning. Some pointed out that administrators, not only need to know the curriculum, but also need to know how the curriculum impact their students’ unique needs.

**Standard 3.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by managing the organization, operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.**

This standard addresses the need to improve student learning through efficient and equitable utilization of resources. Through proper allocation of resources and personnel, school leaders can create an effective environment for students’ achievement. Educational leaders must be efficient managers who monitor school operations to ensure student safety and security and enhance their academic performance. The following interns’ statements provide support that the program had prepared them to
address these issues.

- I want to create a learning environment in which children feel safe, free, and equal... I want the children to believe that they mattered to me and to the school.... I want to mold them into productive, caring citizens.

- One of the memorable classes I had in my program of study was Public School Finance. I learned so much about school funding and spending and all the stringent guidelines that schools face.

- Teachers really need to know and understand how a school district budget is formed and all the requirements for spending the money.

- I realize that school finance could possibly be a graduate program in itself. It will be necessary for me to stay abreast of new laws that have an impact on school funding and school finance.

- I have a better understanding in the use and generation of educational funds so I can make better decisions for the present and future plans.

In this section, students expressed their understanding of how school finances play an important role in providing an equitable education for all their students. Even though none of their internship projects allowed them to work with school budgets directly, they were able to understand the role school finances play in students’ achievement.

**Standard 4.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.**

This standard focuses on the primacy of communication skills of the educational leader in gathering the support of the community behind school initiatives. The collaboration of all other community entities is vital for the success of schools. Educational leaders must encourage teachers to communicate with parents by allowing them the opportunity to establish and maintain a relationship with parents and care givers. They must encourage families and community members to have active roles in making decisions. Educational leaders need to establish lines of communication with all families of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups and make them aware of the school vision and its effort to serve all students. The next section includes students’ narratives that pertain to communication with others in the school community.

- This practicum provided me with an opportunity to work with a group of professional adults who were able to teach me important ideas about working with others.

- Through this experience I have learned the importance of organization and persistence in completing a project within a given time frame, especially one that involves the input from many individuals. In addition, I’ve also learned that people have distinct personalities that I cannot change. My job as the administrator is to figure those personality types out and find a way to get them on the same track with the rest of the staff.

- I think this process has helped me develop skills that allow[ed] me the opportunity to enhance the development of team members.
• It has forced me to leave a comfort zone and reach beyond the everyday ease of working with friends. I have made new professional contacts, and I have learned valuable lessons in how to work with others.

• In the past I never knew how important it was having parents involved in the education process. I guess I lived in my little box and thought since I was doing ok every one else must be. Not everyone has the same view about education as I have.

• My practicum project has allowed me the opportunity to involve numerous people in which I have been able to build strong relationships. . . I have come to realize that communication with staff, other administrators, students, and the community is but one example of how I believe I have made a concerted effort to improve my abilities enabling me to become a better teacher and administrator. I sense a real need to be able to relate to a variety to people from all different sorts of backgrounds.

The students’ journals introduced in this section demonstrated their understanding of the importance of involving community members into school decisions. Many students expressed their appreciations for the program and their internship experience that emphasized the impact of stakeholders on all school practices. They also commented on how important it is for school leaders to be able to communicate with diverse community members.

Standard 5.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner.

This standard envisions school leaders as role models for the school community. Leaders should demonstrate characteristics of care, fairness, and integrity in all dealings with teachers and students. They must follow a code of ethics in their interactions with all community members. They must be strong advocates of all students in the school.

In their reflective journals the interns commented on the importance of credibility and honesty in their personal and professional interactions with members of the school community. The following section includes a sample of these narratives.

• As a future administrator I try very hard to stand firm and support issues or causes for which I believe. I have also learned the importance of thinking things through before asking others to “get on board.”

• The . . . course opened my eyes to a side of administration I had never seen before. Throughout this course, I was driven to examine my personal and professional values.

• I would say this program helped me refine my beliefs and enabled me to articulate them to others in a professional manner.

• I believe that continuing education should be a lifelong process that creates opportunities to network with other educators in the field of education and to also allow me to continually evaluate my own philosophy, practices, and procedures.

• One aspect of the program that I did not enjoy at first was the emphasis on reflective writings.
Early on in the program I was resistant to this process, mainly because I was not very effective at exploring my personal thoughts and recording them on paper... The more reflections I wrote the easier it became and I began to see the value in reflective thought. Now I understand the importance of reflecting on my experiences and defining my beliefs on issues. Through this introspective process I have gained a deeper understanding of my beliefs of exploring and evaluating what I believe and why I believe it.

The students in this section demonstrated how participation in the program had forced them to reflect on their beliefs, in regard to their teaching, and question their practices as they put them in writing. They understood the value of continuous reflection as a fundamental tool for school leaders as they struggle to define their role in schools.

*Standard 6.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.*

This standard highlights the importance of being a school leader who is aware of and able to influence the political, social, and economic context of the school. Many times political and economic leaders make decisions that affect school practices dramatically. Having an active and engaged role in these arenas ensures that decisions being made are based on solid educational research. Educational leaders can help decision makers keep students as the focal point. Interns demonstrated how participation in the program had prepared them for leadership roles in political and social settings in the following narratives.

- I know that I can effectively shape the school environment to increase the productivity among students... The overall goal is to help students achieve socially and academically.
- The course helped me to understand the rights and responsibilities of students, teacher and administrators.
- Whatever the case, it is important for the administrators to stay current on legal issues that affect the school and new laws that have been passed.
- The superintendent must be able to communicate to all the stakeholders what effect laws have on the district and the community.
- The first thing we did in my... class was to take a situation and examine it through the eyes of everyone involved. It was illuminating to view things as student, teacher, administrator, board member, parent, and community member. An effective administrator must have an open ear and eye while he/she remains as "keeper of the vision".

The students commented on how it is vital for school leaders to increase their awareness of all legal, political, and social aspects of education to better serve the students. Many of them stated that classes that addressed the social and legal issues of education were very helpful in their preparation for their future roles.

*Standard 7.0: Internship. The internship provides significant opportunities for candidates to synthesize and apply the knowledge and practice and develop the skills identified in Standards 1-6 through substantial, sustained, standards-based work in real settings, planned and guided*
The internship represents this authentic experience. The interns are expected to practice and reflect on skills associated with all of the other six standards in school settings. The collection of narratives from the interns’ last reflections demonstrated that they were able to relate skills associated with the standards to their school practices, as they described them in their journals. One student expressed the value of reflective writings throughout the program of study, “One common thread in all of the courses I have taken is the writing I had to do. As I was required to conduct more research and write more detailed papers, my comfort level increased and writing became more natural. Instead of writing to please the professor, my writing began to reflect my own beliefs and perceptions.”

Discussion

The study examined the ability of students to understand and relate to standards-based knowledge, skills, and research as they apply to real school settings in their internships. It also investigated how well the program prepared students for their roles as future educational leaders. Through the use of the ELCC standards as the framework for this study and students’ closing reflections, the authors were able to collect data for the study. The authors determined that the program has prepared the students for their future roles based on the skills they described in their reflections which they correlated with all of the ELCC standards.

A collection of interns’ journals showed that skills included in the ELCC standards were perceived by interns as important for their future as educational leaders. Many of them expressed their appreciation of the fact that taking the course work followed by the internship in which they had to apply the skills learned in the program in authentic settings was a vital part of their preparation for the administrative roles they were about to assume.

Even though the students were not instructed to make recommendations for the program in their reflective journals, the authors were able to infer some suggestions for changes for the program from students’ writings. Based on one recommendation, program students are now provided with a matrix in their first class to document the time they spend, activities they carry out, and the products they produce, which pertain to each ELCC standard, during the duration of the program. In this fashion, students find the task of providing evidence of mastering skills associated with ELCC standards manageable. Another recommendation was to emphasize the importance of the program course order for the students. One student commented, “I wish I followed the way the courses were offered [in the program]. Many times I would be sitting in a class thinking how helpful this information would have been in the course I took last semester.” As a result, the program limited students’ ability to register for classes online without the permission of their academic advisors to ensure that students follow the program course succession. A last recommendation was to offer more preparation for the SLLA exam. Despite the fact that a large majority of the students commented in their journals on how well the program prepared them for the exam, a few students expressed a need for additional help. As a result, one of the authors now offers a formal seminar on how to study and prepare for the SLLA exam every semester.

The ELCC standards served as the framework of this program and enabled the professors to focus their efforts and provide students with comprehensive training. The authors asserted that the framework provided a useful tool for university preparation programs of educational leaders to best serve schools
and improve reform efforts.

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