

## The Journey by Eric Vanston

The journey to becoming a great leader is simply never ending. No compliment from a mentor, positive feedback from a co-worker, or a degree can tell me that I have no further to go. A great leader, like a learner, is one who continues to reflect and grow, in order to improve. While this degree may not represent my culmination of leadership, it does prepare me for the next road, and allows a pause to recognize and celebrate the growth throughout the process. A Master's Degree of Leadership is a celebration of new learning, and all the things that have facilitated growth throughout the program. As I look back over the years in the program, I realize the classes taken have not only made me a better teacher and a better leader, but also a better person. Three concepts stand out in changing me and preparing me for continued success on my journey. I have become a more reflective person, a more open-minded person who can work with diverse learners, and even learned about a lifelong passion of mine, sports and coaching. It is my goal to carry these important tools with me as I embark on a journey as a leader to change the norms in education.

As I reflect on my entire degree, there is one class that stands above the rest, having taught me to do that very thing, reflect. TE 802, Reflection and Inquiry in Teaching Practice. The name says it all - reflection. I can honestly say that Professor Mike Steele taught me how to reflect on my practice, and use that reflection to continually improve. Many of our assignments were called PTR, Plan, Teach, Reflect. I learned how to plan a quality lesson, use the common misconceptions to teach an engaging lesson, then reflect upon not only what went well, but more importantly, what could be improved. I learned a very important life lesson from Mike. Reflection is not a tool to be negative and make you feel badly about yourself, but rather a way to see how great you truly can be. This was at times difficult for me because when I first started reflecting, I thought I was already doing a pretty good job. However, Mike asked me questions that I had never even considered, and forced me to think about topics like questioning and equity that I had not previously considered. Because of that class, I have become a more reflective, and more well rounded individual. Reflection has become a habit for me and not just a strategy.

Those PTR assignments not only taught me the importance of reflection, but also of planning. Without proper planning and reflection, I realized that lessons couldn't possibly be as good as they need to be. We focused so much on planning and creating great lesson plans, that we rarely had time to focus on classroom management. As a 21-year-old teacher, my biggest question *was would I be able to control a group of 8th grade students, a group of students who were merely 8 years younger than I was?* As I reflected on my struggles with behavioral problems during my student teaching, I finally asked my professor why we don't strategize about classroom management. His reply was simple. "We do," he told me. "The best classroom management plan is a good lesson plan." As I continued to reflect on my lessons and my practice, I did realize that the better my lessons became, the less behavioral issues I had. The quote that the best classroom management plan is a good lesson plan, is an idea that I will take with me for

the rest of my career as an educator. TE 802 stands at the base of my pyramid as a teacher, and the strategies that I learned about planning and reflecting will hopefully carry me to the top of that pyramid!

There was about a four-year break between finishing TE 802 and continuing my degree work. I spent those years teaching abroad and traveling the world. I came back with a whole different outlook on the world. That outlook, combined with the ideas that I studied in EAD 850, Multicultural Education, gave me one of the most important skills any person should have, and that is to see life through the perspective of others. I believe that I took EAD 850 at a perfect time in my life, a time where the readings really impacted me because of my travels. Key elements of the readings for that class were about the privilege of society versus the oppression of society. We compared males to females, homosexual people to heterosexual people, white people to people of color, and disabled to non-disabled. As a white, heterosexual, non-disabled male, I realized that I identified with all of the dominant groups. When I read about how much privilege there is for people in those groups, I was initially defensive, thinking that it is not my fault that I am a part of those groups and that my life still has not been easy. However, as I continued to read and reflect, I did realize that this privileged society is a real thing. There cannot be a short end of a stick without there being a long end. The first step for me was to realize and believe that this privilege does indeed exist, which then forced me to try to see things from a different perspective. Privilege and oppression are real in this society and should not be ignored; this class provided me the outlook and the perfect timing in my life, to realize that concept, and provided me a different lens to view my world.

Once I became more aware of privilege and oppression in our society, I wanted to learn about how it would directly affect me, as an educator. At the same time I took EAD 850, I was also taking EAD 822, Diverse Students and Families. I craved more knowledge about how to better interact with diverse students as well as possible reasons for why they have struggled in the past. Where EAD 850 taught me about the concepts, EAD 822 taught me about the theories that explained these concepts. Two of the most important theories I learned and that I will take with me are Deficit Theory and Critical Race Theory. Deficit Theory is centered on both placing blame and low expectations. The blame for negative educational outcomes falls on the students, parents, and their communities rather than the teachers and schools (Flessa, 2009). It is very easy to say how hard we work as teachers, and we have studied the best ways to educate students, so if the students do not understand the material, there must be a reason for it outside of our control. Maybe the parents are not involved, or the students come from a poor neighborhood. Whatever the reason for the lack of positive educational outcomes, it focuses on the negative aspects of the student, rather than the positives. This can be a potential self-fulfilling prophesy. We, as teachers, need to be focused on the positive attributes of each student, and less about the things that we cannot change. The second theory, Critical Race Theory, touches on the subordination of people of color in the United States (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Critical Race Theory does not touch on out right racism; rather, it says that societal norms contribute to a systemic racism, such as white privilege.

A mother can tell her child not to touch the stove because it is hot, but can they really understand how hot it is until they get burned? For my final project in EAD 822, I was able to “touch the stove” and actually see these theories having an effect on a local high school. I looked at data, and interviewed teachers at the high school that I graduated from ten years ago. I wanted to study the racial achievement gap in mathematics. I found that Black and Latino students were well overrepresented in the low-level math classes, sometimes up to two times the estimated amount. I also found that these same students were grossly underrepresented in the higher-level math classes, such as Advanced Algebra I or Honors Algebra II. There was a survey that went out to all minority parents at the beginning of the school year. One of the most important things I gathered from that survey was that many of the minority parents and students felt that either the teachers or the administration at that school somehow disrespected them. What is disrespectful can be left up to an opinion, but I have learned that it is essential to try to see the other person’s perspective. Whether we, as white teachers, see the disrespect or not, the parents and students are feeling it, which could be one factor that leads to lower educational outcomes, and consequently, the overrepresentation of Black and Latino students in low-level math courses. Reading about these different theories gave me some insight into the problem. However, I was only truly able to see the magnitude of the problem when I completed my own case study. Having “touched the stove,” I now want to lead the way in making others aware of this glaring issue.

I learned so much over my journey to finish this degree, and I am grateful to have been able to take classes that sparked such passion in me that I never knew I had before. I am also grateful that I was able to take a class that increased a passion that was already there. KIN 856, The Physical Bases of Coaching, allowed me to learn the science behind the sports that I have played all of my life. Coaching, which I believe is very similar to teaching, develops leadership qualities in both players and coaches. Since I have played soccer, basketball, and baseball since I was a kid, I know much about the fundamentals and strategies for each game, but this class gave me so much more. I learned about the most common types of injuries, and I made up exercise programs to prevent said injuries. I was also able to establish a network of professionals that I have already made contact with that will be able to help me and my athletes in case of injury when I do start coaching. KIN 856 was less about doing the work to get a grade, and more about creating a tool belt of things that I will be able to utilize with my athletes when I begin coaching. A math teacher who has a strong understanding of the mathematics and is able to explain *why* things work the way they do will lead to greater understanding from students. Likewise, a coach who is able to explain what works and what does not, and *why* it works, will lead to greater understanding from the athletes, which will lead to better athletic outcomes. My passion for coaching and athletics is as great as it has ever been, and because of this class, my future athletes will be better prepared for safe competition and leadership roles on the field.

As I embark on the next road of my journey, I will no doubt need every single one of these important tools picked up during the completion of my degree. Whether it is in the staff room, in the classroom, on the field, or anywhere in my day-to-day life, I expect

to continue my journey to becoming a more well-rounded leader. As with this degree, there will be some trials and tribulations, but if I rely on the tools I have gained, I am confident I can make changes in the norms of education. I am not sure where my next path will take me, but I know it very well could be the road less traveled. With the skills I have learned from this program, I hope I will be able to lead others down the same path with me. Like all great leaders trying to make a difference, I will make mistakes and fall down. With reflection and a new multicultural perspective, however, I am hopeful that the next part of my journey will lead me, and the people who follow me as a leader, to an even greater celebration.

Flessa, J. (2009). Urban School Principals, Deficit Frameworks, and Implications for Leadership. *Journal of School Leadership*.

Villenas & Deyhle (1999). Critical Race Theory and Ethnographies Challenging the Stereotypes: Latino Families, schooling resilience and resistance. *Curriculum Inquiry*.