Servant Leadership: A Model for Mentoring Undergraduate Student Scholars

Author: Jeanne Tunks, Ph.D.

Department and College Affiliation: Department of Teacher Education and Administration; College of Education

Abstract:

Servant leadership, as applied to the professoriate, in the context of serving students who exhibited interest in publishing in the Eagle Feather Journal, is articulated. Greenleaf's 1970 introduction to the notion of Servant as Leader is explored and applied. Greenleaf suggests that the gains to those served are people who are healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants themselves. The article explores the framework of servant leadership and explains how this applied to mentorship of College of Education students who sought to publish action research, auto-ethnographies, mathematics tutoring, Fiesta Math Night experiences, etc. during the Professional Development School experiences. Benefits to students and the mentor are explained and developed. The most meaningful benefit to the students was the chance to develop their capacity as researchers. For the mentor, the most meaningful benefit was the opportunity to serve and observe students develop their potential.

Introduction

Servant leadership, a term coined by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970 essay, *The Servant as Leader*, where he articulated the aspects of the concept, has grown into a national movement that goes beyond the individual to the institution (Wyant, 2013). According to Greenleaf, a servant leader is a servant first and a leader second. The servant leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities they serve. The concerns Greenleaf stated in his thesis address whether the “people being served grow as persons, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants themselves” (p.1).

In the university, faculty members have multiple opportunities to act as servant leaders, particularly when mentoring students which is most apparent among graduate students who are developing theses and dissertations. However, the Honors College at the University of North Texas has provided an additional option for faculty members to act as servant leaders, in the service of undergraduate students, in the form of mentorship for preparation, presentation, and publication of undergraduate research. The presentation forum, known as University Scholars Day, gives undergraduate students an opportunity to showcase original and grant directed research in the form of posters and paper presentations. In addition, the Honors College sponsors an undergraduate research publication, *The Eagle Feather*. According to the Honors College website (Dunklau, 2013):

Many Honors students elect to participate in the undergraduate research track offered by the Honors College. Students may take courses to learn about research, develop their research projects, and write an Honors thesis, all under the guidance

of a faculty mentor in their major. Students in the research track have opportunities to present their research at regional and national conferences, and may have their work published in the Honors College online journal of undergraduate research, *The Eagle Feather*, or other scholarly journals. The Honors academic counselor can help students get started in research as early as the freshman year.

This excellent opportunity for Honors College students serves to prepare students for upper level degrees, professional growth, and higher levels of success beyond the university. Not all eligible honors students can participate on this level, due to constraints of various degree plans. However, undergraduate students who are not restricted by degree plans have an equal opportunity to participate as scholars in the Honors College University Scholars Day and as authors in *The Eagle Feather*. Qualities required to participate fully in honors-type of experiences are motivation, tenacity, and intentionality of on behalf of the undergraduate students, coupled with volunteer mentorship by faculty members who see university teaching as servant leadership.

My Mentorship Story

In 2008, I had the opportunity to support an Honors College student, pursuing her degree in mathematics, with certification in secondary education. I mentored her through the process of conducting research in a middle school and supported her preparation of the paper for presentation at the 2009 University Scholars Day. Regrettably, I did not attend, nor was I there when she received the award for outstanding research, because as a faculty member outside the Honors College, I saw my role as servant leader only,

standing behind the student's success, rather than as an engaged faculty member, participating with other Honors College faculty members.

In 2009, I became aware that the Honors College was inviting undergraduates outside the Honors College to participate in the University Scholars Day and encouraging students to publish in *The Eagle Feather*. Based on my previous experience, I now saw an opportunity to actively seek College of Education students as potential University Scholars/Eagle Feather participants. At that time, as is the case now, elementary education majors' interdisciplinary studies degree plans leave no room to take upper level honors courses, due to the high expectations for content and pedagogy such as field placement in schools, early childhood labs, and tutoring sessions in schools. However, all elementary education majors in the college of education receive preparation as teachers via the Professional Development School Model, and they have the opportunity to conduct research on teaching and learning across a year of placement in the program during their senior year.

In 2000 I began serving as a coordinator for the Professional Development School (PDS) program, which is affiliated with the Denton ISD. Because of this I had multiple opportunities to interface with principals, teachers, district administrators, and college of education faculty, all of whom worked in concert to provide elementary education pre-service teachers with the opportunity to fulfill the purpose of PDS (NCATE, 2001). The purposes were to support student achievement, pre-service teacher preparation, in-service teacher development, and inquiry.

The partnership between UNT/COE and Denton ISD led to numerous opportunities for pre-service teachers to conduct research in the field including

observation, interview, pre-test/post-test design, comparison, and action research.

Support for undergraduates as scholars recognized by the university and meeting the PDS inquiry standards for elementary education students converged to create multiple opportunities for me to take on the role as servant leader, where I could fulfill my passion for serving students, and guide elementary education undergraduate students in their scholarly pursuits and professional development.

Recruiting Process

The PDS program is structured so that coordinators teach pedagogy courses in the first semester and coordinate seminars and action research in the second. In the first semester of the year students enroll in four pedagogy courses: mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. In each course, there are multiple opportunities for research in classwork and field experiences. Students are expected to reflect, write, and summarize research conducted as course requirements. An example of a research project in the mathematics pedagogy course is one where students are required to conduct mathematics interactions with elementary age students twice weekly for seven weeks. Pre-service teachers (UNT students) administer mathematics pre-tests, conduct weekly mathematics interactions with elementary school-age children based on pre-tests and weekly diagnostics, report weekly on students' progress, administer post-tests, and write a summary report on students' progress, as well as their personal progress as teachers of mathematics. This is one of several research projects required across the four courses.

In the second semester, each student works with his/her mentor teachers to conduct action research. This research is based on the needs observed by the mentor teacher and can include studies of transition time, student behaviors, student

achievement, writing skills, reading skills, mathematics skills, etc. UNT students work closely with their mentors to design, implement, collect data, and report findings on action research projects in public forums, particular to the PDS cadre and the college of education communities.

Since 2009, I began making note of pre-service teachers' work in the first of the two semesters from the perspective of transforming targeted students' class and field projects into scholarly works, worthy of University Scholars day and eventual publication in *The Eagle Feather* online journal. What I looked for were students who were timely, eager, wrote clearly, showed a propensity for scholarly endeavor, and who valued critique. I also had to gauge whether students were willing to take on extra work during their student teaching placement in the following semester, since this would be the semester when they would prepare their materials for Scholars Day and *The Eagle Feather*. Finally, I had to consider whether they would enjoy working with me as a professor in this endeavor. Approximately 6-9 students of 35 were targeted each fall semester, netting 3-6 who participated fully through publication in *The Eagle Feather*. These students became the Denton PDS Scholars Team for that year. This team has invited members to participate every year since 2009, resulting in 3-5 publications each year in the Eagle Feather, with the exception of 2011, when I was on sabbatical and out of the country.

Mentoring

Once the Denton PDS Scholars Team was formed at the end of the fall semester, a support system for mentoring and monitoring students' progress was put in place. The team met monthly from December through March to discuss research decisions of each

student and their progress in completing data collection, analysis, and writing of research findings. I worked individually with each student in flexible electronic systems to share, exchange, and develop research projects. Sometimes students and I met individually to review progress, discuss direction, and find ways to complete the work. Sometimes these sessions took on the form of cheerleading events, because students had faltered in their belief that they could and should do the work. These pep rally sessions usually occurred when students were overwhelmed with lesson planning, teaching, and other life expectations, requiring additional mentorship of the student in need.

During this mentorship time, the tenets of servant leadership were necessary to move students forward. My concern for their growth and well-being was central to my interactions with them. I worked to help each person become more autonomous in their thinking and freer in their expressions of the research they had conducted. Since few college of education undergraduate students conduct research, it was incumbent on me to accept them at the starting point where they entered the team and support them by listening, guiding, and critiquing their thoughts, writing, and revisions. The balance of mentoring and encouraging excellence brought me a level of service to the students, rather than taking leadership of their work. The use of all forms of social media became essential to bringing about success for each student.

Student Projects

Students on the team chose the projects they wanted to study in more depth, with the goal to present at Scholars Day and submit for publication in *The Eagle Feather*. Across the years, students elected to use data from the course projects in the fall, as well as action research projects conducted during the spring student teaching semester.

Various students were research assistants and prepared work on findings from shared data. Several other students conducted auto-ethnographic studies of themselves as they tracked their transformation as teachers. One student had a high interest in a field study I was pursuing, so she participated in the data collection and analysis, and prepared her paper from this shared data. In every case, students pursued scholarly interests that intrigued, engaged, and motivated them to design their research, collect data, and report it in a written form.

Several of the projects were presented at national conferences, in addition to presentations at Scholars Day. Sarah Montejano presented her research on Fiesta Math Night, a shared data project, at the Alpha Chi National Honor Society annual conference in April 2010, where she used the presentation to compete for scholarship money. Codi Potter, a recipient of an undergraduate research assistant award in 2012, presented her research in October 2012 with a team of professors at the American Association of Teaching and Curriculum. She also presented at the prestigious American Education Research Association annual meeting in April 2013. Ms. Potter and her mentor teacher also won the AERA Professional Development School Research Special Interest Group national award for PDS Action Research at the 2013 meeting. Monica Daniel and Vanessa Western were nominated for this same award in 2010, and were both commended. These additional efforts by these students signal a strong commitment to their learning and profession.

Benefits

Students

The benefits to students are multiple. First, students are given the opportunity to test their limits. When they accept the challenge to participate in the process of preparing scholarly work for presentation and publication, they have to extend themselves beyond where they may have thought they were capable of reaching. This kind of extension benefits students as they enter the teaching profession, because they are potentially willing to extend further in their future teaching, eventually benefitting students they teach. Second, students are exposed to a different kind of thinking and reasoning, which expands their perceptions of writing an essay for class, getting a grade, and moving on. The process of preparing for Scholars Day and *The Eagle Feather* publication transcends routine paper submission, ostensibly forcing students to see research and writing as in depth and meaningful. Finally, they benefit from being in a scholarly environment. Often elementary education majors are characterized by some as teachers who care about children, but with limited content knowledge. The experience of conducting research, writing results, presenting these, and submitting for publication dispels the stereotype of non-scholarly expression by elementary education students.

Mentor

There were multiple benefits for me as well. First, there was benefit in observing undergraduate elementary education students grow into scholars. Every time I met with these fine students they impressed me with their dedication to their own personal growth and development as a scholar and teacher-researcher. There were times where their struggles were almost unbearable to witness, because they underwent such angst, balancing student teaching, life challenges, and the project. However, at the end of each process, those who stayed with the endeavor showed great character, fortitude, and

strength to complete the work. A second benefit was learning about how pre-service teachers think about research and the importance of doing research to advance the understanding of teaching and learning. Among the projects where students selected research conducted in pedagogy courses, it was interesting to learn what they valued from these projects, aiding in the improvement of my classes in the future. Among the autoethnographic projects, it was enlightening to learn how students analyzed reflective narratives, collected across the pedagogy semester, to know that they had progressed from being fearful of mathematics teaching, to being ready and prepared. Walker (2012) expressed in her article how research affected her personal transformation.

...brought me to the realization that I was no longer as afraid of math as I had been at the beginning of the semester. With the tutoring of a few students and participating in game nights, I had overcome the fear and proved to myself that I could learn and teach math. By the end of the first semester in Professional Development School, math and I had engaged in a truce. We both waved the white flag of surrender and began a friendship. I started out the semester being terrified of the idea of learning math again and having to teach it. After experiencing the sixteen-week semester, participating in “Fiesta Math Night” and leading tutoring sessions, I developed a new love for math. If you had asked me a year ago if I would ever like math I would have said, “Absolutely not! And for that matter, it’s the worse subject known to man and woman.” (p. 4.)

These projects also taught me important lessons about how to learn the students' perceptions about teaching mathematics, especially to know what it is in the course that makes a difference in their learning.

Finally, the most important aspect of the process for me was the knowledge that mentorship on my part was serving the students. Across the years that I have encouraged PDS students to participate in the Scholars Day/Eagle Feather opportunities, I have received no professional credit for this work. However, the overwhelmingly positive responses from the 14 students I have mentored through this process over the years provides me with all the data I need to know that the mentorship serves them well, which for me is more than enough. Walker frames this well in her 2012 paper published in the Eagle Feather, as follows:

The painting, *Square Sierpinski Subdivision Variation #1* 2006 by Michael A. Coleman represents my current feelings about math Figure 2. In the bottom left corner is a blank square that represents how my learning of math started; empty and blank, feeling like I knew nothing. As the semester went on more shapes and colors were added in, making a beautiful collection of silhouettes that join together. Dr. Tunks summed up my transformation best on her reply to my comments:

It was as though I was glimpsing into the soul freed from pain and suffering and renewed by the love of seeing children learn. It is marvelous to read that the darkness you encountered at the beginning has been brightened by so much

complexity of light and embedded shapes. (J. Tunks, personal communication, December 10, 2012)

Math will no longer bring me to tears again.

I have mentored students because it is important for the students to grow, find their potential, and see themselves as teacher-scholars, and it is through a servant leadership stance that this has been affected. My greatest hope is that students who underwent this experience will choose to mentor their students in a servant leadership way, so that their students' potentials are realized, and that they are inspired to mentor others in the same manner, continuing for an extended period of time, if not forever. I look forward to future opportunities to mentor undergraduate students, and always in the role of servant leader, as it is a great pleasure to witness such growth, enlightenment, and inspiration at the University of North Texas. This is all possible because of the vision of the Honors College who sponsors Scholars Day and *The Eagle Feather*, which are two excellent places for undergraduate students to flourish as scholars.

References

- Dunklau, D. (2013). Honors classes. <http://honors.unt.edu/honors-classes>
- NCATE. (2001). Standards for professional development schools. NCATE PDS Standards. <http://www.ncate.org/public/standards.asp>
- Walker, Wynona. (2012). Becoming a teacher of mathematics to elementary students. *The Eagle Feather*, 9(1), n. pag.
<http://web3.unt.edu/honors/eaglefeather/2012/becoming-a-teacher-of-mathematics-to-elementary-students/>
- Wyant, S. (2013). What is servant leadership? <https://http://www.greenleaf.org/about-us/contact-us/>

Figure 2. *Square Sierpinski Subdivision Variation #1* 2006 by Michael A. Coleman