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Understanding what principals value about leadership, teaching and learning: A philosophical approach

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Abstract

Contemporary views of educational leadership are increasingly focussed on two aspects of the role of school principals - the affective qualities of school leaders and the attention given to pedagogy within the school. Moral and ethical values are seen as important considerations in the leadership role and in the training of school leaders. Understanding the nature of principal value systems including the processes by which particular values develop is an important area of leadership theorising and empirical research. One way forward in this field is to apply a philosophical approach in which value systems are considered as a manifestation of educational philosophy. With regard to leading pedagogy, effective leadership of teacher instruction and student learning is also contingent on the philosophical orientation of the principal. That is, the influence of the principal on the school's pedagogy is dependent on how strongly the principal values this dimension of the leadership role. The authors contend there is a need to investigate exercise of pedagogic leadership within schools from the perspective of philosophic inquiry - to ask questions about the ontology, epistemology and methodology applied by principals as leaders of teaching and learning in the school.

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Introduction

In adopting a philosophical view of the leadership of school principals the assumption is made in this paper that the professional values, attitudes and resultant behaviours of principals are a manifestation of their educational philosophy. Putatively, this involves, knowledge about pedagogy, willingness to improve the school pedagogy, and concern for student educational outcomes are assumed to be a consequence of deeply held beliefs about schooling and the learning of children. In turn, these beliefs are reinforced and sustained through participation in the school's instructional program. Ulveland (2003, p. 661) viewed this reciprocative arrangement between pedagogy and educational philosophy as follows:

> "The language of pedagogy calls us into a depth of human endeavour that allows our philosophy to shine through. Sharing this with our team members somehow makes the experience more significant. It is in these moments, moments that we attempt to share the very ground of our being, that philosophy is done to us".

There is a need to take a broad and inclusive view of school leadership, one that is able to accommodate human subjectivity. It is therefore critical to explore principals' philosophical orientations within the context of organisational culture. In this way, interpretations, meanings and understanding offers an appropriate subjective platform that draws attention to the importance of human intentions, purposes, motives, and beliefs. These aspects may be considered the dynamics of a hidden mental life (Evers & Lakomski, 2000).

The theoretical matters examined in this study are seen as an integral step in understanding the complexities and associations between conceptions of school leadership. However, as Tisdell and Taylor (2000) have stressed, philosophical frames are not intended as tools for categorising principal behaviours. They are simply vehicles for increasing holistic knowledge about leadership in comparison to a reductionist approach in which the leadership of individuals is described behaviourally.

Research objectives

The purpose of this paper was to report on the development of a conceptual frame that will subsequently be applied in an empirical investigation of the beliefs and values of principals concerning leading teaching and learning in schools.

School leadership and values

What is clear in most current studies of the role of the principal is the contingent and situational nature of leadership. Principals work with a variety of stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, community members, and administrators at both a district and a central office level. Each group, and at times individual members within a group, have different understandings of the role and responsibilities of the principal. Conceptualising the role of the principal must take into account the affect of these varied expectations and the also the diversity of contexts shaping these.

One way to explain the interaction between the leader and the context was by proposing the notion of situational leadership - the idea of matching leaders to the environment. In this respect,

Fiedler and Garcia (1987) for example, suggested that effective leadership depended upon the leaders' fit'; the degree to which his or her style is appropriate to the situation in which they seek to provide leadership. Another way to explain the interactive nature of leadership was to view leadership as 'transactions' between the leader and follower. Sergiovanni (1992) explained this a process of bartering between the leader and follower - striking a bargain in which the leader rewards the follower for complying with the leader's requirements. Another alternative explanation - transformational leadership - views gaining follower commitment to the leader as resulting from appealing to the higher order needs of the follower including moral and ethical aspirations (Burns, 1978). This approach focuses on value and belief systems within the school by building a culture in which both the leader and follower share common aspirations of themselves and of the school.

In more recent times, leadership has been viewed increasingly in terms of value systems and beliefs about education (Fullan, 2001; and Sergiovanni, 2000). According to Deal and Peterson (1999) values and their underlying beliefs influence an individual's behaviour and guide their work practices and approaches.   This notion is supported by Combs, Miser and Whittaker (1999, p.170) who stated: "People behave according to their belief systems. A leader's authenticity therefore depends on the nature of his or her belief system as well as the ability to share it meaningfully".

It is the principal's role to articulate values for the school in a way that gains acceptance of them in terms of both the whole organisation and/or individual teacher level (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Clearly articulated and accepted values provide a map for an individual by which they can navigate often complex and ambiguous work-related or personal situations. This expressed succinctly by Loucks-Horsle, Hewson, Love and Stiles (1998, p. 18):

> "Beliefs are the ideas the individual is committed to- sometimes-called core values. As designers clarify & articulate beliefs, these beliefs become the "conscience" of the program. They shape goals, drive decisions, create discomfort when violated, & stimulate ongoing critique".

Reck (2001, p.57) on the other hand studied the beliefs that guide elementary, middle and primary principals:

> "These principals, both individually and collectively, indicated clearly and consistently that they hold the needs and interests of the students who enter their schools foremost in priority. Further they acknowledge that all of their decisions and actions must relate to doing what they believe is in the best interests of the students. While each may define these interests and the ways to best meet their needs somewhat differently, they each identified a set of attitudes, knowledge and beliefs, which guide their actions".

This author concluded that the data supplied by the participants in her study indicate the notion of *fit*, both of the principals within the school and the school within the community. These principals did not see themselves as ship captains, or generals drawn from traditional paradigms of leadership theory based upon business, government and military models of leadership. On the contrary, they viewed these models failing to describe adequately the complex roles they play in the lives of their school communities. Instead, they perceived their relationship, particularly with teachers, as collegial. It was the beliefs, attitudes, norms and expectations of their learning communities therefore, that shaped the context in which they operated and that influenced the exercise of leadership.

This examination of school leadership has shown the importance of value systems both as attributes of leadership and as the outcomes of effective leadership. The development of these value systems appears to be contextual since a high degree of interaction between principal values and school community values was deemed desirable. However, this examination did not take into

account the possibility of incongruence between leadership values and school community values, the possibility that the principal could be dissatisfied with the prevailing school culture. Indeed, school improvement and the principal's role in this process is often viewed in terms of changing the school culture (Dalin, Rolff & Kleekamp, 1993; Fullan, 1993).

In the case of values incongruity, the origins of the principal's values are likely learned from experiences outside of the school and/or experiences gained prior to appointment to the school. Whilst this learning is influenced by alternative or prior contexts, a purely contextual view of values development does not take into account the possibility of personal influences or the nature of the learning process. The following section of the paper examines these issues from the perspective of adult learning.

Leadership values development as adult learning

Malinen (2001, p.132) viewed adult learning as "a process between existential and epistemological perspectives", and argued that the broad field of adult education is "suffering from paradigmatic plurality" (p. 12). The fragmented contributions ranging from pedagogy to cognition have prevented development of a common theory of adult learning. Malinen (2001, p.12) searched for an "all-embracing, universally generalisable theory upon which to base the study and practice of adult education". She identified four adult learning theorists: The first, Kolb (1984), considered learning to be an emergent, continuous, cyclical, holistic and adaptive process. The epistemological grounding for his work comes from Piaget, Lewin, and Dewey. The second, Mezirow (1995), focused on transformational learning in which an adult acquires more developmentally advanced meaning perspectives. Thirdly, Revans (1980; and 1982), proposed a theory of action learning. Finally, Schon (1987) based his reflection- in-action theory on constructivist education, which posits that a learner makes meaning of an experience based on his or her own understanding of reality.

Malinen (2001) interpreted the four theories in terms of three aspects of adult learning. The first concerned knowledge and knowing. She concluded, "knowledge of reality does not lie in the individual subject, nor in the known object, but in the dynamic flow between these two" (Malinen, 2001, p. 54). The second includes the dimensions of adult experiential learning. Questions of paramount concern were considered as: "What is meant by experience? What is the position and meaning of the learner's experience in the learning process? What is meant by 'reflection' in the learning-process?" (Malinen, 2001, p. 22). The final aspect builds on the relationship between the individual and his or her environment by considering the social dimensions of adult experiential learning. In exploring the relationship between culture and individual, Malinen (2001) asserted that the individual is never free from his or her social context. In other words, the individual, experiences learning through the transaction between his self and his environment at any given moment in time: "… it is impossible to think of experiential learning at all except ... from a social point of view" (Malinen, 2001, p. 100).

Alternatively, Tisdell and Taylor (2000) considered that adult learning was dependent upon the presence of an educational philosophy in both the adult learner and instructor, and successful learning required congruency between the philosophies of learner and instructor. Implicit in this assumption is the notion that adult learners already have a preferred way of learning and that this is based upon a view of learning *per se* - a philosophy of education. In clarifying the educational philosophy of instructors, Tisdell and Taylor (2000) identified five dimensions: the purpose of education; the role of the adult educators; the role of students or adult learners; conceptualisation of differences among adult learners; and the worldview, or the primary lens used in analysing human needs. This combination of ontological and epistemological perspectives is also directly applicable to the adult learner and could be applied to identify the educational philosophy of an adult learner.

The salient point in this brief overview of adult learning is that whilst the principles of androgogy may appear similar to those of pedagogy, the beliefs of adult learners about themselves and their learning are probably more persistent. Also, adult learners are thought to have a higher level of cognition of their own learning than children - a more clear understanding of why and how they learn. In relation to the values development of school principals, it is very likely that the influence of the immediate and current context is strongly ameliorated by previously established conceptions of their role as educators.

How school leaders develop a set of values towards their own learning is complicated by the influence of pre-service and in-service training in student instruction and pedagogy. The understanding of their own learning of values may well be over-shadowed by a pedagogically based view of attitudinal learning. Gaining an insight into how principals develop a professional philosophy therefore, necessitates consideration of notions concerning how students construct values towards their learning. This is discussed in the following section.

Socio-cultural and cognitive views of learning

Much of the literature illustrates the rich scope in the area of society, culture and pedagogical practices and structures. A force promoting a renewed focus on the inner life of the teacher is the resurgence of what is now called 'constructivism'. Scheurman (1998, p. 7) proffers an apt description of the philosophical position that constructivists hold to:

> *Truth and reality are constructed by the human perceiver or the knower, that objective reality does not exist as a separate external phenomenon, that teaching and learning are always a matter of connecting internal ideas/perceptions/values with the world outside, and that education is ultimately a matter of creating and interpreting human experience*

Socio-cultural theories of learning have their intellectual origins in the socio-historical school of psychology developed by Vygotsky (1978) and his colleagues. Grounded in the assumption that the discipline of psychology should be reformulated using Marxist theory, Vygotsky (cited in Wertsh, 1985) argued that in order to understand the individual, one must first understand the social context in which the individual exists. He was guided by the belief that the individual's own mental processes also steered the individual when participating in social practices. He argued that a complete picture of the individual requires examination of both the individual and institutional concerns.

Lattuca (2002, p.2) compared cognitive theories and socio-cultural theories of learning. She concluded:

> "The cognitive perspective defines context as the task (e.g., learning the periodic table) and the features of the environment (the instructional setting in which the learning task occurs). In comparison, the socio-cultural perspective extends the understanding of contexts so it includes both the immediate context (the task of learning the periodic table and the class interactions around the task) and larger contexts (the social, cultural, and historical settings in which particular social interaction takes place)".

The cognitive research in the area of student learning seeking explanations of the mechanism by which social interaction leads to higher levels of reasoning and learning is specious (Palincsar, 1998). However, Palincsar (1998) proffers the socio-cognitive theory of Piaget as a plausible explanation of the connection between social interaction and higher levels of reasoning and learning. From this perspective contradiction between the learner's existing understanding and what the learner experiences give rise to a disequilibrium; which in turn, leads the learner to question his

or her beliefs and to develop new understanding. This offers a plausible explanation of how social interaction of the teachers and the principal in a school setting leads to higher levels of reasoning and learning, and subsequently impacts upon teaching and leadership behaviours. This view is supported by socio-cultural perspectives which have the ability to highlight the ways in which the principals' beliefs are enabled and shaped by the contexts in which they occur. It also explains how learning and work are, in turn, shaped by and shape existing contexts that enable new beliefs and practices (Lattuca, 2002).

A considerable body of research supports the idea that "… humans behave in accord with the level of complexity of their mental structures" (Reiman & Theis-Sprinthall, 1993; cited in Arredondo & Rucinski, 1998, p 180). For example, in a study of school principals Silver (1975) found that higher levels of cognitive complexity were associated with more democratic teaching behaviours. Cognitively complex teachers tended to use more diverse and effective teaching strategies, to show greater empathy with students, and to be more willing to innovate (Miller, 2001). Further, King and Kitchener (1994) noted that higher level cognitive mental structures are characterised by a view that knowledge is not a 'given' but instead is actively constructed within a specific context, as well as by the idea that claims are understood in relation to the context in which they were generated (Arrendondo & Tucinski 1998).

Socio-cultural and socio-cognitive theories of learning provide insights into how individuals learn from their experiences in social environments. The mental construction of meaning about self and others will include recognition of what is personally important leading to the formation of values. As has been noted, for adults, this process is strongly mediated by a philosophy of education.

Educational philosophy and the philosophy of educators

Ulveland (2003) described an individual's philosophy of education as a set of ideas and commitments about the purpose and value of education that guides practice and assists in making choices. In other words, a philosophy of education addresses why we educate so that we make better choices about who, where, when and how we educate. A philosophical view of education involves asking questions about the role of education in a society and seeking answers to these questions. Worsfold (2001) proffers the role of educational philosophy as being a guide for others in clarifying ideas, problematising assumptions and conclusions, critiquing the rationales offered for particular courses of action, introducing doubt, and demonstrating the incoherence of particular analyses.

The transformational aspect of educational philosophy may be exemplified in the work of Amobi (2001; and 2003). He identified the major catalyst in his own transformation in the teaching of philosophy to pre-service education students as the persistent practice of refusing to dull the students of education into fitting their educational beliefs into an *a priori* set of conventional platitudes. Rather, Amobi (2003, p.23) viewed knowledge of the different educational belief systems not as a template, but as a tool to evoke prospective and practicing educators' own thinking: "This is in essence the transformative thought and action in my teaching: philosophy of education is not just the way we think, it is the way we think and do".

Galbraith (1999) discussed the critical importance of educators having a well-grounded instructional philosophy and claimed that it situates them within a coalition of similar believers who attempt to practice the art and craft of instruction, based on a shared rationale. An instructional philosophy provides a sense of identity and strengthens the convictions that form a foundation for professional vision. Although it is important for teachers working together to have a common understanding of the reasons for their instructional practise, in reality, teachers display a variety of philosophical orientations. Elias and Merriam (1995) for example, identified five philosophical

orientations in adult education: Liberalism, progressivism; humanism; behaviourism; and radicalism.

Tisdell and Taylor (2000) reconfigured Elias and Merriam's categorisation and proposed a different set of orientations for the philosophy of adult education. These were: Humanist; critical-humanist; critical-emancipist; feminist-humanist; and the feminist-emancipist. Each of these orientations was described in terms of distinct worldviews, the goal of education, how learners differ, the teacher's role and the student's role. In this way, the humanist orientation for example, is characterised by a psychological worldview - the educational goal of personal-fulfilment, the differences between learners are generic, the teacher's role is as a technician, and the student is a 'self-teacher'.

Whilst Tisdell's classification is probably contestable, the conceptual frame used to differentiate between the philosophical orientations could have more widespread utility. This could for example, be considering educational philosophy in terms of worldview, educational goals, and the roles of teachers and students. Such an approach would be consistent with the three concerns of classical philosophic inquiry - ontology, epistemology and methodology.

A conceptual frame for researching the philosophical orientations of school principals

Ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects of inquiry are acknowledged to form the core considerations of both philosophy and research processes in general (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001; and Neumann, 2000). Denzin and Lincoln (2001, p.18) construe these processes succinctly whereby: The researcher "…approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)".

As a move towards researching the philosophical orientations of educational leaders therefore, it is initially proposed that the conceptual framework will comprise two interrelated dimensions. The first comprises the professional focus of the principal in terms of leadership, teacher instruction, and/or student learning. The second comprises the general philosophical viewpoint of the principal - individual stance on ontological, epistemological and methodological issues. This two-dimensional frame is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Professional foci and philosophical viewpoints

	Philosophical viewpoints		
	Ontological	Epistemological	Methodological
Professional foci			
Leadership			
Teacher instruction			
Student learning			

The three components within the professional foci dimension are assumed to be related but are not necessarily assigned equal value by the principal. For example, a principal could prefer an active role in an organisational management within the school (e.g. resource allocation, staff supervision and compliance with accountability policies) but be less disposed towards active involvement in the school's instructional program. Similarly, the components within the *philosophical viewpoints* dimension are assumed to be mutually influential and yet individual

principals could view their work and themselves in different ways. For example, thinking about what is right and wrong within the school (an ontological view) in comparison to considering how knowledge about the school operation is constructed (an epistemological view), or investigating ways to gain more knowledge of the school operations (a methodological view).

The frame presented in Table 1 also assumes interaction between the two dimensions and that the nature of this will be a consequence of both professional foci and philosophical viewpoints. For example, the intersection between the ontological viewpoint and professional beliefs dimension could be shown by the principal having an ethical view of teacher instruction based on notions about the rights of teachers as professionals but not necessarily viewing the education of students as a moral imperative. Likewise, the intersection between focus on student learning and the philosophical viewpoints dimension being evidenced by the principal having an unwavering belief (ontological view) in the importance of negotiated learning in contrast to didactic instruction, yet failing to fully comprehend the merits and weaknesses of both approaches (epistemological view), or identifying methods to assess the comparative effectiveness of approaches (methodological view).

The interaction between the two dimensions and the respective components in the frame can also be examined in terms of the processes by which a principal constructs meaning of the leadership role. Implicit within the frame is the notion of the interplay between professional foci and philosophic reflection being the vehicle for values formation and refinement. The philosophical viewpoints are the lenses through which the professional foci are viewed and conscious or unconscious decisions to apply one or more viewpoints will influence cognition of alternative aspects of the principal's role. The diversity of potential lenses within the philosophical dimension of the frame will conceivably enable consideration of the different approaches towards understanding principal learning previously discussed. For example, both socio-cultural and socio-cognitive learning theories are grounded upon particular philosophic assumptions. These similarities and dissimilarities will be revealed in the answers to the ontological, epistemological and methodological questions posed.

The two dimensional frame could be extended into a three dimensional frame to include an additional dimension considered pertinent for researching the philosophical orientations of principals. In the previous discussion of adult education, attention was drawn to two classifications of philosophies about adult education. A typology of *educational philosophies* could constitute the third dimension in a three dimensional frame. This is shown diagrammatically in Figure 1 by the inclusion of the third axis.
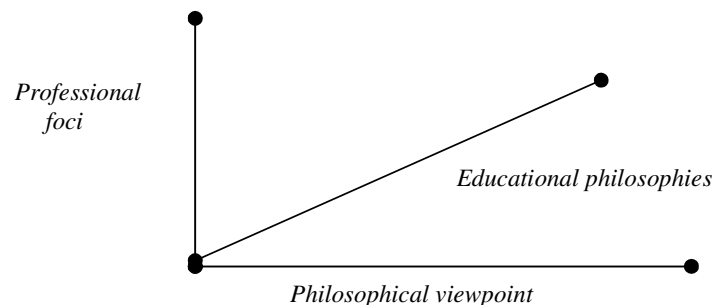

Figure 1: Professional foci, philosophical viewpoints and educational philosophies

Applying a taxonomical approach for understanding the philosophy of education will certainly be construed as an over-simplification of a complex matter. However, inclusion of particular educational philosophies in the frame provides a link to a well-established field of educational theorising potentially relevant to this study. From the perspective of adult education, attention was

previously drawn to the importance of prevailing educational philosophies in the learning of adults and how these affect aspects of the learning process. This gives further support to utilising the three dimensional frame for investigating the philosophical orientations of principals. To exemplify how the frame could be applied for such purposes, the points of interaction between the three dimensions need to be examined. For example, considering Tisdell and Taylor's (2000) critical-humanist category of educational philosophy in relation to professional focus on student learning from the three philosophical viewpoints. The ontological viewpoint is that human behaviour is rational and humans need to be autonomous; the epistemological viewpoint is that students have different personalties and these affect the ways in which individuals learn; whilst the methodological viewpoint is that understanding how students learn requires psychological analyses.

Conclusion

The final comment on the two theoretical frames is a word of caution about the specification of the dimensions and of the components comprising the respective dimensions. The nature of the components within a dimension is highly dependent upon how the dimension is conceptualised. Furthermore, viewing the philosophical orientations of principals in terms of two or three dimensions could be questioned from the perspective of applying a reductionist rather than holistic approach. On the other hand, the frames can be defended by the positivist view of empirical research in which hypothesising about the subject of investigation is an essential part of the research endeavour.

In brief, there seems few ways of resolving such a dilemma other than actually attempting the research as outlined and observing the results (i.e. hypothetico-inductive method). This of course can be balanced neatly by the subject matter itself. For as Bertrand Russell observed in his *Problems of Philosophy* (1914/1976, p.14): "Philosophy, if it cannot answer as many questions as we could wish, at least has the power of asking them".

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