



Ministrative Insight: Educational Administration as Pedagogic Practice by Philip Rodney Evans, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1989

Reviewed by

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The deep significance of the task of the school administrator or principal is to be found in the pedagogic ground of its vocation. (p. 180)

A strong administrative practice in education would be a practice suffused from the beginning by the impulse of pedagogy. (p. 189)

The preceding quotations reflect both the assumptions on which Evans based his research as well as the conclusions that he felt were justified near the end of the dissertation. More generally, the researcher appears to have started with the belief that the study of educational administration has been influenced unduly by an administrative and organization theory that originated in and serves the world of industry and commerce. This approach to defining educational administration concerns Evans. He believes that educational administration, both in thought and in practice, should be distinct from administration in other arenas of organized life. In particular, he holds that educational administration should be fundamentally pedagogic in character.

Evans asks important questions: "Can one be a principal without at the same time also being an educator? Is managing education at all the same thing as educating?" (p. 8). The answers to these questions, based on current thought, probably would accentuate the differences between being a teacher and being a principal. Evans would prefer to narrow the gap between educating and managing education.

The dissertation is an invitation to the reader to accompany the researcher on an exploratory journey in search of the meaning of educational administration. The terrain consists of the events which comprise the lived worlds of school principals. In particular, the search is for signs of the presence of administrative practices which are grounded in pedagogic concerns and relationships. Both the presence and absence of such signs

prompt Evans to engage in reflections about the potential of a pedagogically oriented administrative practice. Along the way, the reflections also probe the meaning of pedagogy and of pedagogic relationships.

The study was animated by a phenomenological and hermeneutic interest in the meaning of educational administration. As part of the research strategy, seven principals were invited to talk about some of their personal experiences as administrators. They told stories which were indicative of what they considered to be the noteworthy aspects of their work. The researcher then subjected the principals' texts to a strong reading in order to reveal something of the meaning of being an administrator. The idea of a strong reading revolves around the search for signs of pedagogic action, or the lack of such action, in the events described by the principals. A strong reading goes beyond being merely descriptive to probing the motivational as well as the normative dimensions of administrative acts. In part, the idea of a strong reading begins with an interpretation of what being an educational administrator means to the principals. Although the principals did not explicitly say that this was how administrators ought to act, a strong reading involves viewing the texts as if they were prescriptions for action.

The result is a powerful statement about what educational administration as practiced by principals is, and what it might be, or ought to be. Rather than begin the dissertation with an abstract critique of current thought or practice, Evans allows a school principal to speak about what being a principal means to him. The extent to which this principal's view of the principalship lacks what might be called pedagogic concerns or educative motives cannot fail to impress. We do not know how representative the view is, but the principal's words are entirely consistent with the heavy managerial orientation that currently prevails in orthodox administrative thought. School administration tends to be understood in terms of activities that are instrumental, technical, and manipulative.

The nine stories which are the main focus of the study are forceful both in the way they are presented by principals and in how they are interpreted by the researcher. At their heart, these are stories of the ordinary everyday events that command the attention of principals: a missing watch, a child who must repeat a grade, a boy who uses bad language in the presence of a teacher, a teacher who has "burned out," a young girl for whom school has lost all significance. The question the researcher asks is, "What do these stories tell us about the meaning of being a principal?" Perhaps even more important, "What

lessons can we learn from the stories?" Strong readings of the stories and the resultant interpretations confirm for the researcher that there is potential for locating administrative action in pedagogic interests and concerns to a much greater extent than occurred in many of the cases. There are signs that a few of the principals seem to be inclined toward a pedagogically oriented administrative practice. But, on the basis of his interpretations, Evans concludes that there is room for, and need for, dramatic change in how principals understand their vocation.

The nature of the research precludes drawing precise conclusions or making generalizations about the meaning of educational administration. However, Evans does develop a number of implications for the needed competencies and personality characteristics that would support a more pedagogically oriented administrative practice on the part of principals. The competencies are ontological rather than behavioral. Key among them is the need for pedagogic tactfulness—the ability to know what kind of touch or practical tactfulness a particular problem requires: to know what kind of praise or punishment is called for; the capacity to be sensitive to the pedagogic consequences of mood and atmosphere; to have a feel for place and space. According to Evans, principals must know how to create the kind of space in which pedagogic relations not only can but will flourish. They should be sensitive to how children experience schools; presumably this will influence not only their actual encounters with children but also other more remote aspects of administrative work which impinge less directly on students.

Another important competence relates to the realization that education is fundamentally a moral endeavor. Educators are responsible for the moral growth of children; educational administration is a normative practice. Consequently, principals should be able to raise value questions and to stimulate moral reflection without imposing values. They must be able to adjudicate value conflicts, to engage in moral discourse, and to make moral judgments that "seem in many ways to be central to a principal's practice" (p. 172). In order to do this, principals need to take their own practical experience as the starting point for pedagogic and moral reflections.

In view of the nature of the desired competencies, the selection of principals becomes more important than formal "training." Acquisition of pedagogic tact implies an educative process of self-formation. In order to be able to accentuate the pedagogic aspects of educational administration, principals must be sensitive, thoughtful people. Such characteristics are not likely to be

fostered through skill-based training programs; at best, they may be enhanced. Evans proposes that principals should remain teachers at heart and in practice.

The argument is presented effectively and persuasively; the dissertation engages the reader pedagogically. On the basis of this research, Evans has something to say not only to researchers but also to practicing administrators and professors of educational administration. Other researchers may be prompted to use a similar approach to explore meanings in related areas of organizational life. Practicing administrators could not read the stories and the interpretations without being prompted to reflect on similar occurrences in their own lives, to relive actions taken or opportunities forgone. The polite but provocative critique of current approaches to study and research should prompt professors to reflect on what might be done to strengthen the educational foundations of the field of study.

Some reflection on current realities reveals the magnitude of the challenge to both scholars and practitioners. The omnipresent and powerful managerial interpretations in most areas of modern life are not conducive to promoting a pedagogic interpretation of educational administration. In order to change the way administrators make sense of their work, the language with which they describe their experiences will have to change. The extent to which administrative talk in education has become technologized—input, output, modeling, performance, production—does not portend well for the sudden rediscovery of the pedagogic in school administration. The cultures of education and of administration have become permeated with language and symbols that run counter to what Evans is advocating.

But there is also support from several quarters. Evans is not alone; his research and conclusions are quite compatible with important developments in thought on the educational administration landscape. Foster (1986) is among those who advocate the recognition of educational administration as a moral science. This definition emphasizes the involvement of administrators in shaping people's lives, making administration truly educational, and developing the potential of an educative approach to educational administration. His views are compatible with those of Bates (1984) who advocates a generally critical stance toward the prevailing study and practice of administration. For some time, Greenfield (1986) has made a strong case for abandoning the applied science perspective in definitions of educational administration and for acknowledging the centrality of values in administrative action. Hodgkinson (1983) con-

ceptualizes administration as philosophy-in-action—as a process through which beliefs about the way the world ought to be are realized. Streams of thought are converging to bring about fundamental changes in the way administration is thought about and practiced. Gradually the stage is being set for the emergence of a more thoughtful, reflective, critical, and moral practice of administration.

Evans' research is not only in the main stream of these new developments, but it has also shown how we can begin to probe the meaning of educational administration with those who are engaged in practice. In particular, he has focused on the prospects of injecting a concern for pedagogy into the meanings which administrators attach to their work. Rather than look to noneducational arenas as sources of definitions for what educational administration ought to be, Evans challenges the field to look to the actual practice of educational administration and to ask, "Is this what school administration should be like?" To ask the *ought* question requires great courage—to show how this question might be addressed or readdressed requires creativity and imagination. Results of such research have the potential to inform and illuminate more abstract critiques and conceptualizations. The challenge to scholars is to create space for the emergence and examination of newer ideas that have been introduced into the world of educational administration study and practice. Good ideas have a way of spreading and of changing the world.

As is true of all good research, the Evans dissertation raises numerous questions. To what extent can a pedagogic basis for action infuse aspects of the work of principals which are only remotely related to the lives of children? Are tensions between the pedagogic and other meanings or orientations such as the managerial in the work of administrators inevitable? If so, how are these tensions to be lived out? To what extent and in what ways can a pedagogic orientation give meaning to events in the lives of administrators who are more distant from students than are principals? These are questions that can serve as part of a research agenda for which Evans has provided a sound beginning.

Brief reviews cannot do justice to fine scholarship. This is a dissertation which merits reading from cover to cover. Many readers may wish that the covers were farther apart. What reaction could be more complimentary to a researcher?

References

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