



Authority in Educational Administration

Rod Evans

The University of Alberta

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For those of us who work with children in schools, the question of authority is raised every day in our encounters with children in schools and classrooms. It is raised not in an abstract theoretical way in intellectual discussions amongst teachers and administrators, but in a much less self-conscious way the question of authority becomes a concern in the way that a school principal knows how to deal with Robert, a grade seven student who defied his teacher and refused to spit out his gum; Frank, a grade nine boy, who swore at his social studies teacher calling him a "bloody communist"; Chrissy, a grade ten girl, who played hookey on Friday afternoon to go hooking at a local convention hotel; or six-year-old Simon who, after having been refused permission to go to the washroom, was unable to hold back any longer, wetting his pants and now ashamedly does not dare to face his class. As one principal told me: "It is these kinds of situations that take up most of my time and energy and prevent me from getting on with the real business of school administration." Modern principals often like to think of themselves as managers or school executives. In the words of another principal: "We're in the business of providing customer satisfaction and that makes our operation no different in the final analysis than Safeway food stores or McDonald's restaurants . . . My business is management." Strict "managers," who take pride in running a school as a "tight ship" where nothing ever goes wrong and every contingency is planned for, encounter these kinds of situations less often. As a result, time is available for administration proper. This is why it seems that principals often resent having to involve themselves in problem situations like these because the problems detract from what they consider to be their role as administrators. They dislike being caught in the crossfire. Let us listen for a moment as a principal talks of such encounters. I will use italics in this text when I ask principals to speak for themselves.

For some reason we have kids who think they must play the "tough-guy" role. They think they must wear boots and leave big marks on the floor. They come in with their jacket collars turned up à la "The Fonz" or Jimmy Dean or whatever they happen to pick up which says to me: I'm here, but I'll do my own thing. When kids are non-conforming then they're not going to be a student. In other words when a student conforms to the role of being a student he will accept his academic duties and do his homework. They come here

and take up space in the school but are completely non conforming. As students they disturb the class and interfere with the rights of the other kids who want to study and so waste all of my time. So with 700 students in the school I may spend, say, 80 hours on discipline among maybe eight or ten kids, and the good kids I could be working with, well, I just don't have a chance to do those things. And as a supposed educational leader in the school, I think I should be doing those things, but time is not conducive for me to do so . . .

Having to deal with these kinds of problem situations is for this principal a source of real frustration. Events like these take up time that could be better devoted to more appropriate managerial tasks such as planning activities, evaluating programs or supervising teachers. This is why this principal resents having to "waste all of his time" disciplining students who seem to take such delight in kicking over the traces. Nonconforming students are troubles for him. They are responsible for events that cannot be ignored but which interfere with the real business of schools and the task of administering them. The successful principal is presumably the one who can deal with such problems as effectively and efficiently as possible. To see such events as management problems in the first place means that they must be viewed as troublesome, as aberrations to be resolved, appeased or otherwise made routine. Such a principal is likely to ask how any real administration can occur when the administrator's time is forever spent fighting "brush fires" that seem to spring up almost as soon as they are extinguished. Of course, another principal may say that this is exactly what real administration is all about. Still the principal is no doubt correct in the suggestion that education requires a certain deference to authority. But we should ask: What kind of deference and what kind of authority?

Let us now examine an example of "administrative authority" in action. This actual incident took place in a large, modern high school in a middle suburban neighborhood. The trouble began when Anton, a high school boy, hid his wallet inside his sneaker for safe-keeping at the beginning of a physical education class and then left them out of sight, or so he thought, at the side of the gymnasium. When Anton went to retrieve the wallet at the end of the class it was missing. After several attempts by the teacher to recover the wallet the principal and two assistant principals were told about the problem.

So the three of us went down to the gymnasium to try to recover the wallet; and that was the sole purpose of us going down there—to try to recover the wallet for this kid who obviously was very upset. We did a variety of things: we talked to the kids as a group; we

searched through the facility . . . The end of the day was approaching (this was the last period of the day) and we weren't making any progress. I suggested that we start to conduct a search on the clothing of the students. We took them into the washrooms—there are two adjacent to the gymnasium facility—I went into one and my assistant went into the other—We obviously had our suspects, because some kids in our preliminary investigation—we had asked them who the primary suspects were, and from previous dealings—actually just the day before we caught one of the kids trying to steal a tape from us in the library and so that kid is a very suspicious one in that sort of a situation. So we called the kids into the washroom in pairs, and asked in some cases, like the approach was: "O.K. remove your clothing because we want to check to see if there's anything in your clothing." Some kids bared all. You know in other words they didn't take all their clothing off, but they kinda dropped their shorts, we could see there was nothing concealed in there and then they pulled them up.

How do we respond to this situation? Of course one response might be to shrug the whole thing off as a rather extreme but nevertheless necessary part of running a tight school. After all kids must be made to learn that it is wrong to steal from others no matter what the provocation. Schools are places where we prepare children for life. And life, as we know, is remarkably intolerant of people who steal. Better to learn that now than later. And don't we also need to be concerned about the boy, Anton, who lost the wallet? It was certainly something he valued highly. Isn't he entitled to expect that the school will do everything possible to recover it? So when we intellectualize about it we can find plenty of reasons to be quite dismissive about the whole affair. And yet . . . and yet at the same time don't we feel pedagogically disturbed about the principal's action in this case? Not just the fact of making children "bare all," of course, that too, but about something else, of something having missed the mark.

. . . uppermost in my mind was the attempt to recover the wallet. I know I could have accomplished the same thing and done it, I suppose, without offence. Like it was suggested: "Well, why didn't you have all the boys go to the shower room, take a shower, at which time you could have inspected their clothing?" We could have done that and for certain it wouldn't have offended anybody because showers are expected of kids. So you say: "O.K. everybody we'll go to the showers and take a shower. Leave your clothing with us and we'll inspect your clothing." And of course there's no sensationalism there because you're not forcing kids to undress in front of you which is the problem. The other thing we could have done, I suppose, was have them remove their clothing in a more private area and not necessarily in front of us which would have been more

discreet. I guess there are other ways of accomplishing the same thing. You know we didn't anticipate the reaction we got and now knowing that there is that sensitivity out there, we could attempt to accomplish the same thing but a little more discreetly, I guess.

The principal in this situation sees the need for administrative intervention as a largely methodological problem. Or perhaps it boils down to a misunderstanding on the part of parents and students of what the event actually entailed. So a communication problem. Yet we feel disturbed not so much about the particular words of the principal, but about the silence that gathers such words. While the principal speaks of what was "uppermost in his mind" we are distraught at looking in vain for a mindfulness worthy of pedagogic authority. What is conspicuously absent is any apparent concern for what kind of experience this was for the students involved. What was it like for them to be made to undress? What do kids learn on such occasions? Anton's missing wallet was not found. But the children were stripped not only of their clothes. They were stripped of relationship, and of the possibility of dignity that is required by any pedagogic relationship between educator and students.

When a situation is permitted to present itself as nothing other than a management problem to be solved or a disturbance to be handled, then the principal forecloses on the opportunity of understanding the situation in a more profound pedagogic way. Pedagogy is not something that is administered *after* all problems have been solved and all school disturbances have been managed. Rather, pedagogy is the type of ministering that administrators practice in the process of dealing with everyday school related events and issues. In the practice of (ad)ministration, school principals demonstrate the scope and depth of their understanding of what it means to work as administrators with children in schools. To see the loss of Anton's wallet in pedagogic terms is to see it as something other than a policing problem in search of a solution or quick fix that will allow us to get on with the "real business" of educating.

We have to contrast a *mere* administrative view of school life with an *educational* administrative view of school life. A principal who is guided by an *educational* administrative orientation always sees his or her actions as an answer to the question of the meaning of education. The principal in the previous case was oriented to other ends. Like many school administrators he was worried more with the problem of community image than with the fundamental charge of his situation. In the words of the principal: "Now, as the parent of the child who lost the wallet I'm sure that administrators are expected to do everything possible to recover it." As it turned out "everything possible" became "the impossible": the community found the action on the part of the school administration fundamentally unacceptable. Letters condemning the principal's action ap-

peared in the local press for weeks after the event. And so we see that, in a way, the community was orienting itself to a principle that should have been the principle of the administrator's orientation in the first place; the sense of a pedagogic standard.

It is ironic how a *truly* educational school administration will concern itself more with the ministration of the little, everyday occurrences than with "big things" such as school based budgeting. It is the modality of ministering the numerous small things that in the end combine to create the good school; a certain ambience that we all recognize and that cannot be created in any other way. Let us now take a look at a situation that occurred recently in a large urban elementary school.

Leanne, a grade three girl, has lost a brand new package of felt pens, and the teacher turns the situation over to the principal. Did someone "take" Leanne's felt pens or were they lost in some other way? Like Anton's missing wallet it looks like a case of "thievery," but is it right to accuse an anonymous someone of "stealing" the pens?

Here again the principal is confronted, like his colleague before him, with a situation to which he must respond. Of course he may just shrug his shoulders and decide to do nothing; it's not really his problem; the felt pens aren't worth much; the girl was just careless—it's not a situation worth investing much time in. Yet there is danger in ignoring the loss completely. The missing felt pens are already an issue among Leanne's classmates. Clearly, something must be done. The principal decides to have a "talk" with the class. There is a hushed silence when he enters the room. Do the children feel his authority? In a way, to be sure. But the principal knows that his authority resides less in the fact of his office than in the way that he knows how to embody the ministrative principle of his position. So he talks with the children about feelings when things are missing. The principal knows that theft is an adult concept that is experienced differently in the world of eight year olds. So maybe he does not quite use the heavy word "theft," although children have to learn about that notion too. What is it like to own something new? What is it like to want something that belongs to someone else? What does it mean to take something that does not really belong to you? And there are other ways to deal with wanted possessions and the question of the rights of others such as sharing or delighting in someone else's pleasure over something held dear. Without being overly solemn the principal wonders out loud how a situation like Leanne's missing pens could be handled by her classmates. If someone had just "borrowed" the pens maybe they could be returned to Leanne's desk. Otherwise the pens better be considered lost.

The felt pens did not appear the next morning. They were never found. Instead something quite unexpected happened. Over the course of the next few days over half of Leanne's classmates brought

in small donations of money, five cents, ten cents, twenty-five cents, to help replace the missing felts. By the end of the week Leanne had a new set of felt pens.

Why is this simple little incident worth telling? Is there anything remarkable about it at all? What can it tell us about the nature of administrative authority in schools? In a way it speaks to us with an eloquence and a simplicity beyond much of the theoretically derived formulations of modern administrative theory. What we see at work in the small world of the grade three classroom is an approach to administering that is mindful of the pedagogic task which founds all administrative endeavor in schools. Here there is no frantic searching of desks, emptying of pockets or school bags, phoning of parents and so forth, in a bid to recover the pens, come what may. Instead what we observe is a principal concerned with the creation of a certain sensitively shared space within which Leanne's loss can be understood and participated in as a shared loss. We see the disappearance of the felt pens not in terms of a disturbance that must at all costs be rectified, but more appropriately as an opportunity for something pedagogical to occur, namely the experience of participating in, indeed of founding, a sense of community.

Within the field of educational administration the question concerning the practice of administrative authority in schools is, in general, raised mainly from *within* a Weberian tradition of bureaucratic and quasi-bureaucratic forms of organization. Authority is a sign on the door that announces to the world that one is a principal. In this view, authority exists not by virtue of who or what I am, but rather on the basis of my position within a particular organizational structure. Leadership authority in this sense is thus a particular kind of *derived* authority to which a principal has access, as it were, by proxy only. Authority is associated with policy manuals on the shelves behind the principal's desk. These manuals set out the precise scope of duties; of how one is to make this decision here, or whether one has the scope to make that decision there.

Every day in schools principals are called upon to exercise authority in some form or other in some situation or other. Education may be unthinkable without it. Yet when we are challenged administratively by the living situation in which we find ourselves in all its specificity and concreteness, upon what sense of ground is our acting premised? Can we really define such ground even tacitly as any kind of epistemological ground at all? And if not, where do we turn to re-locate that which truly authorizes us as educational administrators?

In a way we do not have to search far afield. We can begin, it seems, with what is most at hand, namely the small everyday events and

incidents that in many ways constitute the principal's administrative lifeworld. In a missing package of felt pens for instance. Should busy principals be concerned with such seemingly trivial matters? Of course. Does it make a difference how principals regard such situations? Certainly. Principals who are truly oriented to the pedagogic dimensions of schooling *cannot* be indifferent to the nature of the situations they encounter. Rather, it is precisely in this ability to recognize difference that enables us to distinguish between an educational administrator on the one hand, and someone who is merely a school manager on the other. It is in these questions and others like them, that we begin to glimpse the distinction between a truly educational administration and something that is simply managerial in nature. And at the same time we begin, haltingly at first, to feel our way back to a more authentic sense of what grounds and authorizes our activities as educational administrators. In the process we may remember what is constantly in danger of being obscured, namely that the source of our authority as principals transcends any kind of position power or the possession of merely technical expertise.