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Don M. Beach
Tarleton State University

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Constructing a Theory of Educational Administration

Don M. Beachⁱ

Tarleton State University

The development of administrative theory has long been a quest for scholars in the field of educational administration. The beginnings of the development of a theory of educational administration began with Griffiths' (1959) now classic *Administrative Theory*, where he outlined the problem and noted, "The field [of educational administration] is no longer neatly defined [and] textbooks are characterized by a search for the substance of administration and for a theory which binds the substance together" (p. 1-2). The need for such a theory has been important because a theory could serve to guide and support practice, even though the link between theory and practice has not always been articulated. In addition, the complex interactive nature of educational administration and the different school contexts have made it difficult to establish a uniform administrative theory. English (2002) called the theory-practice gap the "Gordian Knot." He noted, "The theory-practice gap is a direct result of continuing to use inductive methods in creating theories for use in studying schools and the practices in them. The creation of . . . theories in educational administration . . . are not likely to come about under the way theories are constructed . . . in much of the present research" (p. 3).

Originally, this paper sought to explore the historical evolution of an administrative theory, but instead, seeks to answer the question: What theoretical framework or paradigm serves as a basis for the development of an administrative theory? In order to answer that question, a search of the literature was initiated to discover various theoretical components. This search for a theoretical paradigm was prompted by a similar search conducted by Ornstein and Hunkins (1988), who examined the theoretical foundations of curriculum by examining the major textbooks of the day and by Reinhartz and Beach (1988), who wrote about "The Search for a Theory of Supervision." Building upon those models and acknowledging that educational administration, like curriculum development and supervision, is complex and interactive, this paper examined the content of various textbooks over the past decade and how the concepts of various authors contribute to the development of administrative theory.

The search for a theoretical paradigm for educational administration has proven to be challenging and somewhat elusive. The challenge comes from the need to extricate the components that support a theory from the various texts. Elusive because the theoretical approach used by authors has often been disguised or overshadowed by the implementation of practices (craft knowledge) or a philosophical stance, rather than a body of empirical studies, and so extrapolation and interpretation have been necessary. In distilling the authors' theoretical perspectives, it was necessary to examine definitions, related fields and supporting research as well as the general practices advocated by each author.

The purpose of the paper is to provide a "think piece" to encourage discussion and dialogue about key concepts related to an administrative theory. After revisiting the Griffiths' book, it became apparent that a paradigm or framework was needed to incorporate all of the "pieces" or

ⁱ **Dr. Don Beach** may be contacted at beach@tarleton.edu. Dr. Beach served as the second Editor of *School Leadership Review*.

concepts related to such a theory. In identifying and articulating the components of a theory of educational administration, the framework became descriptive as well as theoretical. This paper then, proposes a paradigm that identifies key components that can be used to create administrative theory and is based on the conceptual components that have been used by various authors to articulate both the theory and practice of educational administration.

In formulating a theory of educational administration it was appropriate to examine various definitions of “theory” in order to have a better understanding of the components of the paradigm provided. When Griffiths (1959) wrote his *Administrative Theory*, he noted, “At present, there is no generally accepted definition or use of the word *theory*... A theory is a set of assumptions from which a set of empirical laws (principles) may be derived. A theory is *not* a law. A theory, itself, cannot be proved by direct experiment” (pp. 27-28). Kerlinger (1973), defined theory as “a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena” (p. 9). Greenberg and Baron (2008) provided a similar definition and suggested that, a theory is “a set of statements about the interrelationships between concepts that allows us to predict and explain various processes and events” (p. 662). For Marion (2002), “Theory is a worldview, a paradigm... a way of understanding reality” (p. 4). For these authors, *theories* have one overriding purpose - to explain phenomena. Phenomena may be either real, like human behavior, or entirely conceptual, like philosophy and mathematics. To explain phenomena, three minimal elements are required: phenomena, explanatory concepts, and principles that relate concepts to their respective phenomena. Perhaps most importantly, theories help to guide and explain practice, because educational administrators “think and work from within some conceptual framework, some theoretical bias, [or] some intellectual stance” (Getzel, 1960, p.38). Or as Griffiths (1959) pointed out, “The movement toward the development of an adequate theory of administration is actually a movement toward a more scientific approach to administration” (p. 21).

A theory, then, provides a framework for interpreting data or information relative to concepts. This information serves to provide a lens for practice or a “bias” for action. As Sergiovanni and Starratt (1988) have observed, “All... actions are theoretically based. The question for [administrators]... is not whether they are being theoretical or not, but what are the theories (operating principles)... which provide the basis for professional decisions and practice” (p. 41). Therefore, an examination of administration perspectives espoused in educational administration textbooks provides a starting point for a theory of educational administration.

An examination of various definitions of administration also provided a beginning point for theory construction. One of the classic definitions of administration is Fayol (1949) who said that administration was an integrated system that involved the functions of planning, organizing, activating, coordinating, and controlling resources. In his early work, Griffiths (1959) described the primary function of administration as “to develop and regulate the decision-making process in the most effective manner possible” (p. 73). He further identified four aspects of administration:

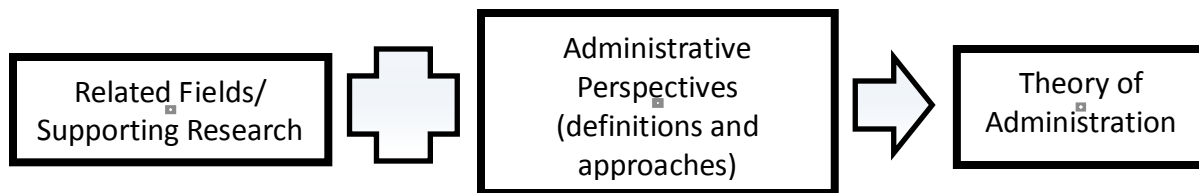
- (1) Administration is a generalized type of behavior to be found in all human organizations.
- (2) Administration is the process of directing and controlling life in a social organization.

- (3) The specific function of administration is to develop and regulate the decision-making process in the most effective manner.
- (4) Administrat[ion] [is working] with groups or with individuals with a group referent, not individuals as such. (pp. 71-74)

Lipham (1964) observed that administration involves “using existing structures and procedures to achieve an organizational goal or objective... [Administration] is concerned primarily with maintaining, rather than challenging established structures, procedures, or goals” (p. 122). Kimbrough and Nunnery (1976) have described administration “as policy leadership and management” (p. 3). They further noted that there has been “a fallacious dichotomy between management and policy leadership. These are inseparable functions of operating educational organizations” (p.3). Owens and Valesky (2007) have said that administration is “working with and through other people, individually or in groups, to achieve organizational goals” (p. 160). While the list of authors and texts are not exhaustive, they are representative of the field and instructive for this exercise of constructing a theory of educational administration.

To sort out the various conceptual pieces regarding their theoretical perspective, a framework was established using three filters: (1) use of related fields and/or supporting research; (2) administrative perspectives (definitions and approaches) which when combined yields (3) an administrative theory. This conceptual model for theory building is seen in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Model for Theory Building



Modified from: Reinhartz, J. & Beach, D. M. “The search for a theory of supervision.” *Wingspan*, 4, 2, p. 7.

By examining the filters of related fields and supporting research, common themes emerge and those that were common to most of the texts included:

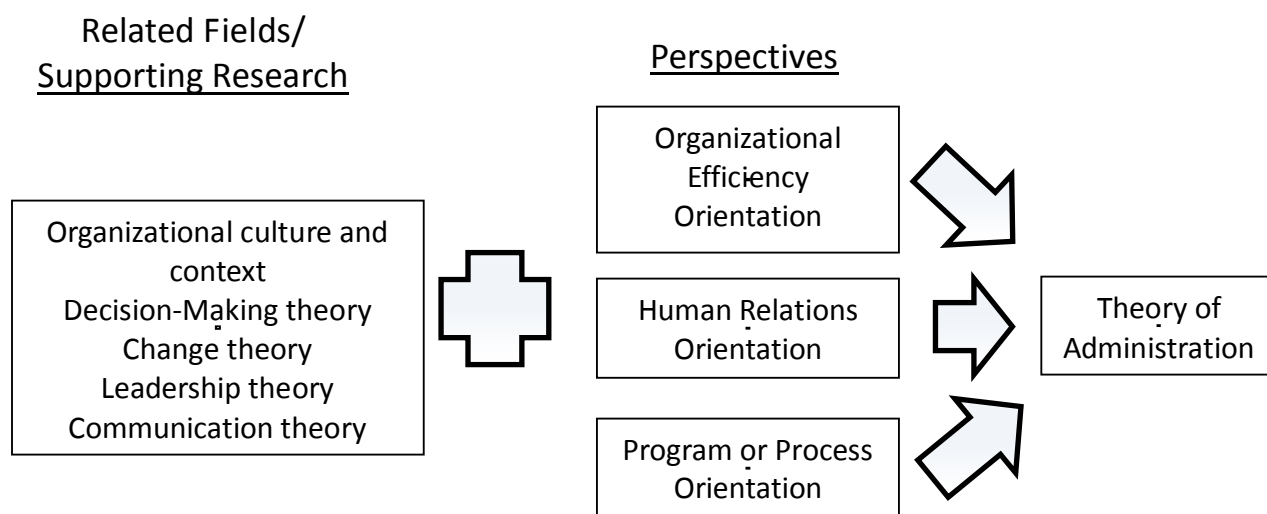
- (1) *organizational culture or climate* (Gorton,, Alston, Snowden, 2007; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Lunenberg & Ornstein, 2004; Marion, 2002; Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000; Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1976);
- (2) *decision-making theory* (Gorton,, Alston, Snowden, 2007; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Lunenberg & Ornstein, 2004; Marion, 2002; Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000; Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1976)
- (3) *change theory* (Gorton,, Alston, Snowden, 2007; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Lunenberg & Ornstein, 2004; Marion, 2002; Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000; Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1976);
- (4) *leadership theory* (Gorton,, Alston, Snowden, 2007; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Lunenberg & Ornstein, 2004; Marion, 2002; Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000; Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1976) ; and

- (5) *communication theory* (Gorton., Alston, Snowden, 2007; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Lunenberg & Ornstein, 2004; Marion, 2002; Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000; Kimbrough & Nunnery, 1976)

Each of the identified themes or supporting research and theory were supported in depth by each of the six educational administration textbooks. The characteristics and function of the organization were viewed through a particular lens or perspective of educational administration. For example, one text might emphasize administration as organizational efficiency, while another text might emphasize a social systems or human relations perspective. An yet a third might reinforce a program emphasis.

If one of the earlier definitions of a theory, an explanation of phenomena, is used then what are the implications of these results? In following the process, what appears to happen when authors develop a personal theoretical perspective is that they draw upon related fields and supporting research and then combine that with a perspective or screen to generate a theoretical framework. Figure 1.2 illustrates this process of theory formulation.

Figure 1.2 Process of Theory Formation



Modified from: Reinhartz, J. & Beach, D. M. “The search for a theory of supervision.” *Wingspan*, 4, 2, p. 7.

As seen in the figure, the components of a theory include research and related fields combined with a filter or perspective to produce a theory. Using this model as a basis for constructing a theory, each theory would be unique to the individual. Each person would select the appropriate research and related fields and then use a filter or orientation to combine the views into a theory. For example, if one selected communication, leadership, culture, and change as related concepts and then used the process orientation, then administration would be theoretically seen as using the communication, change, leadership, and culture building processes as way to accomplish goals of the organization. It is important to note that a theory of administration does not occur

outside the context of the organization, in this case the school. The context of the school, both in terms of historical factors and socio-political factors also shape the theory of administration. A school undergoing a reduction in force “RIF” would have a much greater need to view administration through an organizational efficiency lens. A school that has been rezoned with different neighborhoods attending and faculty from several campuses being combined, might result in a human relations view that would also draw upon change, communication, leadership, and decision-making, but these supporting areas would look different than the school losing faculty.

The purpose of this paper was to answer the question: What framework or paradigm can serve as a template for constructing a theory of educational administration? Based on the cursory review of educational administration textbooks, the results would seem to suggest that there is no single theoretical paradigm, but several theoretical perspectives can be found in the textbook literature. When related fields and research are combined with a perspective or lens, they produce a personal theory of administration. When administrators can identify the components of orientations that contribute to their personal theory, they are able to integrate theory with practice and provide a rationale for their actions.

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