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Unless leadership candidates develop different normative frameworks on which they can ground their decisions, how can we expect schools to be different?

PRINCIPAL CONSTRUCTION OF NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS: Improving Schooling for Students

John L. Keedy*, David S. Seeley and Paul F. Bitting

Leadership Candidate Construction of Normative Frameworks: Improving Schooling for Students

Leadership . . . suggests that what an actor does is intentional, emphasizes the subjective meanings attached to situations by the individual actor, and requires that behavior be examined within the context of the actor's culturally defined situation and network of social relationships. . . . The actor's definition of a situation is a reflection of the situation's perceived characteristics and a reflection of the actor's intentions defined a priori by values and beliefs. (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 307)

Sergiovanni provides a subjectivist perspective in viewing principal leadership as administrative actions grounded within frameworks of values, belief systems, and cultural norm systems. Actions taken depend on how principals construct their realities. Two principals could begin tenures in the same school and make remarkably different decisions because their conceptual frameworks differ: "We see the world not as *it is*, but as *we are*—or, as we are conditioned to see it" (Covey, 1989, p. 28, original emphases). So good leaders lead out from their own ideas rather than having ideas imposed upon them either by superordinates or through prescriptive behaviors based on organizational theory and applied research.

In this article we use the subjectivist perspective in contending that professors can help leadership candidates develop their own "normative frameworks" (personal constructions of values, beliefs, and commitments about good teaching, learning, and administration). First, we define normative frameworks and

describe their components. Second, we provide rationale for these normative frameworks both within the nature of principals' work and major policy shifts occurring in public schooling. Third, we describe two teaching strategies professors can use to help leadership candidates construct their own frameworks. This article is written for principals, teachers considering the principalship as a career option, and professors in education administration.

Normative Frameworks for Today's Principals

In defining normative frameworks we provide their: a) purpose, b) development, and c) normative orientation.

The Purpose of Normative Frameworks

The outstanding principals in our nation's schools, like other leaders, do not make decisions merely by mere accident or only "according to the situation". Good principals, instead, make *consistent and predictable* decisions grounded in how they make sense of their work and how they define relationships with parents, teachers, students, and central office administrators (Greenfield, 1987; Sergiovanni, 1991). Normative frameworks provide leaders with across-situation rationale for daily administrative decisions and help leaders motivate others in formulating new policy thinking and changing practice.

The Development of Normative Frameworks

Normative frameworks are the bedrock upon which effective principals analyze circumstances surrounding situations and "frame" informally testable assumptions about their practice. Principals then reflect on the consequences of their actions and continually re-adjust their frameworks with what works for them (see Argyris & Schon, 1974, for the interactive relationship among circumstances, assumptions, and consequences). In Figure 1, we provide a flow chart of the "personal theory-building" process.

A principal committed to empowering teachers decides to implement block scheduling for the next academic year. What *decisions* will he make in the implementation process? He may consider sharing the decisionmaking with teachers as a *possible action* among several others. He then *compares the circumstances* surrounding this particular situation (e.g., available time, nature of decision, resources, faculty expertise) with other circumstances under which sharing decisionmaking with teachers worked: Can he make the same assumptions about how certain circumstances are linked to actions and consequences? Would the teachers, for instance, be as intrinsically committed to this problem as to previous problems? What are the *consequences of the decision*, once made? Can he *adjust his normative framework* by generalizing across various situations in which sharing decisionmaking with teachers works and/or does not work?

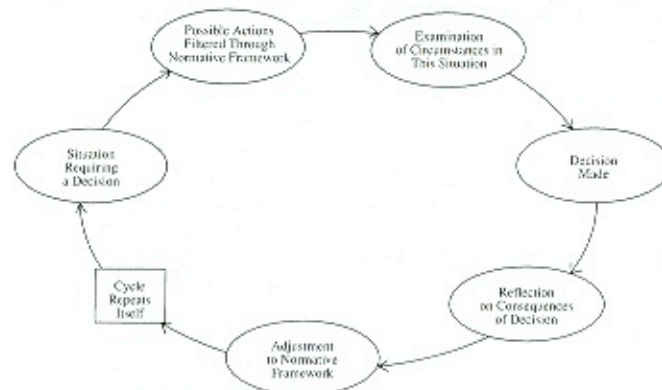


Figure 1. Flow charts on steps used in developing normative frameworks.

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The Normative Orientation of These Frameworks

These frameworks are "normative" because they are based on promoting the needs of their clients, the students, and therefore comprise the highest standards of the profession (see Beck & Murphy, 1994; Starratt, 1991). The values implicit in these frameworks function as standards of reference in making judgments about whether a current state is satisfactory (Greenfield, 1987). Argyris and Schon, (1974, p. 6) buttress the normative orientation in education administration: "From the subjective view, my theory of action is *normative* for me; that is, it states what I ought to do if I wish to achieve certain results [emphasis added]."

We now describe the components of normative frameworks: a) personal values, b) beliefs about professional practice and schooling, and c) internalized commitments.

Personal Values

As pointed out by Katz and Kahn (1966), values and beliefs in general provide elaborate and generalized justification for appropriate behavior and for activities and functions of an organization. Specific to normative frameworks in school leadership, however, *values* emphasize highly desirable personal attributes since schools are responsible, civic institutions. Such values consist of: 1) deeply embedded personal attributes (e.g., honesty, integrity, caring, responsibility, perseverance, initiative); 2) desires (e.g., career advancement, power, money, respect); and 3) political and social policy orientation (e.g., equity, democracy, competition, professionalism).

Beliefs

Beliefs within normative frameworks include tenets and conceptualizations about redefining schools as equitable, caring, and student-centered institutions. Examples include: a) education and schooling (e.g., the need for higher academic standards, the concept of "success for all," homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping or tracking, whole language or basal reading methods, the roles of teachers as professionals, and students as prime "worker"); b) management and leadership (e.g., Deming's theories about quality control, democratic vs. authoritarian management, bureaucratic vs. partnership approaches); and c) human motivation (e.g., negative vs. positive reinforcement, Maslow's hierarchy of values, Kolberg's moral reasoning, teamwork, and shared, institutional mission).

Commitments

Commitments occur when principals hold values and beliefs so strongly that they become predisposed toward taking certain actions as the right things to do in improving the life chances of students. Commitments function as internalized values and beliefs. Examples may be decisions to: 1) long range vision (e.g., school restructuring, personal career plans), and 2) short range plans (e.g., rescheduling use of the lunch room). Commitments often are based on applied research: class size (Finn & Achilles, 1990), cooperative learning (Slavin, 1987), outcomes-based learning (Spady, 1988), and principals' instructional leadership (Heck, 1992). Applied research may act as "triggers" in convincing principals that, given their values and beliefs, they become committed to taking particular actions.

In sum, normative frameworks are bundles of beliefs, values, and commitments providing 1) bases for consistent, predictable actions, 2) testable theories of practice, and 3) the highest standards of professional practice. Principals using well-formed normative frameworks lead out from ideas and therefore are not dependent on mandates from central office administrators'. Good principals do not make decisions within ideological vacuums. As Foster (1986, p. 15) observes, leadership lies not in the position given, but in the position taken, and what administrators choose to do.

Rationale for Normative Frameworks: The Nature of Principals' Work and Major Policy Shifts in U.S. Schooling

Given the criticism that traditional education administration programs do not relate to the "real world of practice" (see Griffiths, Stout, & Forsyth, 1988), the development of normative frameworks can help principals make sense of the unpredictable and fragmented world of administration. Principals usually spend their time in two or three-minute face-to-face interactions with teachers, parents, students, central office administrators, state and local education agency personnel, and community leaders (see Martin & Willower, 1982). Invariably, different people are going to want contradictory things from principals. In a student discipline situation, the teacher wants backing from the principal; the student and parent may want the teacher reprimanded. Since their work is characterized as unpredictable, ambiguous, and hectic (Crowson & Porter-Gehrie, 1981; Peterson, 1977-78), principals need normative frameworks to make sound decisions with quickness and conviction.

Second, given the decentralization policy shift in U.S. schooling, such frameworks help principals conceptualize clear, compelling school visions for systemic reform as teachers, principals, and parents are empowered to make more decisions in the best interests of their students. Considerable power in many states is devolving to school sites away from the traditional middle management levels of local boards and central offices (see Keedy, 1994). School reform observers such as Pauline Gough (*Kappan editor*) are convincing some policymakers that genuine school restructuring (where students are engaged persistently in thoughtful, classroom tasks) can only occur on a school-by-school basis by each school's administrators, teachers, and parents. State education agencies can set broad, enabling policies. Central office administrators can create the conditions district-wide conducive to change and improvement but they cannot engineer improvements "down to" schools.

As building leaders, principals will need mental blueprints as bases for group discussion with teachers, parents, community leaders about how to redesign schools to meet the learning needs of their students. Such blueprints could include integration of school services with preschool, social, legal, and health services. If principals lack frameworks as consistent bases for their decisions, how can their actions taken represent compelling, persuasive stances to those whom they claim to lead? (See Strike, 1993, for a normative, consensus-building model in which all articulate community members use democratic principles for governing local schools.)

In sum, the nature of principals' work (constant, unpredictable interaction with teachers, students, parents) and the decentralization in public school policy (creating the need for principals to create their own ideas for good schools) help make a case for leadership development of normative frameworks in principal preparation programs. We turn to two teaching strategies useful in the candidate construction of these frameworks.

Professor Facilitation of Leadership Candidate Construction of Normative Frameworks

Professors cannot teach normative frameworks, but they can create intellectual and moral university classroom conditions in which leadership candidates counterpoise and synthesize their beliefs, values, and commitments with what can work in schools. Developed frameworks become "filters" through which organization theory and applied research are used to help candidates make sense of their predicaments and provide rationale for future actions. Theory and research inform, but do not prescribe actions (see Sergiovanni, 1991).

Below we describe two case methods useful in helping candidates develop normative frameworks. In the first case method we distinguish between values and attitudes; in the second, we show how organizational theory and research can help candidates construct their own frameworks.

Value Building in Normative Frameworks

Helping leadership candidates recognize their important values deserves particular attention (Goodlad, 1990; Hodgkinson, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1991). Values differ from attitudes. *Attitudes* can become values only when examined critically in the context of conflict in decisionmaking. *Values* emerge from attitudes when principals evaluate consequences of decisions and differentiate "valuable" consequences from unimportant or even negative consequences.

Many leadership candidates begin academic programs convinced that they should always be loyal to superiors, honest, decisive, and self-reliant. All will be right in education as long as administrators do the right things. Such an attitude is likely to preclude any conscious attempts to confront candidates with choices between and among competing standards of goodness. Yet these very choices are a real part of administrative practice. In short, values are end-products of critically examined attitudes when administrators must choose between competing standards of goodness.

Dr. Jones has a traditional attitude (i.e., do what she is told to do) regarding loyalty to her superiors. Her opportunity for value-building occurs when her attitude of loyalty to superiors conflicts with her attitude toward integrity of academic programs. When Jones is asked to implement a school board policy which she believes violates the well-being of a successful academic program in her school, should she be loyal to her superiors or fight to protect her program? Dr. Jones is confronted with a moral dilemma in choosing between two competing standards of goodness.

The dilemma remains framed in the form of attitudes until examined critically in terms of consequences of one's choice. There is a difference between saying that "one should always maintain the integrity of one's academic programs as one sees it" on the one hand, and saying "if one attempts to maintain program integrity against the wishes of one's superiors, then those superiors will be antagonized." The first statement is attitudinal, and is neither true nor false (i.e., not testable). The second statement is propositional in form, and it is either true or false, and therefore testable. Jones can test the second statement by researching similar principal-central office conflict within her district. The first statement suggests that administrators act irrespective of consequences, while the second statement suggests that they consider the consequences.

When Dr. Jones then decides to maintain the integrity of her program rather than maintain loyalty to her superiors, how is her decision different from one made without prediction and verification of consequences? The chief difference is that she sees more clearly what she stands for and what she is likely to achieve. She can hardly know what she wants without knowing the consequences of maintaining integrity rather than loyalty.

An *attitude* is an unexamined and, perhaps, inculcated preference. *Valuing* stands for an examined and anticipated preference in the context of competing standards of goodness (see Dewey, 1908/1960).

Use of this case method exemplifies our normative framework model presented in Figure 1 in two ways. First, possible consequences are tested out as ways of valuing possible consequences of actions; in effect, a principal is "filtering through one's normative framework" actions and consequences he values. Second, this case method can be used to help candidates become aware of their values in schooling (as opposed to mere attitudes); values, of course, comprise a component of normative frameworks.

Developing Frameworks Through Organizational Theory

In this teaching strategy, leadership candidates construct normative frameworks developed incrementally by integrating 1) organization theory and research, 2) leadership candidate beliefs about teaching and learning, values and commitments; and 3) professional and political demands (workplace context).

The professor first presents an organization theory (e.g., socio-political, socio-technical, systemic school reform). Second, paired-leadership candidates develop written case formats in which elements of the presented theory are used to analyze a pre-assigned case, and then teach the class. Third, leadership candidates formulate: 1) what they each would do to address the dilemma presented at the end of the case, and 2) the bases on which they would make such a decision. (The professor prepares the first case analysis and teaches the class to model this case method cycle.)

One case involves leadership candidates assuming roles (e.g., school board member, county commissioner, teacher association representative, superintendent), and then analyzing the role play (a scenario about school closings) as to which players can manipulate power according to their own group needs (a tenet of socio-political theory). The professor models the grounding of decisions on his normative framework and calls on leadership candidates to do the same.

As the leadership candidates become more comfortable with the case method cycle, they begin critiquing their peers' motives, intentions, and assumptions as bases for their intended actions. Leadership candidates gradually realize that their peers: 1) increasingly articulate different actions taken, and 2) provide emerging normative frameworks as bases for their actions. Candidates then use notebooks to record their reactions to a case analysis and note new additions to their normative frameworks. At the beginning of the next class (before introduction of a new organization theory), students meet in groups to share their writings. In this way, the process of developing normative frameworks is incremental (from class to class) and peer-critiqued.

Some leadership candidates have difficulty in conceptualizing their normative frameworks in their final papers. They expect a handout on which the "requirements" for the normative frameworks are specified. Of course, no such document exists, since normative frameworks require candidate reflective analysis of personal beliefs and values.

Summary and Suggestions for Improving University Preparation Programs

Our first purpose was to define normative frameworks: reasonably coherent mindsets of internalized values, beliefs, and commitments providing consistency for actions taken across similar situations. Our second purpose was to provide rationale for why today's principals need to develop normative frameworks. Since principal work is unpredictable, fragmented, and fast-paced, these administrators can use normative frameworks as consistent bases for on-the-spot decision making. Also, given the policy shift toward decentralization and school-site autonomy, unless principals can internalize and act on a set of beliefs, values, and commitments consistent with these policy shifts, how can they lead schools in this restructuring age? Finally, we suggested two ways that professors could facilitate leadership candidate construction of normative frameworks.

We end this article with three suggestions designed to make university environments more "student-centered" and more supportive of leadership candidate normative framework construction. Such a change will not be easy. Leadership candidates often expect professors to tell them what they need to do to become good principals. "Cook-book formulas," however, do not relate to the real world of the principalship: every situation represents a new configuration of players (e.g., with teachers, students, parents), and circumstances. The teaching of

normative frameworks must occur within a supportive environment in which leadership candidates become the meaning-makers through application to real problems in schools.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

In PBL professors and students together identify an administrative problem (e.g., implementing special education mainstreaming in an elementary school). The professor provides the learning materials, such as special education law and relevant court cases, background reading, descriptions of student learning problems and the school and community. The professor also helps organize the learning groups and sets up the timelines (see Tanner, Keedy, & Galis [in press]). Candidates assign themselves roles, interview various principals, students, parents for more contextual information, and produce their own strategies for dealing with the problem. (See Bridges & Hallinger [1992] for more suggestions.) Team members ultimately will differ among themselves as to what they should do. Identification of such differences, of course, would be ideal for incorporation into individual development of normative frameworks.

Cognitive Apprenticeships

Candidates can learn from practicing principals why and how they decide to make certain decisions. During well-planned internships with articulate principals, candidates can begin developing their own frameworks by contrasting their principals' reasoning with those of their own. Would they have made similar decisions under similar circumstances? (See Prestine & LeGrand, 1991).

Action Research

Candidates as action researchers identify problems of practice in their workplaces and then research various ways to improve those practices (McCutcheon & Jung, 1991). Professors can provide candidates technical assistance, and at the same time learn about how the practice of the principalship can be improved. The keys here are that: a) candidates, not professors, set the research agenda, and b) research agendas should be grounded within leadership candidate normative frameworks.

These three suggestions focus on the leadership candidate as meaning-maker of constructing normative frameworks, with the professor as facilitator of the learning process. For if we expect schools to be different from the "25 kids in a box" factory model, then we need leadership candidates building their own explanations about how good schools work, and negotiating these explanations with teachers, parents, students, and community leaders. Unless leadership candidates develop different normative frameworks on which they can ground their decisions, how can we expect schools to be different?

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Author Notes

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Endnotes

1. Effective principals, in fact, may be far less dependent on their central offices than their "typical" principals. Keedy (1992) found that four highly successful high school principals rarely mentioned the support of central office administrators during the extensive interviews. Their references to central office administrators were as likely to be negative as positive. Logically, the less dependent principals are on their superiors' support and goodwill, the more they can lead schools out of their own frameworks as bases for decisions.