

Moral Leadership: A Model for Educational Leaders in the 21st Century

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Abstract: Furthering the understanding of and exploring the literature on moral leadership models is the purpose of this research paper. A review the literature was undertaken, synthesizing concepts and offering a new paradigm for educational leaders.

The roles of the educational leader are many: coach, teacher, counselor and sometimes parent. The tools of the trade are equally varied: counseling, revitalizing, sharing, teaching, leading and pointing the way. Leading means articulating a vision and then creating the structure for that vision to come to fruition. As an educational leader, one must be willing to serve, serving those around one and subordinating oneself to the vision and best interests of the organization. The following quotation epitomizes what educational leadership for the 21st century should be:

The new view of leadership in learning organizations centers on subtler and more important tasks. In a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards, and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models—that is, they are responsible for learning (Senge, 1990, p.340).

How do educational leaders act as “stewards” for their respective institutions? What are the practices that make for an ethical and moral educational setting? How do these practices affect students? Do these practices teach our students to act in the manner we intend or are we teaching unintended lessons? These are the questions that educational leaders must ask themselves as they lead our educational institutions into the 21st century. Failure to answer these important questions in a thoughtful and intelligent manner will result in an increase in the kind of moral and ethical difficulties with which we are faced today. In the 21st century, more than at any time in our collective past, educational leaders must be moral role models.

Leadership in any endeavor is a moral task, but even more so for educational leaders. Educational leaders are not only responsible for the success of their particular institution, but their work can impact various other institutions now and in the future, those who are led will be the future leaders of tomorrow. “Adults need to demonstrate to young people that it is possible to live one’s values and advocate for a more just and responsible society” (Berreth & Berman, 1997, p. 25). Educational leaders must be constantly vigilant about their actions as they speak volumes about the values that the educational leader supports. It is impossible for an educational leader to take an action that does not signify some comment about how things *should* be done – which by definition is moral action – and everyone is watching, especially the students.

Organization of Paper

The first section of this paper presents a discussion of school culture, climate and community. The second section introduces the three principles for educational leaders and the third section describes a model for principal actions. Finally, implications for educational administration are presented.

School Culture, Climate and Community

“Schools constitute minisocieties within the larger culture. They are structured by norms and conventions that frame the affective, personal, and moral elements of the school experience” (Nucci, 2001, p.141). The principal is the key player in a school; for it is from the principal that the climate of the school will come. The climate of a school is the moral feeling of the place derived from the values that the principal advocates and makes actionable. The climate significantly impacts the culture. The culture is defined by the practices, both explicit and implicit, in which the constituents of the school are involved. These behaviors may be either codified and sanctioned, as in a specific way for addressing grievances within the school, or they may be unspoken assumptions about how one achieves his/her objectives within the community. The climate and culture of the school impacts the type of community that a school will be. The sense of community is defined by how the relationships within the school are created, valued, sustained and managed. Is the school focused on normative behavior, enforced by rules and regulations, or is there a sense that the community places a value on democratic participation and on positive, affirming relationships among all members of the community above any other considerations?

The responsibility for directing the creation of a sense of community within the school lies with the principal. The principal’s actions shape the experiences within the school, directly and indirectly, affecting and determining the norms and conventions of the institution, giving form to the climate, culture and, ultimately, the community. “[A] sense of community in school [is] a pivotal condition for children’s ethical, social and emotional development, and also for their academic motivation” (Schaps, 1998, p.6). Understanding that a sense of community strongly influences student development, educational leaders must focus their attention on activities that enhance the sense of community within the school. Bureaucratic initiatives, policies and procedures are not enough. The leader must create rituals and traditions that symbolically represent the values of the community. These rituals and traditions give life to the values that are espoused by the leader, but more than that they become the foundation on which the climate, culture and community is grounded. These activities teach lessons to all involved in the school community.

Three Principles For Educational Leaders

With the knowledge that lessons are being taught and understanding that one is a steward of the school, the educational leader needs to have self-knowledge – knowledge of one’s own values - and the ability to translate that knowledge into action. “Integrity is a fundamental consistency between one’s values, goals, and actions. At the simplest level it means standing for something, having a significant commitment and exemplifying this commitment in your behavior” (Evans, 1996, p.185). For the principals, the first moral lesson that they teach is that they have beliefs that are valuable and on which they are willing to take action, demonstrating integrity and practicing authenticity. If leaders do not act from a place of “integrity” then their “authenticity” will be questioned (Evans, 1996, p.184). “Authentic” leaders are those who are

trusted, and they are trusted because they "...do what they say they will do – meet their commitments, keep their promises – are trustworthy" (Evans, 1996, p.184). For the educational leader the first principle of moral leadership is authenticity: acting in accord with one's beliefs, or as the colloquial expression goes, "If you talk the talk, then you better walk the walk." For example, a principal who believes in Kohlberg's concept of a "just community" (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989a, 1989b as cited in Nucci, 2001. p.158) may create a structure for joint decision making and democratic participation that involves all stakeholders, demonstrating in action his/her belief in cooperative power sharing; such a structure will communicate to the community a very strong message about the leader, but even more so it will communicate that the climate, culture and community is founded on such values.

The first principle for educational leaders is "authenticity." The second principle is balance – balance between the ethics of justice and the ethics of care. Too often educational leaders align themselves with one to the exclusion of the other when what is needed is a balance. More often than not this focus on one rather than the other is an unconscious decision; therefore, the educational leader must make a conscious choice acting with volition to find the balance.

So how is this achieved? The ethics of justice focuses on "problems of oppression, problems stemming from inequality, and the moral ideal... of reciprocity or equal respect (Gilligan, Ward, Taylor, & Bardige, 1988, p. xvii). There is a need for a focus on the ethics of justice; although this is a necessary condition for the creation of a morally healthy community, it is not sufficient. The ethics of care must also be actively pursued. "From the perspective of someone seeking or valuing care, relationship connotes responsiveness or engagement, a resiliency of connection that is symbolized by a network or web" (Gilligan, et al., 1988, p. xvii). Education is primarily about relationships; the ethics of care supports this notion. Yet, once this point is conceded, one must then consider how all the various relationships within a school community will be managed. An ethically responsible educational leader will focus on the primacy of relationships and the understanding of the interrelatedness of all the stakeholders within the community, while simultaneously creating a climate in which each individual is free from oppression, is treated with equality and the "golden rule" is enacted in the relationships between members of the community. Linking these two ideals then is the test of the educational leader as moral role model.

The third and final principle for educational leaders is systems thinking. Senge (2000) says, "[T]he discipline of systems thinking provides a different way of looking at problems and goals – not as isolated events but as components of larger structures...A system is any perceived whole whose elements 'hang together' because they continually affect each other" (p.78). Linking the ethics of justice with the ethics of care in an authentic manner in order to affect the school community is approached from a systemic perspective, understanding that the leaders words, actions and/or inactions, and the tenor of his/her relationships have an impact across the entire system. This knowledge forces the educational leader to reconsider his/her role. The days of unilateral decision-making are over. A leader focusing on the systems perspective must rely on others, affirming the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of the stakeholders within the community. Working closely with others and building constructive relationships becomes key. "Systems often take their shape from the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the people in them. That's because our mental models, our theories about the way the world works, influences our actions, which in turn influence the interactions of the system" (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton & Kleiner, 2000, p. 83).

A Principal's Actions

Although there is no formulaic way for the educational leader to exercise all of the three principles – each leader will respond in a unique fashion - one possibility will be offered. The principal, focusing first on the primacy of relationships, begins his/her tenure at a school by cultivating relationships, engaging all stakeholders in a dialogue about the function of the school - remembering that the first principle is “authenticity.” The focus of this dialogue will be on unearthing the “mental models” of which Senge (2000) speaks. As the principal authentically engages members of the community in dialogue, s/he is modeling behavior for the others in the community, creating values that will begin to affect the climate and culture of the school. These first values will be: relationships matter, listening matters and everyone has a voice.

As the dialogue continues with the various constituents of the community, the questioning of the current structures and practices begins. How were these structures and practices created? What purposes did they serve? Are they still useful? Have they caused unintended consequences? The lesson that the leader begins to model during this part of the process is one of inquisitiveness and curiosity - two of the most important qualities for any learning community. “It means that learning and the acceptance of uncertainty that is always part of learning are part of the culture, or the genetic code of the system. [L]eaders expect themselves and others to be uncertain, inquiring, expectant of surprise, and perhaps a bit joyful about confronting the unknown” and questioning the known (Senge et al., 2000. p. 417). However, there is one caveat about this aspect of the process. It must be done with a degree of reverence for the current practices, as they are a part of the present climate, culture and community. Even if the stakeholders are uncomfortable with some of the current practices, they are theirs and to question them in a manner that could be perceived as disrespectful may feel to some in the community like the leader is undermining their very personal foundation, as well as that of the community.

The next step in this process is the most crucial. Since the leader has been clear and open from the beginning, the community will not be surprised by the next phase; actually they will expect it. It is at this point that the need for change is genuinely examined. The educational leader's authenticity will be most important during this time. Those practices that were discovered to be ineffectual and/or archaic will have to be replaced. Here is where the educational leader must focus his/her energies on the synthesis of the principles. “When faced with such complexity, convening the appropriate people in the system and facilitating their conversations and learning is called for” (Senge et al., 2000, p. 414).

Decisions about what needs to be done, by whom and when, must be considered in the context of the ethics of justice and the ethics of care and from a systems perspective. How will these changes assist all students in fully developing their individual potential? How do the proposed changes empower stakeholders, and which ones? Are some individuals having their power diminished? Are all individuals and perspectives being respected? What are the long-term benefits and/or consequences of the action across the entire system? Will this positively affect the relationships within the community or will they be diminished? And finally, what are any other costs and benefits from the proposed change? All of these questions, and many others must be considered, but if the leader has done his/her groundwork the constituents will trust that the decisions were arrived at in a competent manner because they were involved in the process. Ron Heifetz, as cited in Senge (2000.), defines leadership as “the ability to mobilize people to tackle tough problems” (p. 414). The task of the educational leader is the constant review and evaluation of current practices and structures and, where needed, the establishment of new

practices and structures that will create the intended climate, culture, and, in turn, community of the school. Understanding that this is a process of constant evaluation and re-evaluation, will allow the community to continue to question itself and its practices making sure that the community is functioning in the intended manner with the goal always of serving the best interests of the students.

As educational leaders attend to the three principles of moral leadership – authenticity, balance, and systems thinking – they are teaching lessons to all within the community, especially the students. The principal is developing a community in which the “[a]dults exemplify positive moral values in their work with one another and with the students...model[ing] behavior by developing codes of conduct for [their] own work” and their interactions with one another (Berreth & Berman, 1997, p. 25). This task cannot be overstated, as it is the very foundation of a vital education. Frequently, educational leaders focus on curriculum, policy-making and other bureaucratic functions to the exclusion of the truly vital function of education, assisting students in becoming the very best people that they can be. This must be understood in a holistic context. That is to say that each individual is a thinking, feeling and acting being attempting to make meaning of his/her life. Education, therefore, must focus on the shaping of the whole child and the learning community must be structured in such a way that all of the actions of the school demonstrate the values that the community espouses; for the students will follow the example that the adults on campus set. Supporting this notion, Sizer and Sizer (1999) state that, There has to be a unified (if not precisely uniform) culture. And there has to be room for the appropriate expression of individual convictions. These two are not necessarily in opposition, but they can be. Among a few very important things, school is about helping young people to gain the habit of seeing the virtue of such a balance, not only at school but in all the years that follow. One is true to oneself. One is also true to one’s communities. Each citizen must find his or her most defensible balance. School exists to help along that process (pp.17-18).

It is this holistic focus that must be the guiding thought for the educational leader as role model. S/he must exemplify this balance in all that s/he does, assisting others in the process, allowing for mistakes, but always guiding individuals to the appropriate path; for the educational leader as moral role model must be the thoughtful, caring, intellectually inquisitive guiding force of the learning community.

To find the core of a school, don’t look at its rulebook or even its mission statement. Look at the way the people spend their time – how they relate to each other, how they tangle with ideas. Look for the contradictions between words and practice, with the fewer the better. Try to estimate the frequency and the honesty of its deliberations. Though it will always want to spruce up for visitors, its hour by hour functioning is what is important. Judge the school not on what it says but on how it keeps (Sizer & Sizer, 1999, p.18).

Implications for Educational Administration

For successful educational leadership, educational leaders need to (a) articulate a vision and create the structure for that vision to come to fruition; (b) be symbols of the institutional values of the school that they lead; (c) be cognizant of the symbolic nature of their position when taking action; (d) be role models for students, staff and faculty; (e) teach lessons with what they

support and how they act; and finally (f) be conscious of the possible implications of all of their decisions and actions.

Conclusion

The “keeping” of the school rests with the institution’s leadership. The principal as moral role model must work to create a climate, culture and community that exemplifies the very values that s/he espouses. Through the use of the three principles of moral leadership – authenticity, balance and systemic thinking – the educational leader can successfully create that community. As s/he acts, so s/he instructs, guides, and leads. True leaders understand that their “actions speak louder than words,” and that they must “practice what they preach” for inevitably they “shall reap what they sow.” Although all of these adages are cliché they serve as a map for the educational leader because of the powerful evidence of experience. Educational leaders will testify that the climate, culture, and community are a direct reflection of the leader’s leadership. The relationships the leader creates, the structures that s/he supports, and the decisions that s/he makes will impact the entire school. Therefore, the leader must consciously and intentionally take the actions that s/he believes are in the best interests of the students (authenticity/integrity), while modeling the importance of caring and just relationships (balance) and understanding that his/her decisions have consequences across the entire system (systems thinking). Doing this will afford the leader the opportunity to cooperate with all the stakeholders in the community, assuring that the school will reflect the communities intended goals - to assist young people in fully realizing their potential, with the understanding that they are connected to others through a web of interrelationships of which they may not even be conscious, but one that exists none the less. To do this should be the goal of every educational leader, especially those who understand that they are role models for ethical and moral action.

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