



VALUES AND ETHICS IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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DEVELOPING REFLECTIVE HABITS OF MIND

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The fast paced environment of modern schooling makes the role of principal a complex one. Trends towards decentralized decision making and centralized accountability have increased role ambiguity and conflict. Principals often seem to be in an impossible predicament as they attempt to navigate new directions, or even simply try to hold fast to an existing course. Their existing procedural maps may be outmoded or no longer applicable to the shifting currents of education, while the absence of direction from external reference points may seem even more problematic and dangerous. More than ever, principals must know and consider their intentions before taking action in an environment where they will inevitably be judged by these actions. How then, do principals come to know and interpret their intentions and the subsequent actions in response to these intentions? Over the past few decades there has been a range of educational research conducted on this topic. Though the concepts vary, for example, action theory (Argyris & Schon, 1974), praxis (Wilson, 1994), problem solving (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995) and cognitive apprenticeship (Prestine & LeGrand, 1991), many fall within the realm of reflective practice.

The intent of this article is to explore the nature of reflective practice by comparing and contrasting school principals' perspectives about reflective practice with the portrayals presented in professional literature.

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Conceptualizing Reflective Practice

Peters (1991) suggests that reflective practice involves critical thinking and learning, both of which are processes that can lead to significant self development (p. 89). Barnett (1990) posits that reflection is the ability to bring past events to a conscious level, to make sense of them, and to determine appropriate ways to act in the future (p. 67). Adding to the variety, Osterman (1991) regards reflective practice as a professional development process that goes beyond imparting knowledge to creating action change.

Van Gyn (1996) asserts that most notions of reflective practice are based in "Dewey's theoretical perspective on critical inquiry and how that relates to practice" (p.105). Dewey proclaims "Reflective thought is the 'active' persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey in Van Gyn, p. 105).

Definitions appearing in literature of recent decades continue to be derivatives of Dewey's. For example, Loughran (1996) views reflection as, "the purposeful, deliberate act of inquiry into one's thoughts and actions through which a perceived problem is examined for order that a thoughtful, reasoned response might be tested out" (p. 21).

Loughran, citing Dewey (1933), further asserts that such a process involves five phases, *suggestion, problem, hypothesis, reasoning and testing*. Suggestions are action ideas or possibilities that come to the minds of individuals as a puzzling situation arises creating the need to suspend judgment. As individuals come to see the puzzle as a whole, rather than as small parts they begin to better understand the situation's perplexity and the problem itself. The suggestions are then reconsidered in terms of what can be done with a more adequate and refined sense of the problem. This is referred to as the hypothesis stage. Then through reasoning, ideas and experiences are linked to expand suggestions further. The hypothesized end result is tested to corroborate or negate the idea (p. 5). Loughran contends that the five phases overlap considerably and that some may be omitted or expanded, depending on the nature of the problem and the timing of the reflection.

Grimmett (1989) identifies three variations of reflective practice in professional literature. Each perspective is sorted according to its purpose and method, clearly distinguishing divergent epistemological differences. The first, *instrumentally mediated action*, characterizes approaches that tend to be positivist where technical problems can be tinkered and adjusted. Knowledge is used to technically direct practice. *Deliberating among competing ends*, too, has elements of deciding among various lines of action. Grimmett emphasizes, however, this type of reflection is more contextual, experientially based and collaborative. The third category, *reconstructing experience*, also tends to be personally and experientially rooted but is aimed at transforming practice through self enlightenment. This may come about through restructuring any combination of personal experience, the situational context, image of self as teacher or personal assumptions held about professional practice.

Loughran (1996) considers the temporal nature of reflection relative to experience. Subscribing to Dewey's (1933) phases of reflection (suggestion, problem, hypothesis, reasoning, and testing) he advocates that the weight of each stage depends on when the reflection occurs in relation to the pedagogical experience. Loughran contends that reflection can occur before, during and after an event and believes that the 'when' of reflection influences the learning that might be drawn from experience. Consequently, he uses three distinct time elements, *anticipatory, contemporaneous* and *introspective* corresponding with reflection for, in and on action.

A Metaphor for Reflection

A conceptual framework was developed based on the issues and themes derived from the preceding literature review. Using the metaphor of a camera, the scholarly thinking discussed in the preceding section can be consolidated to present the many interconnected dimensions of reflective practice. Behind a camera lens, various shutters work together to create and control an aperture. Reflected light enters an otherwise light proof box when this aperture is existent, making an image onto film. The size of the aperture is determined by the synergy of the shutters since each does its part to systematically open or close the camera box enabling rays of light to

focus onto an action frame. The image of this action frame is influenced greatly by the amount of light. Too much light causes overexposure and a blurring of boundaries while too little light creates shadows and dullness. Expert photographers use this light effectively, to capture not only action but the very essence of humanity.

Reflective practice, happening within the camera's aperture, occurs with the synergetic opening of its shutters. These shutters, *perspectives*, *antecedents* and *timing* determine the nature and extent of reflective practice through the activation, size and control of this aperture. Three perspectives and related purposes are identified, *technical - directing practice*, *practical - informing practice* and *reconstructionist - transforming practice*. For example, the purpose of reflection from a technical perspective is to direct practice. However, a practical perspective views reflection as informing practice by emphasizing the contextual basis. Meanwhile, the reconstructionist perspective of reflection attempts to transform practice.

The *antecedents* and *timing* shutters are variations of ideas presented earlier. Antecedents form and shape theories of practice and include such variables as one's values, training and experience. Timing, on the other hand, indicates when the reflection occurs in relation to the situation or event being reflected upon. Reflection can be retrospective, contemporaneous or anticipatory respectively corresponding to reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-for-action.

Reflective Practices of Six Principals

Six principals participated in the study. They were at least at the midpoint of their careers, varied in gender, training and administrative experience and worked in schools with different grade configurations. I wanted to consider the place of background factors such as training, experience, gender and job description in reflective practice, so I selected participants who varied in this regard. Interviews were conducted with each of the six participants to collect their views and perspectives. During each interview I asked participants to describe reflection, what caused them to reflect, when they reflected in relation to an event, the process they used, the kinds of information they included in their

reflection and the place of their values, training and experience in reflection. Questions also focused on their perceptions about the usefulness and prevalence of reflective practice among school principals. A grounded approach was used to identify and determine codes that represented various categories, themes and patterns. Although the review of the literature helped establish initial patterns, categories were not limited to a specific reflective stance. Some findings supported elements of existing theory while other findings contribute to the development of new ideas. Pseudonyms are used for all participants and in some cases, minor details are altered to better preserve the anonymity of their identities.

How Practitioners Define Reflection

I initiated discussions about reflective practice by asking participants first to share their understanding of the idea. There is remarkable definition similarity among participants and between their comments and findings of the literature review. Kay describes reflection with a series of verbs such as "rethink, mull over, probe, ponder and pick apart," to ask "what if?, why?, how come?, and what about?" in an effort to "come to grips with a situation." Beth, Jon and Roy approach their definitions by asking a sequence of questions, similar to "Where are we?, What are the possibilities?, How are we going to get there?" Beth, Cam and Roy respectively emphasize pausing, taking time to stop, collecting their thoughts, putting things on hold, and giving more thought before or after situations. All three emphasize reflection as being able to cut through everyday tasks to ask this sequence of questions.

Reflective Timing

Most definitions offered by participants emphasize reflection before or after action, not during action. Paul for example describes reflection as "past thinking through" and Beth says it is asking "what can we do to make things better down the road?" Cam stresses the element of planning in his reflection and contends that reflection is mostly about what needs to be put into action. Roy and Jon do however, refer to the contemporaneous nature of reflection. Roy asserts that one function of reflection is to put things on hold to give more time for thought and Jon

adds that reflection is always happening, suggesting instances of reflection-in-action.

Although most participants say they do not reflect-in-action, there was evidence to suggest otherwise, Cam for example states, "I am not quite sure if I reflect on present events, I am probably reflecting on some instances just intuitively, as you are doing something." Later in the interview he reveals, "I could be in a conversation and say, now this isn't going well and I shouldn't have started this." Although Cam may not realize it, this is an example of thinking in action.

Reflective Prompts

The group of six gave consistent responses to circumstances and events that prompt reflection. Usual suggestions included unanticipated events, critical events, conflict, interpersonal tensions, crisis events, extremely positive or negative happenings, and events that directly affect the participants' welfare. Although most participants said that they reflected about everything, there were individual differences. Beth was more inclined to state that she reflects when negative outcomes occur, especially unexpected ones. She also names other prompters such as 'interpersonal conflict' and 'personal life changes' such as illness. Cam, with a strong planning orientation, is prompted to reflect when anything that impacts the school's effectiveness and achievement arises. This ranges from the management of a crisis to accommodating individual student learning needs. Similar to Beth, the unexpected, especially in the form of a crisis, is an immediate prompter.

Kay contends that an extreme experience sets her into a reflective mode, ". . . extremely positive experiences or really negative experiences cause me to reflect most frequently, and the general run of the mill experiences that I have, I don't find that I reflect as frequently on these." Roy is prompted into a reflective mode when he receives an adverse reaction to his decisions or actions. Jon also identifies personal criticism as a prompter acknowledging that this kind of reflection "sticks with you or hurts something ... it probably hangs on a little bit longer than the positive things that go on." Roy also identifies concerns related to change as an initiator of reflection.

Another aspect of reflection that yielded interesting findings was when and where participants reflect. Most participants insisted that most of their reflection occurs outside their school day. Beth claims that there is no time for reflection from the time she enters school in the morning until the last event is finished after 5:00 p.m. Beyond that, she contends she could reflect anywhere. She describes how sometimes at night she cannot sleep or could wake up thinking about a particular thing.

Cam has a cabin outside the city and claims that most of his reflection occurs here. Jon, who believes that we reflect all the time, asserts that there is no best time to reflect. He holds the belief that it depends on the issue and the degree to which deep or uninterrupted thought is needed. Reflection could occur for Jon anywhere or at anytime, from the staff room to the evening drive home.

Kay places the most emphasis on the need for solitude when reflecting. She usually sets time aside at the end of her day or sometimes at the start. Reflection could also occur during leisure activities such as gardening or exercising. Paul, on the other hand, enjoys the opportunity to reflect at conferences and professional development seminars. He observes that he has opportunity to think and talk with colleagues in an environment where he is not directing the activity. Attending professional development sessions also helps him see his work in a different light once he returns to school.

Roy vividly describes why reflection is difficult at school by detailing the start of a normal day. "The first minutes in the morning there could be ten decisions, all of varying levels of concern and every person who comes to you, that's their major problem right now." He finds the evening time best for his reflection when he is "just sitting down and everything is quiet." Roy adds though "I don't sit down and say well I'm going to think about how things are going now." For Roy, reflection comes to him when circumstances are right, it is not something he schedules.

Reflective Processes

Questions to participants about their reflective process produced detailed and intricate commentary. Beth begins reflection-on-action by first creating a mental picture of the event. She includes as much

detail as possible, such as where people were located, what they said, and even their body gestures. Next, she gives thought to what happened, and why it happened in this way. Beth acknowledges that she plays these questions repeatedly to herself, “just like a tape recorder.” She questions not only how things could have been done differently but also how she could be a better support to others. Beth deems the setting, conversations, feelings and emotions all to be important elements of reflection. Once Beth has analyzed the event, she next considers what has to be done and, more specifically, what her role is to be. Beth remarks “then I will practice in my head how I am going to go at this, when I am going to have to do this . . . and what is going to be done.”

Kay begins reflection by recounting detail such as the conversational atmosphere, the color of clothing that individuals wear and their facial expressions. Recounting physical characteristics then brings to light the conversation, which in turn causes Kay to think about how she felt during different parts of the conversation. “I will probably say I felt intimidated there, or I felt a great sense of peace there, I felt guilty there, I felt intimidated and insecure when such a person said that part of the conversation.” Kay not only thinks about the conversation and related feelings. She also tries to delve into why she experiences these feelings, particularly the negative ones. She claims that usually she is attentive to her feelings and for the most part “can attribute them to a cause.”

Roy posits that when reflecting on specific situations, his first step is to try to understand better what is happening. “Do I have the facts straight ... or am I exaggerating something?” Next he tries to discuss the situation with other persons to be certain that he has considered it from all angles and that his interpretation is accurate. Then he develops a course of action that considers who he has to talk to and in what order. Roy also explains that reviewing how he has handled similar experiences in the past is helpful in this process. Next, the reflection moves to adopting a course of action.

Cam focuses much of his reflection process on future events. He poses the following question in rapid fire order. “What has to be accomplished? Who is doing what? Is the plan effective? Is necessary communication in place? Is some other information

needed? Does everybody understand? Does anything else need to be put in place?” Cam claims that sometimes he reflects mentally, but usually reflects better “on paper.” Consequently, he commits many of these questions to paper and finds that he needs to have concrete evidence of planning. He declares that he needs to look at his schemata to decide if everything is included, otherwise “I tend to miss things in my head.”

Improving Decisions Through Reflection

Given that participants express clear views on what constitutes reflection and the processes they employ, I extended the discussion by soliciting their opinions about whether reflection leads to better decisions. For a variety of reasons they gave a resounding “yes.” Beth claims that she gets herself into more trouble when she acts without “taking it all in and thinking about it.” She contends that many people misread her when she has to decide something in a rush. Consequently, she tends to rethink and backtrack on rushed decisions. She adds that unfortunately reflection can also be seen as “indecisiveness” or “wishy-washy.” Rarely, Beth claims, does she “speak off the top of her head,” unless it is to a trusted person.

Paul says that it is important to be able to show how he arrives at decisions. He comments that reflective practice must be used to decide action and reiterates that if reflection is not used to improve action, it is wasted time. Roy’s response summarizes the views of others when he adds “the decision that I ultimately make may not be the best decision, ...but at least I can go back and say I thought it through, and it was the best thing that I could come up with at the time.”

The Evolving Quality of Reflection

Kay holds the belief that the quality of her reflection has found more depth and breadth over time. She notes that in the early stages of her career, reflection would involve recalling events, their circumstances and accepting at face value the immediate meanings associated with those events. Now she contends that she delves more, to go beyond “what” to “why,” theorizing that the why gives her more insight and understanding about others and herself. She says, “I don’t think I had that depth in the beginning.”

Paul claims that with experience, the purpose of his reflection has broadened considerably. In his formative years Paul reveals, “. . . it was probably reflecting but really in a negative sense, in the sense of trying to look good and not being relaxed in what I was doing.” Today, for Paul, reflection is more about listening and being attentive to others, to help motivate people and to develop ideas. Paul claims that today he also reflects about his reflections pondering “Am I using it enough? Is it impacting? Is it making a difference?”

In a similar way Cam describes reflection in his beginning years as “worry and torment,” mainly because he felt that when things did not go as planned it was a reflection on him. He suggests that now he has gotten over taking things personally and regards reflection today as a generally positive exercise. Cam states too, that reflection comes to him more naturally, not a chore or a task that has to be done.

Beth contends that more exposure to different situations and “getting gray” has made her reflections more open and more focused on human elements and less on accountability. However, she acknowledges that she sometimes wavers between the two. Beth believes that she now reflects more than she has in the past and that some of this reflection is actually about how and why she reflects. She asks of herself, “Why are you reflecting? (laughing) How are you reflecting? Sometimes I just walk away and not do that.” Beth remarks that with time she has learned more about herself, and this she adds, has helped her reflect even better.

Implications for Practice

The literature portrays reflective practice as a process involving critical thinking and learning that in turn, leads to significant self development. Finding meaning through the questioning of ideas and existing patterns, is emphasized too. Images presented by the participants were very much like this portrayal. This was especially so when participants presented reflection as a series of questions that revolved around developing a better understanding of situations or events. Self questioning, usually aimed at examining existing thought and developing alternate perspectives, often

helped participants better understand their reality and consider how to make necessary changes.

Participants consistently stated that they did not reflect during their working day, rather, outside the day when immediacy for action was not present. They also suggested that they did not plan a time to reflect, that it just happens when conditions are right, and participants like Jon know their right conditions. These conditions usually include being away from job responsibilities, being in comfortable surroundings and perhaps in the quiet company of a trusted friend. However, participants asserted that often they need to work things through in solitude before including others in their reflective process.

No literature references were found about where participants reflect, though all participants have strong views on the matter. Most participants, for example, comment that reflection occurs at professional development sessions. Although these sessions may appear crowded, busy and noisy, participants say it gives them opportunity to step back from their work, and alternately introspect and socialize with colleagues. They are able to confidentially discuss concerns and thoughts during unstructured times.

Wilson (1994) and Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) identify the importance of social interactions in learning and in the development of expertise. Wilson argues for example, that praxis is to be done as a community of inquirers while Leithwood and Steinbach emphasize Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. The credit that participants give to their gatherings acknowledges the ideas of these theorists. Whether through a formal agenda or incidental discussions at break time, participants thrive as a community of learners at conferences and meetings. As Cam says “it solves a whole bunch of unnecessary individual reflective time, to which you would not get the same results.”

Similar to the literature review, all participants identified the need to have a trusted friend. This friend usually had no immediate involvement in the problem situation and generally had a long-standing rapport with the participant. Many reflective strategies such as Costa and Kallick's (1993) critical friend or Barnett's (1990) peer assisted leadership (PAL) are based on similar principles. Such strategies help participants develop critical and

alternative perspectives in a trusting and supportive atmosphere.

The findings about reflective prompts can be linked to values research to explain the use of ethics in reflective practice. Begley and Johansson (1997) found that values were important in deciding action, particularly in providing structure for problem solving. This was especially so when principals lacked information, considered the problem unique, or when principals were pressed to act quickly. Leithwood & Steinbach (1995) also found that expert principals, in comparison to non-experts, were much clearer about their values and could use them as a substitute for knowledge, when domain specific knowledge was lacking. Additionally, they found that values served as a perceptual screen influencing what principals chose to notice and how they defined problems.

Literature findings about when principals increase reliance on their values are similar to circumstances that prompt participants of this study to reflect. Additionally, the functions of reflective practice and valuation overlap considerably. They are both used to detect and resolve difficult situations. Since a fundamental goal of reflective practice is to frame a problem situation properly and to resolve it affably, the use of values in this process is a natural fit. On the other hand, reflective processes facilitate the inclusion of value considerations.

Not only do practitioners need to organize their work to allow for "reflective rests" they need consciously to think about their experiences if they are to learn from them. Filby (1995) contends that learning does not automatically result from experiences. It occurs when the learning is consciously thought about. Some participants even suggest they extend their reflection by recording their thoughts in some manner. This for instance, could mean attaching a notation to a file for future use. When the situation or event again occurs, the practitioner can then reference it as retrospective reflection.

Conclusion: Developing Reflective Habits of Mind

These findings illustrate the need for principals to examine the daily organization of their work to find opportunity for reflection and to make it an integral part of this day. Given growing role ambiguity and

conflict, principals will continue to be pressed for time to reflect, let alone critique the quality of these reflections. They also support the greater use of reflective strategies in professional development. Such a move not only encourages principals to develop their use of reflection but it would enable them to be more open to the critique of others and to change practices in view of better rationales.

Despite the possibilities of reflective practice it must be acknowledged that not all reflection is effective. Dewey (1933) postulates that reflection, allowed to become overly extensive, can lead to inaction. Practitioners may limit areas open to reflection, thereby restricting its depth and quality. A similar observation is noted by Campbell (1996) who states that because one has reflected before making a decision does not necessarily guarantee that the decision will be good or ethical.

The main purpose of reflective practice is to increase our relative awareness of factors that influence planning and action. In many ways this is an ethical undertaking, however tentative the planning and action. Dewey (as cited in Willower, 1994) concludes that if reflection is to play a part in making every day moral choices, it has to be an internal habit of mind. In essence to develop reflective practice is to develop habits of mind so that we might picture ourselves more clearly.

Notes

1. Dr. Cyril P. Coombs of St. John's, Newfoundland passed away suddenly on Friday January 10, 2003. Cyril was an active contributor and associate of the Center for the Study of Values and Leadership from the time of its establishment in 1996 at OISE / UT. A well respected Newfoundland school administrator, an exceptional scholar, a fine friend, a beloved father and husband, he is greatly missed by his family, friends and professional colleagues.

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