

RISKY BUSINESS: THE ROLE OF CORPORATE IDEAS IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP TRAINING

By

Robert J. DeAbreu

Student #: 84910124

A Paper presented to Dr. Mark Aquash,

Department of Educational Studies,

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

EDST 532 – LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

University of British Columbia

Tuesday, October 9, 2012

This paper is
A Critical Response Paper to
Newspaper Article:

Skills to Fix Failing Schools

by Laura Pappano

from Education Life, New York Times

Published December 29, 2009

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/education/edlife/03educ.html?_r=0

Introduction

The “crisis” in education has made the “fixing” of “failing” schools an explicit national focus in the United States (U.S.), with calls for radical change in many facets of the profession. In December 2009, Laura Pappano of the New York Times wrote of new educational leadership programs being started at Harvard and Stanford the following autumn. According to the author, the key characteristic of these programs is their emphasis on business. Harvard and Stanford’s programs bring together professors from schools of education, business, and public policy to offer candidates skills in being able to oversee large-scale change, to handle the politics of these changes, and to manage finances through budgets, grant writing, fund-raising and strategic partnering. Representatives of these programs who were interviewed stated a need for educational leaders to be able to use “corporate skills” and “speak in business terms or at least be familiar with that way of thinking” in order to have influence. One could argue that the leadership style being promoted by this rationale is aligned with Foster and Smyth’s bureaucratic-managerial model, where “leadership is a function of organizational position” and “is goal-centered” with the purpose of “producing” (Foster & Smyth, 1989, 30) . It is paramount that one considers the possible consequences of embedding such a model of leadership in educational training programs. The purpose of this paper is to respond to the article by examining these possible consequences.

The Assumption of Production: Ends Justify Means

Foster and Smyth’s model involves three assumptions: that the focus of the organization is production, that the aim of leadership is to meet goals of the organization, and that the power of a leader comes from their position in the organization (Foster & Smyth, 1989, 30) . Let us look first at the assumption of the need for production in this model. Pappano cites the politics of

change and the amount of public funding being committed to public education as reasons why business can be a valuable source of knowledge for educational leaders. It is safe to assume that the U.S. government will want a result in exchange for their commitment of four billion dollars to school improvement. This desire is evident in the development of legislation that determines teacher training program effectiveness based on the test scores of candidates, and evaluates teacher pay increases through student achievement (Jackie Lund, 2011). The problem is that schools are not about production – they are about learning, which is distinctly a focus on process, not product. Ignoring this, school districts focusing their efforts on “production” create pressure on teachers to unproductively follow “bandwagons” and “slogans” in professional development, desperately seeking that “quick fix” for their classroom ailments instead of taking time to develop their practice through informed research (Leithwood, 2008). This focus on product is also one of the main factors leading to test anxiety, and can turn many students’ motivations towards the grade they get on an assignment and away from the learning that comes out of working on it (Papert, 1980). Learning is a process that is difficult to quantify. There are ways for teachers and leaders to investigate their practice, but these qualitative methods are of no concern to the production-minded manager who needs hard numbers to prove progress to stakeholders. Unfortunately, the assumption of the school as an organization focused on “producing” student learning has some very negative consequences.

The Assumption of Goal Achievement: Compromising Student and Teacher Motivation

Another common assumption, that organizations need to be goal-oriented, can prove harmful for schools. Pappano mentions that the newly-developed educational leadership programs will focus on supporting leaders’ ability to achieve the goals of large-scale change. Foster and Smyth point out that, with the goal-oriented nature of the bureaucratic-managerial

model, “leadership essentially becomes getting employees to do what management wants them to do” (Foster & Smyth, 1989, 30) . Regardless of profession, it is difficult to argue that people are motivated to do what they are asked without question or request for input. A large body of research on teacher motivation and resistance to change has found a seemingly obvious, yet important truth: enacting change in a school is impossible unless teachers are motivated to be an integral part of this change (Guthrie, 2011; B. B. Tye & Tye, 1993; Wrigley, 2005) . On the whole, teachers do not resist change outright so much as they make rational choices between alternatives (Guthrie, 2011). A leader single-mindedly working toward a goal in a bureaucratic-managerial model may ignore the need to refine some of the more time-consuming, but crucial, aspects of schools, such as classroom conditions, time restrictions, examination pressures, and levels of administrative support – precisely the same obstacles teachers commonly give as reasons for not fully implementing school change initiatives (Guthrie, 2011). The need for efficiency is also the reason that a goal-centered leader can develop priorities incongruent with continuous dialogue that is so necessary in the day-to-day running of our schools. Talking to students at break times, sitting in on teacher classes, and conducting meetings with parents are necessary parts of an educational leader’s job, but not likely times when leaders are finalizing concrete decisions about school policies, or checking items off of their “list” of things to accomplish. Whether dealing with teacher, parent or student concerns, one could argue that a goal-oriented leader would tend to neglect time-consuming, “unproductive” duties in favour of more productive ones, which would largely leave students, parents and teachers feeling like part of a “machine” rather than an important member of an organic process. These are some cautions that must be taken regarding the central role of goals before whole-heartedly accepting a bureaucratic-managerial model of educational leadership training.

The Assumption of Power from Position: Stifling Teacher Leadership

The assumption that leadership is derived from one's position in an organization is a third problematic aspect of the bureaucratic-managerial model of leadership. This supposition, by its very nature, does not respect the possibilities for teacher leadership within a school, and thus promotes a prevailing "just a teacher" habit of mind that keeps many teachers from embracing their leadership capabilities (Helterbran, 2010). The assumption of power through position here assumes a "power over" model rather than a much more effective and powerful "power with" relational model (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Shields, 2005), which shares power and takes advantage of the creative energy people contribute naturally (Foster & Smyth, 1989). A "power over" approach does not invite teachers to be part of the process of change, which, as stated before, is impossible to achieve unless teachers are motivated to be an integral part. It is up to both the teacher and administrator to ensure teacher leadership takes place. It is possible, without a form of critical leadership that Foster and Smyth emphasized, that an educational leadership training program with a focus on incorporating bureaucratic-managerial ideas of leadership could impress upon candidates the assumption of power through position, and thus keep them from opening up possibilities for teacher leadership.

Setting Assumptions Aside: Speeding Up a Slow Explosion

However negative the bureaucratic-managerial model may be, one could argue that education as a profession could most certainly use a different perspective as it develops. Businesses and schools are not entirely devoid of similarities. For instance, while there is a danger to view student learning as a "product," schools should be productive in meeting the needs of those they intend to serve. One striking difference between schools and businesses is that the latter are remarkably adaptable – they have to be in order to compete for their share of

the market, and the corporate world can offer assistance to schools in this area. Much of the literature on school change indicates frustrations and cynicism surrounding the slowness of changes to education in the twentieth century (Gillette, 1979; Guthrie, 2011; Miller, 2012). It has often been the case that policy makers' "central concern was to provide more people with more of the already existing kinds of education" (Gillette, 1979, 268) . When change is attempted, rational choices made by teachers to resist modification, such as in technology education, are widely evident when changes are inconsistent or impractical (Campbell et. al., 2010; De Smet et. al., 2012; Katz, 2003). In short, it is evident, from teacher reactions and other sources, that educational change has been slow and this is where corporate ideas can assist. There are many examples of creative processes, such as Design Thinking, that can breathe life into strategies used to enact educational change. Design Thinking invites people to realize that they already are "designers" in that they can "design" creative solutions to problems; it focuses on process and values input from multiple perspectives (Brown, 2009). Education reform, though inefficient, has proven undeniably "that students achieve more and are better able to apply their knowledge when they experience collaboratively planned and taught interdisciplinary curricula" (Henson, 2010, 99) . Surely offering more perspectives, such as those from the world of business, could only work to diversify the ideas at work already? One could certainly argue that the corporate ideas could play a positive role in educational leadership.

Concluding Remarks

The contribution of corporate ideas to educational leadership programs is worth questioning, and it is not conclusive whether or not their inclusion is problematic. A critical approach is necessary for educational leaders of tomorrow to reap the full benefit of the integration of these ideas.

References

- Brown, T. (2009). *Change by design: How design thinking transforms organizations and inspires innovation*. HarperBusiness.
- Campbell, T., Shaing, K. W., Hui-Yin Hsu, Duffy, A. M., & Wolf, P. G. (2010). Learning with web tools, simulations, and other technologies in science classrooms. *Journal of Science Education & Technology*, 19(5), 505-511. doi: 10.1007/s10956-010-9217-8
- De Smet, C., Bourgonjon, J., De Wever, B., Schellens, T., & Valcke, M. (2012). Researching instructional use and the technology acceptance of learning management systems by secondary school teachers. *Computers & Education*, 58(2), 688-696. doi: 10.1016/j.compedu.2011.09.013
- Foster, W., & Smyth, J. (1989). Toward a critical practice of leadership. *Critical Perspectives on Educational Leadership*, , 39-62.
- Gillette, A. (1979). Structural changes in education since 1954: A slow-motion explosion. *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale De L'Education*, 25(2/3), 267-296. doi: 10.1007/BF00598029
- Guthrie, G. (2011). Teacher resistance to change. (pp. 61-76). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. doi: 10.1007/978-94-007-1851-7_4
- Helterbran, V. R. (2010). Teacher leadership: Overcoming "I am just a teacher" syndrome. *Education*, 131(2), 363-371.
- Henson, K. T. (2010). *Curriculum planning: Integrating multiculturalism, constructivism, and education reform, 4th ed.* Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Jackie Lund. (2011). Improving teacher education. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 82(5), 3.

- Katz, R. N. (2003). Balancing technology and tradition: The example of course management systems. *Educause Review*,
- Leithwood, K. (2008). Should educational leadership focus on best practices or next practices? *Journal of Educational Change*, 9(1), 71-75. doi: 10.1007/s10833-007-9045-7
- Margaret A Miller. (2012). THE SLOW EXPLOSION. *Change*, 44(3), 4.
- Ogawa, R. T., & Bossert, S. T. (1995). Leadership as an organizational quality. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 31(2), 224-243. doi: 10.1177/0013161X95031002004
- Papert, S. (1980). *Mindstorms: Children, computers, and powerful ideas*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shields, C. M. (2005). Hopscotch, jump-rope, or boxing: Understanding power in educational leadership. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 33(2), 76-85.
- Tye, B. B., & Tye, K. A. (1993). The realities of schooling: Overcoming teacher resistance to global education. *Theory into Practice*, 32(1), 58-63.
- Wrigley, T. (2005). Leadership and resistance. *Improving Schools*, 8(1), 5-6. doi: 10.1177/1365480205052922