

Ethical Dilemmas of Educational Leadership: A Narrative Study of Four Vermont Superintendents and their Experience with Policy Governance®

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February 26, 2015

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Abstract

This manuscript reports the results of a narrative study which focused on examining the stories of four Vermont superintendents and their experiences implementing Policy Governance® across a variety of Vermont school district settings. Policy Governance is a coherent model of organizational governance developed by John Carver (2006) and is widely used in nonprofit organizations including school districts. This study surfaced four ethical dilemmas encountered by these superintendents during the implementation of Policy Governance: 1) developing an organizational vision through ends policies which transfers control over vision from the superintendent to the school board, 2) assisting school boards with engaging their communities in the development of ends policies while at the same time ensuring those ends meet the moral purposes of schooling in serving the needs of all students and the larger public good, 3) enforcing a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities while also serving a school board in its work, and 4) assuming responsibility for transforming school systems to meet the future needs of students while at the same time supporting the success of students and educators in the current organizational structures. This study concluded that Policy Governance can provide an intellectual and practical framework for educational leaders to engage in the necessary ethical action to ensure the success of public schooling in postmodern society.

Key Words

superintendent, policy governance, ethics, educational leadership

Introduction

The Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) held a conference on Policy Governance® (PG) in 2003. PG is a comprehensive model of organizational governance developed by John Carver (2006). Carver, an organizational consultant, developed this model in response to the dysfunction he observed in traditional board governance practices (2006). As these traditional governance practices pertain to school boards, Carver described typical school board governance practices as being a combination of micromanagement and rubber stamping, and he characterized school boards as being the least disciplined, least rational, and most disordered element in the public education system (2000, pp. 6-8).

The VSBA obtained a grant to pilot PG in four Vermont school districts from 2006-2007. The pilot project consisted of providing PG training to these school boards and superintendents, and direct support to assist them in adopting new policies based on the PG model. The four districts involved in this pilot project represented the complexity of Vermont's public school governance structures. One of the features that contributes to this complexity is the lack of uniformity: no two Vermont school districts are alike (Proulx, 2007).

In order to better understand the issues surrounding the implementation of PG, VSBA contracted with the University of Vermont to study and evaluate the PG pilot project, and I served as a member of the research team. PG appeared to cause dissonance for board members and the superintendents because it seemed to call into question the efficacy of how things had been done in the past. For example, school board members often worried about how they would explain PG in the local grocery store where it would be perceived as “giving away the farm” in terms of giving away control of district operations to the superintendent. PG also seemed to present challenges for the superintendents who seemed to be hesitant to give board members authority over Ends, an area usually controlled by administrators through the articulation of action plans, strategic plans, and mission statements but not often described through board policy.

The need to better understand the causes of this dissonance from the perspective of the superintendents involved in the VSBA pilot project became a primary intellectual motivator for me in designing and implementing this follow up study. In this study, I examined the perceptions of the four superintendents who participated in the VSBA pilot implementation of PG. My inquiry focused on understanding superintendent beliefs and perceptions about PG, and to what extent PG challenged their leadership from an ethical perspective.

The Theoretical Context

The connection between educational leadership and ethics is not a new concept in the literature. The concept has its roots in the Progressive Era and is a prevalent theme in the writings of one of its more influential educational theorists, John Dewey (1916). Modern theorists, including Maxcy (1994), Sergiovanni (1995), and Strike (2004), have attempted to

articulate a description of ethical educational leadership from the perspective of civic morality: re-asserting the primacy of the mission of public schools in promoting the larger public good. Much of this work has been focused on promoting a response to the challenges educational leaders face in leading in the postmodern era, an era characterized by an increased use of connective technologies, a lack of faith in organizations and leaders, and the frequent restructuring of organizations (Lipman-Blumen, 2000).

Similarly, Furman (2003) argues the renewed interest in examining the connection between educational leadership and civic morality is becoming a significant theme in the literature on educational leadership. Furman gives the following reasons for this renewed interest: the triumph of the secular humanist perspective of the 1980s, the increasing recognition of the new challenges of the social context of our schools, and a growing tendency to reject the principles of scientific management as it pertains to the function of leadership in schools (Furman, 2003).

The tension between scientific management as compared to a broader definition of educational leadership which includes the traditional, moral foundations of public service, is a common theme in much of Sergiovanni's work. Sergiovanni (1992) argues moral leadership is a necessary precondition for transforming schools into communities. He portrays moral leadership as a force that inspires teachers and principals in creating a climate of virtuous professional collegiality. By emphasizing accountability, Sergiovanni believes school leaders have shifted the control of schools to bureaucratic authority as opposed to its traditional moral and ethical foundations (1994). To counter the more scientific or rational view of school leadership, Sergiovanni proposes a framework for school leadership that includes moral leadership, servant leadership, and leadership for stewardship (1993).

Starratt (2001, 2003, 2004) is another modern theorist who is concerned with educational leadership from an ethical and moral perspective. Starratt argues authentic educational leadership is dependent on developing a solid ethical orientation. Starratt's multidimensional ethical framework for educational leaders places the moral obligation of educational leaders squarely within the broader tradition of democratic public service and civic morality. Schools and educational leaders must connect with their communities to reestablish the primacy of public education's mission in serving the larger public good by ensuring a quality education for all students (Starratt, 2003). According to Starratt (2003), educational leaders need to balance three ethics in their practice in order to support democratic educational leadership. These ethics are the ethic of critique, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of care.

The literature on PG in educational organizations is limited, but there are important themes emerging from this literature which are relevant to the modern concept of ethical educational leadership. First, there is a call for increased connectedness. Carver (2000) builds on this theme based on concepts from Rousseau and Greenleaf, but simultaneously theorists such as Sergiovanni (1995) and Starratt (2003) are calling for educational leaders to connect back to the same philosophical tradition of civic morality as a means of articulating a future vision for schooling. In the PG literature, a future orientation is synonymous with a board shifting its focus

to ends as opposed to means. In the literature on ethical educational leadership, a future orientation is necessary in order to articulate a new vision for schooling based on fundamental changes in postmodern society. Another theme is the necessity for clear organizational roles and responsibilities as a means of avoiding micromanagement practices on the part of a school board. Here too, PG seems to offer some applicable relevance in PG's clear establishment of ends and prohibited means (Carver, 2006).

To better understand the connections between postmodern themes in the literature pertaining to ethical educational leadership and PG as a coherent model for organizational governance, I designed and implemented a study to capture the voices and perspectives of a small group of superintendents who shared a common experience in implementing PG. I focused on the role of the superintendent because the superintendency appears to connect the new moral imperatives of educational leadership to the practical, day-to-day business of school governance (Houston, 2001).

Methodology

The primary methodology used in this study was narrative inquiry because the focus was to better understand the unique experiences of the subjects, a small group of Vermont superintendents. Narrative inquiry is a methodology well suited for this type of research because it lends itself well to understanding the experiences of people within a specific time context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The overall structure of this study was a case study. The case was the four superintendents who participated in the VSBA PG pilot project. By limiting this study to just these four superintendents, an in-depth understanding of their beliefs and perspectives was obtained.

Each of the four superintendents was interviewed three times during the 2008-2009 school year. Further analysis of the data occurred during the Summer of 2010. The final development of findings and recommendations from this study occurred during the 2013-2014 school year. Each superintendent interview lasted approximately ninety minutes. The development of the interview protocols followed an iterative process using input from expert educational leaders in Vermont.

Data from all of the interviews were organized and coded to identify common themes. Initial coding was performed by me after a close reading of the transcripts to conduct "key word" searches of the Microsoft Word interview transcripts. Passages containing key words were assembled and arranged to identify deeper meanings and patterns. I then re-read the transcripts by considering the themes in order to identify additional patterns and relationships among the data. Through the lens of my experience as a PG practitioner and Vermont superintendent, the themes were also analyzed to surface ethical dilemmas based on the work of Starratt (2003, 2004).

In addition to the voices of the four superintendents, I also considered my perspective as

both a PG practitioner and a successful Vermont superintendent. My contribution functions as a fifth data source for the findings of this study. Such an approach is consistent with the postmodern perspective on inquiry which acknowledges the researcher as an equal participant in a dialogue (Glesney, 2006). The dialogues that produced the data for this study pointed to the importance of considering my contribution as an equal participant.

A variety of measures were taken to establish the trustworthiness of this study by addressing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I was attentive to confirmability by considering my objectivity. As a practicing Vermont superintendent, I was keenly aware of my subjectivity in this study. All of the superintendent participants were colleagues but none of them were close friends. Although I was not professionally committed to the success of the PG model, I was, and remain, committed to the success of the superintendency. I believed the superintendent was the most important leadership role in our school governance system, and I had to be careful this perspective did not contaminate my ability to be objective. I also believed the conclusions from the postmodern literature were accurate in that educational leaders need to have a solid commitment to an ethic of democratic service. I anticipated this study would affirm my belief in the necessity of examining the ethical basis for educational leadership. My interest in seeing outcomes from this study that might reinforce my beliefs in this area was another concern for subjectivity.

To assist with maintaining objectivity, all of the interviews were digitally recorded and the transcripts were produced from the digital recordings using a commercial transcription service. This ensured accuracy of the data. I also maintained field notes of the interviews to capture my subjective perceptions for later consideration and review. I checked my interview protocols, perceptions, and conclusions with several leadership experts who were familiar with my work as well as the condition of the superintendency in Vermont. This input helped me generalize my findings based on their perspectives of working with school districts and superintendents state-wide over several decades. I also invited several executive-level Vermont educational leaders to respond to my conclusions.

At the same time, however, I acknowledged that my role as a superintendent gave me unique insight into the stories of these superintendents. My perspective as a practicing superintendent enhanced my ability to attenuate the significance of these findings relative to the larger political conversation about school governance in Vermont. Through the study and analysis of the stories of these superintendents, I gained a deeper understanding of my own thinking about educational leadership, ethics, and school governance practices.

Findings

The findings of this study suggest PG can act as a framework which enables superintendents to act with presence “when they attempt to lead” (Starratt, 2004, p.5) since they must intellectualize and work within a defined policy structure which supports the twin ideals of democracy and organizational effectiveness. Through the lens of my experience as a Vermont superintendent and by considering Starratt's framework of virtues (2004), I identified four ethical

dilemmas in the data that were confronted by the superintendents in PG implementation: creating ends policies and ceding control over vision in ends policy development, ensuring ends policies serve the larger needs of the public, enforcing roles and responsibilities, and transforming systems.

As seen from the data, the creation of ends was one of the more difficult aspects of implementing PG. Part of the difficulty had to do with the fact that board members were, “just not prepared for the work,” or as one superintendent described it, the board members, “had no clue” as to how to develop ends. A significant source of the tension had to do with control over vision. PG requires the board to develop ends based on “owner” input (Carver, 2006). In the case of a school district, the organizational owners are the taxpayers not the superintendent, teachers or other members of the instructional staff. Under PG, organizational employees such as educators are part of the organization's means and therefore by definition cannot be organizational owners (Carver, 2006). The tension then comes from how a superintendent supports a board in engaging the public in ends policy development while at the same time letting go of the authority over organizational vision. The data from this study suggest superintendents can reconcile this tension by realizing that the ends gained from broad community involvement will strengthen the democratic purposes of schooling while at the same time providing clear organizational purpose, a benchmark against which program success can be determined.

Another dilemma around ends policies had to do with the increased pluralism of postmodern society. What if broad community engagement around ends enables certain groups to gain power over others and therefore undermine the democratic purposes of schooling? If the primary function of moral educational leadership is to protect the school and its democratic purpose (Sergiovanni, 1995), how does a superintendent act to support broad community participation in determining ends while at the same time ensuring the fundamental moral purpose of school in serving all students is protected? This dilemma underscores the need for the superintendent to play a leadership role in helping a board develop ends policies. Soliciting community feedback is an important part of developing ends, but the authority over ends, like any other policy aspect, resides with the school board not the community. The board has to reconcile community input with its understanding of the legal and regulatory requirements which govern all public schools. All of the superintendents in this study expressed a belief that “it is about all students achieving at high levels.” A superintendent needs to believe this, and needs to have the virtuous presence in his or her authority to ensure the increased pluralism of postmodern forces can be harnessed to support the long standing, historic and moral purposes of schooling.

Another dilemma had to do with enforcing roles and responsibilities. As pointed out by Proulx (2007), true collaboration in school district governance can only occur when there is a deep understanding and respect of the different roles among the board, principal, and superintendent. At the same time, superintendents often come to the role with a service mentality, and traditional Vermont school district governance practices tend to reinforce this role (Proulx, 2007). There is an inclination on the part of superintendents to “serve boards by letting

them lead.” PG firmly delineates roles between board and superintendent, and it also draws a clear line between means and ends. What happens then when board members step out of their role, what one superintendent described as “falling below the line” as in the case when a superintendent needed to “protect the principal from the board?” The data suggest superintendents reconcile this tension by acknowledging it openly with a board and discussing why role clarity is necessary for positive organizational outcomes. Positive organizational outcomes can be the common ground between the board and superintendent. A piece of this common ground is accountability for the superintendent. It is difficult if not impossible for a board to hold a superintendent accountable for organizational ends if the board is also involved with organizational means.

A fourth dilemma had to do with transforming organizational systems. PG, with its focus on ends, creates a new emphasis on program success as defined by student outcomes. Previously, many school system programs were determined to be successful or not by what extent they met the needs of educators. Teachers might describe a new curriculum approach as being “good” based on the extent they felt fulfilled by doing the activity not by to what extent the approach had a positive impact on student outcomes. One superintendent described this as “wing flapping,” or a tendency to define program success based on the subjective perceptions of professional satisfaction.

Another aspect of this dilemma had to do with the growing perception that the current structure of school systems is inadequate to meet the future learning needs of students in a larger, more global and interdependent democracy (Zhao, 2012). Changing the structure of schooling to meet these future needs has been termed “transformation” since the changes deemed to be necessary are significant (Vermont State Board of Education, 2008). How does a superintendent lead the transformation of a school system while at the same time being responsible for the successful operations of that system today? The data suggest the response to this dilemma comes from the power of ends policies, particularly if the ends policies are truly future-oriented and describe outcomes for students beyond academics. Superintendents can leverage ends policies with staff to not only put more focus on student outcomes as a measure of program effectiveness, but also to contemplate future possibilities. Ends policies can, as one superintendent said, “be a source of inspiration to teachers.” I think part of the challenge here is the superintendent must believe the structure of schooling needs to change. Following from Starratt's framework of virtues (2004), a superintendent cannot be authentically present to lead school transformation unless he or she truly believes such change is necessary. Part of the challenge of this dilemma is a requirement on the part of the superintendent to admit that he or she is part of a system that needs to change, and that the change will transform him or her as much as the organization (Evans, 1996).

The findings of this study begin to describe the complex ethical context of educational leadership in postmodern society. Starratt (2003, 2004) provides a useful framework for educational leaders to evaluate their ethical perspective to better understand the moral implications of their actions. The question remains, however, on how best to encourage superintendents and other educational leaders to engage in this type of self-examination, and

equally important, how to ensure that this introspection translates into moral action, action that has been deemed to be necessary for the success of schooling in postmodern society (Sergiovanni, 1992; Fullan, 2002; Furman, 2003; Starratt, 2003). The findings of this study suggest PG can act as a framework which can lead educational leaders forward down a path of ethical leadership while at the same time providing them a concrete framework for action, action which can help ensure the future success of schooling. From the lens of Starratt's virtues construct (2004), PG can provide a "presence framework" that connects a superintendent's moral belief system to his or her authenticity.

Implications and Recommendations

Superintendent development programs designed to equip superintendents with the necessary skills and dispositions to engage in school system transformation should consider giving PG some coverage. The focus of any leadership development program using PG should be on both the theoretical and practical aspects of PG, with an emphasis on highlighting the ethical dimensions of PG implementation surfaced by this study. PG should be portrayed as a concrete framework which can enable school leaders to confront the many ethical challenges associated with leading in postmodern society.

This study points to the need for school districts to function as systems. Hargreaves (2003a) argues systems thinking will be an essential requirement for schools and other social organizations to be successful in meeting the increasingly complex demands of postmodern society. PG anticipates groups of schools working as systems with a common set of ends in what Hargreaves calls "lateral innovation networks" (Hargreaves, 2003b, p. 5).

Research on educational leadership tends to be generic across all leadership positions, and I believe the unique role of the superintendent warrants specific attention. I think this is especially true in the postmodern context where the importance of systems leadership in education as a solution to increasingly complex societal problems is gaining more attention (Hargreaves, 2003a). The superintendent position sits at the center of these systems, and as such, occupies a pivotal role in organizational success.

This study was focused on PG and ethics in the school district setting. The call for an increased focus on ethics on the part of public leaders seems to have broader application than to just educational leadership, however. In particular, Copper (1991, 1998) has raised this concern in the area of public administration. It would be useful to examine connections between superintendent leadership and the leadership of other public leaders. I wonder if other public leaders confront the same ethical challenges as superintendents in responding to the complexities of postmodern society. I think it would be interesting to examine to what extent PG has presented similar challenges for other types of public leaders, and to see if PG has been described as a concrete framework for ethical action among public leaders who seek to serve the democratic purposes of organizations in our increasingly complex and interdependent postmodern society.

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