Educational theories and administrative styles

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Educational Theories and Administrative Styles

Robert R. Newton, S.J.

Most principals operate their schools on the basis of an eclectic educational theory, says this writer, who presents three widely accepted theories and shows how they undergird administrative practice.

MOST PRINCIPALS administer their schools on the basis of an implicit educational theory. After a long period of training and experience in schools they have come to practical conclusions about the major issues in education; these conclusions in turn have developed into attitudes which guide their daily initiatives and responses. More often than not, such theories are unspoken assumptions rather than clearly articulated propositions. At the same time, they are the value structure which gives coherence and continuity to administrative decisions.

It has been my experience that explication of an administrator's underlying educational theory can have numerous positive effects. It can provide a framework which enables the administrator to integrate the various elements of personal theory, and, as a result, to construct and articulate a more solid basis for activity. Delineation of this theoretical position can help the administrator compare and contrast competing theories and enrich the current position with insights from other theoretical perspectives. Greater explication can enlarge the efficacy of the theory as a guide to

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action both by increasing consistency and by creating a greater sense of direction and purpose in the principal and the school. Educational theories are midpoints. They are neither the practical and detailed prescription of what should happen in schools and classrooms nor a philosophical investigation strictly speaking. Rather, an educational theory is born out of the answers given to philosophical questions: What is the purpose of human existence? How does learning take place? What is the role of school in society?

Once evolved, an educational theory gives direction to the practical decisions on how schooling takes place—personnel, methods, content, processes—all of the elements which are combined in varying proportions to produce this rather than that educational environment. Thus, an educational theory leans back to philosophy for its direction and forward into everyday practice to give direction.

general
philosophical ⟵ educational ⟶ educational
orientation theory practice
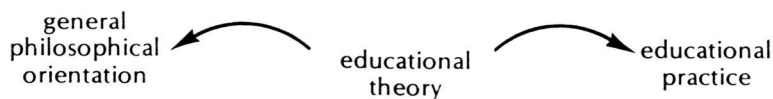
Though there are a variety of responses to these philosophical and practical questions and consequently various educational theories, I propose to isolate three educational trends which are being seriously urged in educational circles and which are being accepted or adopted by a wide spectrum of school people, many times without a full understanding of their underlying values and implications. I will then describe their application to administration and how they lead to rather distinct administrative styles.

Three Educational Theories

Individual Fulfillment

The first theory could be described as the humanistic, or Individual Fulfillment, school. Its champions are such men as Carl Rogers and the late Abraham Maslow. Both Rogers and Maslow place emphasis on the individual as initiator and director of personal learning, on the learner as *agent*. The student is thought to learn best when given freedom to explore a world rich in possibilities, with a minimum of direction or predetermination by others. The teacher remains in the background, ready to offer assistance, but reluctant to interfere with the natural unfolding of the student's innate curiosity.

An extreme application of this position is Neil's Summerhill in

England, where the goal is to "make the school fit the child rather than the child fit the school," and where the basic educational principle is noninterference with the natural growth of the child. In the United States, the Individual Fulfillment movement has gained popularity under the more moderate approach of open or informal education. One of the basic tenets of open education has been that what the student does and who the student becomes should be up to the student to decide. The role of the teacher is to nurture initiative in each child and to promote in each student the acceptance of responsibility for his or her learning.

Knowledge is seen as fundamentally individual; it does not exist independently of the actual knower and cannot be arbitrarily subdivided into convenient logical categories or disciplines. The emphasis is on self-actualization, on providing a rich and accepting environment, on trusting the student to know better than anyone else what is good for him or her.

Scholarly Discipline

A second theoretical position is the Scholarly Discipline school. Its most prominent and articulate spokesman has been Jerome Bruner, whose *Process of Education* became the inspiration and rationale for the many curriculum reform projects which were initiated in the '60s and which continue to influence today's schools. Bruner maintained that the focus of the curriculum should be the scholarly disciplines—their basic concepts, structure, and modes of inquiry. He argued that the basic approach and principles of a discipline could be taught to any child at any level provided they could be reduced to terminology that was understandable to the learner.

Bruner regarded the teacher as a model—a scholar who, rather than producing new knowledge, was devoted to communicating the ways of knowing the discipline to the next generation. The teacher was someone who was personally excited about the scholarly quest and able to create enthusiasm in his or her charges with the same thrill of search and discovery.

Philip Phenix, in *Realms of Meaning,* provided the philosophical underpinnings of this approach and argued that the content of the curriculum should be taken exclusively from the disciplines. By concentrating attention on the disciplines, the frameworks within which mankind has organized what it has judged worth preserving and knowing, the child could both be introduced to the substantive treasures of western civilization and could be equipped with the perspectives and intellectual tools to contribute and add to that intellectual heritage.

Educational Technology

A third emphasis, the Educational Technology school, is represented

by B. F. Skinner and the many educators who have applied his behaviorist theory to education. Learning is described as change in behavior. The focus is on terminal behaviors and the processes by which predetermined behavioral changes can be made to occur in the student. Skinner regards teaching as the application of a carefully devised behavioral strategy which progressively and precisely develops the predetermined complex performances in the learner. The teacher is the strategist or manager who is able to diagnose the needs of students and to create or implement the behavioral strategy appropriate to those needs. Skinner and his educational disciples see the *environment* as the controlling force in behavior; they propose that a scientific analysis and prescription of the most effective and efficient reinforcing environmental forces is essential if education is to emerge from a prescientific dark age to meet the educational needs of contemporary society.

The Educational Technology movement has received further impetus from the widespread application of the systems approach to education at every level—behavioral objectives in the classroom, management by objectives in administration, program-planning-budgeting systems on district-wide levels, etc. All of these developments are based on systematic core: a) precise definition of performance objectives (in behavioral terms); b) careful selection of alternative strategies to produce the desired changes; and c) systematic evaluation of outcomes in behavioral terms.

The diagram on page 133 summarizes and contrasts the important elements of the three theories presented.

Educational Theories and Administrative Styles

Each of these educational theories has direct implications for school administration and can be seen as the guiding principle or underlying assumption of the leadership style of a principal. Orientation toward one or the other theory would have significant impact on the various aspects of school operation that are regularly controlled by principals. For purposes of illustration, five elements of school operation will be compared: school climate, selection of staff, supervision of teachers, evaluation processes, and decision making.

Individual Fulfillment

A school administered by a principal with an Individual Fulfillment orientation would have an organizational climate characterized by informality, freedom of movement, creativity, and open expression of feelings and ideas. A visitor would be struck by these characteristics—both as qualities of the rapport between faculty and students and also as char-

Three Trends in Educational Theory

	aim of learning	first principle	teacher	student	curriculum	advocates
INDIVIDUAL FULFILLMENT	to be	unfolding of nature	guide, helper, partner	ultimate source of initiative and direction	curriculum with minimum structure	open educators, liberals, radicals
SCHOLARLY DISCIPLINE	to know	accumulated wisdom of the disciplines	mediator of modes of inquiry of the discipline	beginning practitioner of the disciplines	guided tour through the disciplines	academic community
EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY	to do	systematic development of potentialities; from simple to complex	manager, implementor of an experimentally validated strategy	highly adaptable, sophisticated respondent to reinforcement	scientifically developed, sequentially arranged behavioral strategy	behavioral psychologists, scientific managers

acteristics of the relationship between teachers and administrators. School architecture and furniture would be flexible rather than rigid. School processes, student rules, and teacher procedures would likewise promote freedom and responsibility rather than restraint and conformity. The teachers in an Individual Fulfillment school would be encouraged to develop their own unique styles of teaching. Diversity of approaches, suited to the talents of the individual teacher and the needs of students, would be encouraged by the principal. Teachers would probably have been selected by the principal on the basis of their originality and creativity and their ability to establish positive rapport with their students.

The supervisory process would aim at helping each teacher to develop in his or her own way. There would be no uniform prescription for all teachers. The process of supervision would be characterized by the setting of mutually acceptable goals between principal and teacher; the principal would take the role of an experienced partner trying to help the teacher develop a personal teaching style. The hierarchical distance between teacher and principal would be minimal as the authoritative relationship gave way to the helping relationship.

Evaluation of teachers would focus similarly on mutually set goals. Emphasis would be on teacher self-evaluation and the principal and teacher would share reflections on the self-evaluation. A uniform standard of evaluation would be avoided. In an environment of acceptance and with the help of an empathetic principal, the teacher would be assisted in reaching conclusions on how improvement might take place. There would be an assumption that self-discovery rather than advice-giving is the route to improvement in teaching performance.

Decision-making in an Individual Fulfillment school would emphasize sharing both authority for decisions and responsibility for their implementation. Involvement of all concerned would be sought and consensus would be seen as the mode for an ideal decision. Status and role distinctions would be de-emphasized and all members of the school community would have appropriate voice in decisions that concerned them.

Scholarly Discipline

A visitor to a school administered by a Scholarly Discipline administrator would probably be struck by a school climate which was strongly academic. There would be a heavy emphasis on content and methods and on the basic disciplines. School arrangements would emphasize strong departments; materials for instruction would be the best examples of the disciplines being taught. The school would be proud of its academic achievements; study skills and homework would be emphasized. Teachers in Scholarly Discipline schools would clearly be *magistri*

rather than partners in learning. They would have been selected for their expertise in their disciplines. They would be highly professional, encouraged by their principal to be members of professional teacher organizations in their subjects, and to attend workshops and conventions to improve their teaching skills. They would have a strong sense of themselves as mathematicians, historians, biologists, etc., who had chosen to devote themselves to teaching rather than scholarship.

The supervisory activity of the principal in the school would aim at ensuring that each teacher used the best known teaching methods in that discipline. There would be an assumption that there are proven methods which characterize the best teaching (e.g., student activity, variety in classroom materials, wide student participation, accountability, etc.) and the principal would work with each teacher in an attempt to promote the adoption of these practices. The principal would tell teachers that they must initiate their students into the methods of inquiry and the basic concepts of their subjects.

Evaluation of teachers by the principal would be on the basis of their application of the best known teaching practices and on the basis of their subject matter knowledge. The principal would make it quite clear to the faculty what these methods were and would encourage them to work toward application of these principles in their classrooms. Such principles would likely be written into supervisory and teacher evaluation materials.

Decision making in a Scholarly Discipline school would follow the more traditional model. The principal would be seen as having the responsibility and authority to make the key decisions for the school. Though he or she would do so with consultation, the principal would be recognized as the person who possessed an overview of the needs of the various constituencies and who could not abandon ultimate responsibility for the school. The principal's training and expertise, both in the management of schools and general educational matters, would be seen as placing him or her in a unique position to make important school decisions.

Educational Technology

A school administered by a principal with an Educational Technology orientation would have a school climate characterized by carefully organized structures for all of the processes necessary for the operation of the school. A visitor would be impressed with the high degree of identification of objectives, both in the classroom and activity of teachers and administrators generally. The visitor would probably observe the use of scientifically designed learning activity packages and a management-by-

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	school climate	teachers	supervision	teacher evaluation	decision making
INDIVIDUAL FULFILLMENT	freedom, informality, creativity, openness, high degree of rapport	free to teach in their own unique styles; able to establish positive rapport with their students	each teacher encouraged to develop in a unique way	no uniform standard, unique to each individual	shared, participative
SCHOLARLY DISCIPLINE	'academic' atmosphere, subject-oriented, traditional methods and content	expert in their subjects	each teacher expected to use proven, traditional methodologies	on the basis of knowledge and application of the best teaching methods	principal makes key decisions after consultation
EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY	carefully organized learning materials, systematic processes marked by objectives, program, evaluation cycle	organized, skilled at 'managing' student activities; expert in diagnosis, alternative strategies, and evaluation	performance objectives established for each teacher, appropriate to the individual's needs	evaluation in terms of performance objectives: a) objectives for teacher performance, and b) objectives for student performance	scientific planning strategy; objectives, program, evaluation; input and evaluation on all levels

objectives approach to administrative tasks. In general, the visitor would see a highly organized and objectives-oriented environment.

Teachers in an educational technology school would probably have been selected on the basis of their high level of organization or their potential to become good managers both of their students and of the objectives-centered learning materials that characterized instructional activities. They would also be expert in diagnosis, organized in identifying alternative strategies for individual students or groups, and skilled in devising objective measures for the evaluation of student learning.

The supervisory process in an Educational Technology school would focus on precisely established performance goals for each teacher. These objectives would be based on a diagnosis of the needs of the individual teacher and would be projected for the coming academic year. The principal would assume the role of a manager with the task of identifying targets for a subordinate in consultation with that subordinate.

In evaluation the principal would focus on the performance objectives established for each teacher and on measurement (in terms of observable behaviors) of the degree to which these objectives had been met. Measurement of change in student behavior or performance would probably also be considered by the principal in the evaluation of teachers. There would be periodic evaluation based on a predetermined timetable in order to permit evaluative feedback during performance and thus improve performance as it developed over the course of an academic year.

Decision making in an Educational Technology school would be embodied in a systems strategy focusing sequentially on objectives, selection of program, and evaluation. There would be input from every level. All decisions would follow a careful diagnosis of needs, full consideration of alternative programs (including their cost-effectiveness), and establishment of systematic processes for evaluation in terms of observable outcomes. These procedures would be highly formalized and the roles of all staff personnel in the process clearly defined.

The chart on page 136 is presented by way of summary and comparison of the administrative implications of the educational theories presented. The five characteristics mentioned are intended to be representative of the differences which might emerge. Commitment of a principal to one or other of these theories would obviously have implications beyond the five areas discussed.

Conclusion

Several concluding statements seem appropriate. Obviously there are more educational theories than the three mentioned above. However, the Individual Fulfillment, Scholarly Discipline, and Educational Tech-

nology trends are among the most visible and powerful orientations at work in schools today. In my observation, they are the three major sets of assumptions which undergird much of teaching and administrative practice in schools today.

As in any conceptual framework, these educational theories can promote fuller understanding of present realities and enlighten future practice and decisions. For example, a principal who is predominately Scholarly Discipline in orientation might be able to understand more fully why he or she is having little supervisory success with a new teacher who accepts the assumptions of the Individual Fulfillment school. Similarly, the same principal, by reflecting more clearly on the school he or she wishes to create, might select teachers whose backgrounds and interests fit the Scholarly Discipline model.

Most administrators operate on the basis of an eclectic educational theory, drawing insights and practices from a variety of perspectives. This is possible here. For example, a principal may adopt selected techniques from the Educational Technology school while building a school which is Scholarly Discipline or Individual Fulfillment in basic orientation. I would maintain that it is not only possible but also essential that a contemporary principal take an eclectic approach. The fundamental insight which gave rise to each of these trends was a corrective to a deficiency in the educational system, a response to the absence of an important element. The danger in contemporary educational theory is the exclusive or extreme application of any one of these theories. Since all propose an important and even essential insight, none can be ignored without diminishing the validity and utility of a principal's operative educational theory. It is important to avoid the perennial pitfall of absolutizing any one theory to the exclusion of all others.

However, it is also my contention and observation that a principal who exerts strong leadership will have a predominant, guiding orientation—one of these three, and that, if the principal does not, it is unlikely that the school will have clear direction. There is a fundamental insight supporting each of these approaches to schooling; at their center, they *are* competing and contradictory ways of answering the important questions about schools. While not excluding insights from the other theories, a principal must choose a direction for the school, and that **direction** must be both distinctive and definitive.

This presentation has been based on an assumption: that principals are leaders in school environments and that the educational theories to which they commit themselves have substantial implications for the atmosphere and operation of the schools they administer. It is my firm conviction that the leadership of principals in both personnel matters

and operating structures does set the tone and direction of schools. If you are willing to grant the importance of the principal's leadership role, then the importance of a reflective and clearly defined theoretical position becomes more obvious. And the more reflective and consistent a principal's educational theory, the more likely that the school will establish and maintain a positive sense of direction and purpose.