

Some philosophical questions need to be considered before any educational contribution that assessment centers have to offer can be intelligently judged.

The Homogenized and Pureed Principalship

by G. Daniel Harden

Recently there has been a spate of symposia, conferences, and special publications dedicated to the detailed consideration of the principalship. Much of this attention emanates from the laudable emphasis placed on the leadership role of the principal by the Effective School Research. Unfortunately, a great deal of that which has been written has related only to some very superficial behavioral observations which have missed the point of why the principal is the key to an effective school community.

Philosophical shallowness and/or vagueness is at the root of the failure to perceive some of the more important roles of the principal, as it usually is in any serious discussion of general education. How does one see the principalship and what is expected of it? What characteristics should a principal have and how do they affect the position? These questions are especially pertinent now that there is a movement developing for the establishment of regional assessment centers to screen potential administrators. Some philosophical questions need be honestly asked and considered before any educational contribution that assessment centers have to offer can be intelligently judged. Superficial assessments may be worse than none. Are the assessment centers simply assessing certain administrative strategies preferred by prospective principals or are they delving into the more profound foundational contours of their educational thought? This writer suspects that the more superficial profile is being sought.

There appears that there are at least three schools of educational administration that reflect substantial philosophical variations. The usual distinctions of authoritarian vs. democratic leadership or formal vs. functional leadership styles are ephemeral divisions at best. While they might indicate something in terms of a potential administrator's *modus operandi*, they shed little light on the vision that the principal has of the mission of the school enterprise or his place in it.

The first position, that supported in the main by those who have drunk deeply of the waters of educational psychology and philosophical positivism, measure the worth of an administrator by his ability to develop measurable goals and meet them. The outcomes are students who possibly

are problem solvers, rational thinkers, and fit rather well into the Yuppie world of the Silicon Valley. Unseen dangers may well threaten from what Ortega y Gasset referred to as the "terror of the laboratory," but they go unheeded and little noticed by these 20th century inheritors of the positivist faith. The second group is composed of public administrators who, despite the periodic use of trendy rhetorical camouflage, see their task as one of balancing competing public interest groups and mediating differences. These administrators are concerned primarily with the appearance of technical and environmental modernity and progress, and the introduction of allegedly new techniques and organizational structures. Their foremost interest in education is, however, with the package in which it can be presented to the taxpaying public. These public servants are big on public relations, collegial decision-making processes, and Zig Zigler. The third group see its role as leaders in a learning community. A full understanding of all human experience within the cultural context of place and time, encouraging and directing the constantly changing syntheses of disciplined and creative minds, is the educational environment desired by these leaders. The mastery of specific goals are important primarily in the context of preparing the individual to deal intelligently with the timeless problems of both the material and non-material world. To develop a true *amor intellectualis* would be the final reward within their educational communities. The industrial schema is replaced with an almost ecclesial model. Metaphorically speaking, the picture of Lee Iacocca is replaced by one of Plato, the Holy Father, or the Baghwahn Rajneesh. These three groups are distinct and contrast sharply. True, like any effort at categorizing human behavior and understanding, there are few true "types." Most practitioners are hybrids, but hybrids with dominant characteristics and inclinations. That these delineations are most often not recognized in the current round of discussion is noteworthy.

In reality, we are forced to admit that each group has its own membership and constituency. Turf is jealously guarded and animosities often carefully nurtured. The first group finds its natural constituency on the university campus in the departments of psychology and curriculum. The second group centers on upwardly mobile school administrators—the ones depicted a few years ago by white shoes and belt cum Lion's Club pin and now noted for their slim line attache case and running shoes. Their department at the University is usually administration. The guru-leader of the third group normally must create his own constituency on the basis of personal and educational voltage and charisma. The new emphasis on coaching, taken partially from the Paideia formulation, seems to have implications favorable to this school of administrative leadership.

Assessment Centers

The establishment of assessment centers across the country raise a number of very real concerns among those who believe in a variety of legitimate educational leadership modes. Much of the Effective School's research indicates that strong building level leadership is vitally important, but is not as clear on the exact nature of that leadership. Some have developed 27 characteristics of effective leadership and some have gone over the 127 mark. If Professor Smith developed 500 (e.g. "A successful administrator smiles more frequently than an unsuccessful administrator:") they would probably all be valid to varying degrees, but they would not constitute a formula which would guarantee a successful educational leader. Nor do they contribute much to a better understanding of the actual philosophy of

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a prospective administrative candidate.

A two- or even three-day assessment period in terms of judging leadership characteristics is doubtful in terms of evaluative criteria. Most of the characteristics sought are questionable in terms of their empirical measurability. What we can best label this approach is assessment through Rorschach. Was the assessed properly aggressive or improperly passive during simulated discussion No. 3? Are the raters themselves as fresh, open and observant at the end of their evaluative marathon as they are at the start? Do not the individual personalities of the raters, after extended exposure, begin to chemically interact with those of the subjects and, thus, develop profile renderings based on personal proclivity rather than on empirical datum?

An assessment process such as that developed by NASSP and similar groups is vulnerable to the theater major. Verbal agility and the ability to quickly read desired responses may well help the educational administrator in the field, but is less important than many other characteristics desired of someone interested in developing a career in legitimate educational leadership. It is made to order for the person who knows how to skillfully manipulate jargon, avoid the pitfalls that plague and bedevil all serious educational thinkers, and fit the mold. A question worth a moment of thought is how well would William Torrey Harris have done as he tried to discuss his philosophical Hegelianism with his evaluators or how would Mortimer Adler relate to the gentlefolk from the NASSP assessment team? Assessment center dependence on the empirical methodologies of educational and leadership psychology ensures a bias toward strategic thinking as opposed to philosophical thinking.

We talk quite a bit in education about risk-taking. Most of the verbiage is just that—empty speculation. The educational community generally has been very conservative about protecting its own flank. An example has been the reserve shown toward any program that would tend to put the public educational system in a truly competitive position

vis a vis any system of non-public instruction. A chill goes down the collective spine of our national organizations at the mention of educational vouchers or of legitimizing and enriching the value of the home school experience. The fact is that someone who suggests team teaching is still being loudly heralded as a risk-taking innovator. When the foundational questions are being considered there is no risk taking, nor is there any reason to believe that those who would be evaluating potential administrators would recognize the worth and value of nonconformist educational thinking. As long as innovation is limited to the reorganization of observably superficial modes of instruction, no real danger exists. But it is advised to not start tampering with institutional missions and priorities or those with vested interests will turn around and bite the tamperer. Does this not have an implication relative to the assessment center process? There are delicate areas in educational speculation and fairly safe havens. Surely no practical person interested in getting through the assessment center procedure with high recommendations is going to actually risk the former with a potential career hanging in the balance. The appearance of novelty and innovative thinking must, within this format, replace actual risk taking.

No one can now predict the future of the move toward assessment centers with any certitude. To the extent that they survive, one might suspect that they will tend to dull the cutting edges, recommending primarily those who will fit pleasantly (or unpleasantly) into the corporate industrial model. Those who are interested in quality of cultural product might well have a more difficult time getting into public school administration. But the demand for such schooling will remain, if not within the public school system, then without. If public schools remain largely fixated with the re-adjustment of their methodologies and fail to enlist administrators as well as teachers who are versed in those foundational areas upon which the entire educational superstructure is built, they are the losers.