

Reconceptualising the Philosophic Base of School Principals

by
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From the evidence widely reported in the media as well as that which escapes widespread public scrutiny, there appears to be a groundswell of opinion that our schools, particularly our state schools, are not experiencing the type of transformational leadership required by schools in this technological era. The type of school governance practised in our schools currently relies heavily on bureaucratic/managerial competence and rule compliance, with scant regard for human emotion, human concerns, and the dynamics of work groups. This type of school administration is definitely a relic of a past era.

Principals are discovering, although too slowly, that in order to achieve desired educational goals, it is imperative that they work along with multiple constituents--students, teachers, parents, and the general public--who represent a wide range of interests and circumstances. In too many schools that I have visited students and parents do not have a meaningful voice. This is evident in some state schools but particularly so in denominational schools, both primary and secondary. In those secondary schools where student councils exist, they operate under severe regulatory constraints and, in most instances, their continued existence depends on the extent to which they remain one-way, top-down conduits of the schools' administration. Several reports indicate that seldom are students encouraged to engage school administration in discussion of contentious issues that affect them. Also, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), which should be the main forum for meaningful dialogue between parents and school personnel, often functions as a parents' organization. Many principals and teachers view PTAs as the fund-raising arm of their schools. Parents are not valued for the tremendous potential that resides in this collectivity, and the enormous contribution they can make to increasing the effectiveness of schools, in terms of goal identification, resource acquisition, and programme and technological implementation.

Also, within their schools, some principals are slowly realising that they must cultivate a shared vision, a collection of meaningful and coherent professional and personal experiences, and a sense of membership in a community of learners with people who may have profound differences in living conditions, values, and beliefs.

A situation that comes to mind immediately is the problem currently existing at one of our nation's comprehensive schools. In the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s, this particular school was the pride of comprehensive schools nationwide. The school then was led by one of our most successful secondary school principals, who subsequently became a school supervisor, then Director of School Supervision. The comprehensive school concept was introduced to Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) in the 1970s, and this period witnessed, for the first time in T&T, large state schools with enrolments in excess

of 1,500 students and more than 150 members of academic and non-academic staff. What this meant was that tremendous leadership and management skills had to be employed in coordinating and motivating such large and disparate groups of individuals. What is evident from discussion with past students and parents of this era is exactly what researchers have continuously documented about effective schools. Researchers have argued that effective schools are invariably led by effective principals who are able to coalesce disparate groups, identify and share common beliefs and understandings, nurture and develop a common vision, and create appropriate structures for accomplishing desired school outcomes. Also, researchers have indicated that, without doubt, ineffective principals lead ineffective schools.

It is quite obvious, therefore, that in order to provide the relevant type of leadership in our nation's schools today, principals must be equipped with the knowledge base and leadership/management competencies required to identify appropriate sets of values, beliefs, and expectations (or philosophy) that will underpin their actions. Christopher Hodgkinson, a renowned scholar on the ethical character of administration, explained that a value is a concept or conception of the desirable or a broad enduring preference for some state of affairs. The essential point here is that values do not exist in the world; they are phenomenological or objective constructs of the observer. Expressions of values, then, are statements of worth, which individuals impute to features of their everyday reality.

Complicating this challenge, however, is the fact that many of the values, norms, ideals, and assumptions that once provided a fairly stable framework to guide leaders are now under attack. Nevertheless, researchers have argued that among all the contending issues and ambiguities that confront principals today, they must be certain of two things: what their values and beliefs are, and where their power lies. Knowing this will help the administrator to translate values, beliefs, expectations, and aspirations into action.

Chester Barnard, in his famous book "Functions of the Executive," asserts that the function of the leader is to know and say what to do and where to stop, with reference to the general purpose or objective of the undertaking in which he is engaged. He argues that it is the leader's job to formulate the general purpose or objective. Further, Barnard sees leadership as a moral act and claims that, as a moral agent, the job of the principal is to bind the various stakeholders of the school to the ethical ends for which education and schooling stand, and which it is the principal's job to define/redefine. Supporting Barnard, other researchers have articulated the belief that principals perform a critical role in schools, and it is their job to choose key values and create social structures that embody those values. These researchers believe that it is the principal who instills a school with character. For example, Christopher Hodgkinson contends that values are the wellsprings of human action and the motivating force behind everything that people choose to do or not to do. Thomas Sergiovanni, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Educational Leadership and founding director of the Trinity Principals' Center, asserts that the task of principals for the future is to create a moral order that bonds both administrator and stakeholders to a set of shared values and beliefs. Further, Joseph Murphy argues that the school administrator must acknowledge his fundamental role as

moral leader in which values, value judgments, and purpose defining are the central elements in the selection, extension, and day-to-day realisation of educational purpose.

This means that, in the context of T&T, persons wishing to have an impact on society as school leaders must be motivated by a set of deep personal and professional values and beliefs, and by a guiding set of academic and social norms that can provide a rudder. Principals are also reminded that values, beliefs, and high expectations are central to a number of closely related school phenomena (culture, mission, vision and strategy) that are important for engaging the challenges that are inevitable in today's schools.

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