Educational Administration in the 21st. Century: Challenges, Ideas, and Perspectives*

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Thank you for inviting me to the Annual Conference of Professors of Educational Administration. For a long time I have shared with my students the importance of this prestigious organization and its contribution to the development of the administrative theory in education. I believe, like am sure you all do, that the most important quality in any profession is the passion that comes from our heart. That is what we brought here today, the passion to look at different perspectives and find new and more effective solutions to the administrative problems we face in our educational systems.

Perhaps you expect a formal lecture from this colleague that has traveled many miles to be with you today. I hope not to disappoint you if I do not give a formal academic speech, of which I've given too many and you have heard a lot. Allow me to speak from my heart. I prefer to feel that I'm sharing ideas with my colleagues instead of being lecturing for them. Let me confess, I was born to be a teacher and I really and truly enjoy what I do. Education runs in my veins, as we say in Spanish, so if I were to born again, no doubt, I will be a teacher.

As I mature, both intellectually and morally, I have embraced the perspective that instead of complaining of the social, political, economical, and educational difficulties we are facing, I look at the problems as opportunities to be creative in understanding, sometimes accepting the harsh reality, and always moving ahead to improve educational institutions. Of course, we all face many difficulties everyday.

However, I'm talking about a different way of approaching problems, much like Charles Dickens when he says, in *Tale of Two Cities "We are in the worst of times, but we also are, in the best of times"*. I insist that we are in the best of times because even when this society is complex and turbulent, it provides us a great laboratory to create and invent new and different ways of solving problems. So, I have learned to look at the problems in education with perspectives of opportunities to learn, and to growth.

For about fifty years or more, academics, researchers, practitioners, professional organizations such as the NCPEA, and various theoreticians have pursued the search for some kind of coherent theory of how educational organizations change, what is leadership and how might leaders induce major changes in the administration of teaching, learning and curriculum. So far, their search has not yielded the best expected results. There is a paradox in resources invested in education in contrast with the academic achievement of the students. The more resources invested the lowest results are achieved every year, that is, every year the educational budget increases wile the academic achievement of the students decreases. (Shmoeker, 2006).

As specialists in educational administration, we can ask to ourselves: "What have we done wrong as educators that there are so many people unsatisfied with the school results? In other words, let me pose the following questions: 1. What have we learned about the process of change and development in educational organizations?; 2. What have we learned regarding the administrative structures that support the process of change and the results we strive for?; and, 3. What have we learned about the leadership that enables those changes?

I'm convinced that questions are very useful for an effective process of reflecting and learning. As a matter of fact, literature points out that effective leaders lead with questions. (Marquardt, 2005). Thus, attempting to find possible

answers to the questions stated before, I'll raise three more questions: 1) Why, despite that we have learned so much about change processes, we continue to practice non working ways or strategies to implement change? 2) Why, when research stresses the importance of more effective structures in order to make change successful, do we keep attached to old structures that have proved so unsuccessful? 3) Why, despite some good models, a plenitude of research findings, and some very talented people in all areas of knowledge, leaders find it so difficult to implement the changes we have envisioned? These are the type of questions that interest me.

That's not to say that there aren't plenty intriguing ideas, models, concepts, processes and practices worthy of consideration. Of course there are many. This is what literature names as islands of excellence, but, as beautiful or excellent as islands may be, I'm talking about totality (the wholeness). There have been also many excellent books in the field of leadership, organizational behavior, and in the process of change. There are excellent intellectuals and researchers doing fine work. There are many colleges and universities around the world offering degrees, concentrations and doctoral programs on the various fields of educational administration, change and leadership. There are many reputable consulting firms whose people are competent and well qualified to approach the mission at hand. There are many professional associations whose memberships are among the best and brightest thinkers in the world as for example the NCPEA, just to mention one. However, almost all of reputable practitioners, who are in direct and daily contact with the reality of schools, who are teaching daily at any level, will admit that the state of the art in educational leadership and administration has not yielded enough practical results. We really need humility and intellectual honesty to accept such reality.

In facing reality most of us are distraught with the extraordinary wide range of definitions and descriptions of leaderships, and the inability of investments in

leadership programs to produce better equipped leaders. We are dismayed with the quick fix "you too can be a leader" Band Aid, being put on leadership trainings. In my experience most programs do not produce any noticeable change in the attendees' leadership behavior. It seems as if we were giving more attention to the form and loosing sight of the essence.

It is a "clichéd, but a true clichéd", that we live in the knowledge society, in which the knowledge worker is the most important asset of the organization. Consequently, educational leaders need new knowledge and skills to foster competent school system. To create new systems requires: moving from unconnected thinking to system thinking; from an environment of isolation to one of collegiality; from a perceived reality to data driven reality, and from individual autonomy to collective autonomy and collective accountability. (Zmuda, Kuklis and Kline, 2004). These profound changes demand new knowledge and professional skills. However, still some administrators believe that what they need to do in the organization is to increase budget, get more technological equipment, and better physical facilities including a larger parking lot. Thus, nobody will be surprised to find some administrators with a mind set of the 50's and the 60's, although they may presume to be update in his/her professional field. (Claudio, 2003).

There have been many ways of describing leadership. One is by inspirational stories. The other is by wish lists of attributes of successful leaders. Another way is by describing competencies and the kinds of knowledge and skills that are necessary to perform effectively. Focusing on processes and results, and leading with questions are other ways for describing leadership. Most recent literature states that effective leaders create the conditions and environment to ask and to be asked questions. (Marquardt, 2005). Research also affirms that questions serve as the foundation for individual, team, and organizational learning. All the above mentioned practices are important and can be justified, but they must be integrated

We need to reframe the discussion on leadership. The key is to create a balance and equilibrium of attributes and results. Effective leadership requires connecting leadership attributes, (who leaders are and what they know and do) and desired results. This implies that leaders must have a clear and compelling vision and should be capable of sharing it with their fellow's coworkers. Competencies, inner character attributes, knowledge and skills, attitudes and behaviors, all are crucial, of course. But also, leaders have to focus on results. When leaders understand both what they need to do to be successful (results) and what they need to know and do to be successful (attributes), they will fulfill their own expectations and the expectations of their educational constituencies, as well.

The most common way we try to change educational organizations or systems is through simple minded strong leadership, clear vision, rewards, and lots of trainings designed to get the new message across. Principals, supervisors, school boards, and teacher's unions, huddle to devise strategies to get teachers, students, parents, and communities on board. Those planning the change somehow believe unconsciously that are they who are in the boat and the others are in the water. When people talk of the need for change they are usually thinking that it is someone else who needs to change. In a sense the feeling is: "I'm OK, they are not OK".

The mind set that drives educational change management methods includes many meetings, many presentations, endless discussion of burning platform issues, lots of process improvement programs, and a full basket of essentially leader directed moves. However, researchers as Sparks and Hirsh (1997) have pointed out that "gone forever are the days when educators (usually teachers) sit passively while an "expert" expose them the ideas or "trains" them in new practices, and the success of the effort is judged by a "happiness quotient" that measures participants satisfaction". Schmoeker (2006), on the other hand affirms, that: "we have relied far too much, with miserable results, on a failed model of improving instructional

practice: training, in the form of workshops, or staff development. Despite the millions of teacher-hours we have invested in such trainings, it has, by common consent, been monumentally ineffective". Interestingly, when the change process is too slow or frustrating, the typical response is to redouble our efforts and drive faster, as if picking up speed will solve the problem. We have become slaves of the old management practices, even when we keep talking about new approaches and innovative management strategies in educational administration. From my viewpoint, this reflects our naiveté in how to bring people together for an effective change. So the issue of effective change process still prevails.

An alternative to leader driven change is to continue exploring and practicing the democratic values of freedom, participation, respect, choices, and trust that enable engagement and good will relationships in our educational environments. If you watch closely and critically a change or learning effort taking place, you would not observe minds whirling, complaining, and criticizing. What you would observe is people meeting with each other in mutual respect, creating spaces of all kinds –physical spaces, emotional spaces, intellectual spaces, spiritual spaces and organizational spaces- different spaces where a community of respect, truth, dialogue and understanding is possible.

In this environment you will observe people creating, fostering, and strengthening outstanding learning communities. In the process of building a competent school system, for example, the staff members emerge as a professional learning community, embracing collective accountability as the only way to achieve the shared vision for all students. Research affirms that the heart of school as a learning community is working together to expand and enrich the learning environment of the school as a place where the children learn, (Cochrame, 2000). The school is then considered as the place educational change and all its components, actually unfold.

Reflecting myself on these ideas, I will name the title for my new doctoral course in educational administration *The Choreography of How to Bring People Together.* But the goal is not to dance or to socialize, but to get something done with a minimum of friction and a maximum of satisfaction. In other words, I'll be asking my graduate students two things: First to bring ideas, based on research, to create and develop a competent school system. Second, I will ask each doctoral candidate to simply bring his/her own experience of **when**, **how** and **why** he or she was successful on any choreography of bringing people together for a shared purpose. I can foresee that given the opportunity and with questions as a mean to provoke deep reflection, they will reconceptualize and redesign schooling in the context of life's fundamental principles. Together we will be creating vibrant and dynamic networks and learning communities that embody the diversity, innovation, interdependence, and creativity of life, and where student constantly learn. They will create the new school that better respond to the needs of a global and technological society and specifically to the needs of the present and future generations of students as well. (Claudio, 2003).

The point I want to make is that the way we bring people together becomes a major concern for how educational change happens. A sine-qua-non condition for achieving the goal of creating a new school is getting rid of the spectrums that have controlled us for many years. The great playwright Ibsen says: "We are controlled by the norms and ideas that have survived its usefulness, but they are only spectrums. These spectrums have a great influence over us, as if they were alive". It seems as if Ibsen were talking about ideas and administrative practices from the times of Frederick Taylor, Henry Fayol, Max Weber, among others. These are the spectrums that, to some extent, guide the management practices of most organizations at the beginning of the 21st. century

We most remember that educational communities are human systems. Human systems require patience; they grow out of conflict and succeed when

feelings are connected to purposes. What is missing in the consciousness of many educational leaders is the reality that the social structure of how and why humans come together determines the real, human outcome of the event. Thus, you cannot have a high control, leader driven process to engage a high involvement and high committed change effort. A culture of openness, relationships and trust is needed. The school as a living system can only be understood within the context of the whole. We are all connected to the whole universe, in a holistic way of understanding life.

So far, we have stressed two common sense truths. First, command-and-control behavior does not work. Second, no one alone can bring about change. Successful strategy change requires people at all levels of the system and organization that care about the outcomes, people who have the necessary ownership, commitment and will to implement them. Without this level of engagement the most daring, ingenious plan, becomes leadership's abandoned child, left on the doorstep to fend for itself in a dangerous world.

My advice is not to look for specific methodologies, recipes, or set of techniques, rather it is a set of principles and values that people can be aware of when faced with new or different situations. Four such principles are:

- Widening the circle of involvement
- Connecting people to each other and to different ideas
- Creating communities for action, i.e., outstanding learning communities
- Embracing democracy

These simple principles form an integrated set whose maximum benefit is achieved only when all four are applied simultaneously. Leaders who successfully apply these deceptively simple, yet extremely powerful principles reap the benefits of creating and sustaining educational institutions that are able to respond

effectively to the chaos, confusion, and complexity of an ever changing environment. In these educational institutions, there are characteristics, such as:

- People grasp the big picture, fully understanding the dangers, limits, possibilities and opportunities for action
- There is urgency and energy as people become aligned around a common purpose and create new directions
- Accountability and responsibility is fully distributed throughout the organizations, as people come to understand the whole system.
- Collaboration across boundaries increases because people are connected to the issues and to each others.
- Broad participation quickly identifies performance gaps and their solutions, improving their own productivity in whatever measures they decide upon.
- Creativity is sparked when people from all levels, especially teachers, contribute their best ideas and experiences and are able to practice them, experiment and improve constantly.
- Capacity for future changes increases as people develop the skills and processes to meet no just the current challenges, but future challenges as well.

A leader who has a clear concept of how an educational organization needs to change and evolve has a better chance of engaging and guiding everyone concerned with the teaching and learning of the students.

I have learned that there are at least four basic propositions when dealing with change. First, you need a model that describes where your organization is now. The leaders need to come to some consensus about the current state of what really is happening and a way of evaluating the "health" from the point of view of the purpose, mission, strategic direction, and value propositions of their systems or organizations.

Second, you need a strong reason for change. Start recognizing that people are miserable when they are not feeling successful in their personal and professional lives (Schmoeker, 2006). Before deciding what to change, consider first deciding why to change and then how to proceed to achieve the proposed change. You should keep in mind what price are we paying for not changing, and what benefits could we reap if we could figure out how to do things more intelligently. This step may seem completely obvious, but is probably overlooked or neglected in most change failure efforts. Before we decide that we've got to become such a feature, or implement such a technology or pedagogy, let's make sure that's what we need to be, that's what students and teachers really need in their lives, and lets get an idea of the payoff involved. Third, you need a mental model for what you want the organization to become. It's not enough to say "we need to become excellent". We have to know what the school will look like, act like, and perform like, while it is achieving that purpose. Saying we "need to build a culture of respect, freedom, innovation, excellence, competitiveness, or whatever" does little good unless you can point to the conditions that can prove you built one. ==This make to take careful== thought, analysis and a lot of discourse at various levels of the organization. Fourth**,** you need a strategic, well focused plan for closing the gap. The disparity between "what is" and "what ought to be" implies various specific interventions to change the underlying conditions keeping where the organization is. The range of choices is nearly endless as for example: surveys, analysis, task force meetings, organization-wide communication events, systems changes or redesign process, reorganizations, lots of training, changing key policies, re-engineering… you name it. For me, the key to successful change at this stage is fitting the intervention to the change objective the community has set for itself. Reassuringly, perhaps, we've just described the age-old management problem-solving process and common sense approach: evaluate the current situation, decide what and why has

to be changed, define the goal condition you want to achieve, and make a plan for getting there.

Now let's think about what those steps look like in real life. If we are prepared to admit that too many schools or educational systems change initiatives, maybe even most of them, fail to achieve their desired ends, we have to question to ourselves: do we know how to increase the chances for success? Are there practical things that leaders can do to engage all concerned in favor of the change they are trying to promote? Well, yes indeed. I've seen critical elements of success in change programs that come down to key essentials like the followings:

1) A Credible Imperative. Too many times the real reason for change is in somebody's brain, not in the circumstances facing the organization. So, first of all, you must perceive truthfully the needs, reality and circumstances prevailing in your community and in your educational scenario.

2) Committed leaders. The change effort must be a daily priority to the principal and her/his staff.

3) Engaged teachers. People have to be prepared to invest their discretionary energy in because it makes sense to them, not only to the leader. So the question will be what must happen in the minds and hearts of teachers? If you can answer the question and your own mind and heart change while engaging yourself in the question, then something interesting will happen in your change effort with others.

4) Change vectors. You have to make visible and relatively stable changes in the organization, its processes, its policies, its rules and regulations, its rewards systems, and lots of other aspects of daily life that make the old way of operating less and less attractive and the new way of operating more and more attractive. You have to burn some bridges, put some sacred cows to pasture far way, and get rid of some nasty habits. Apply

the implications of the book titled "From the sacred cows you can have the best hamburgers",(Kriegel and Brandt, 1997)), to eliminate them.

5) A Score Card. For being successful you need persistence, commitment, patience, faith in people as well as a good accountability process, and effectiveness plans.

If you take it upon yourself to try to influence the culture, process, or structure of an organization, it helps to keep in mind a few more basic Meta Principles of Change. If you follow your personal code of values, and approach the role of leadership with a measure of humility, always keep in mind that as a leader you are a servant and that you are not in the organization to be served. In his best- selling classic Good to Great, Jim Collins (2001) reports his discovery that leaders in great companies are both: humble and persistent. You may be well capable of contributions you can take pride in. Consider at least the following personal rules to help you add value and live through the experience with calm, confidence and trust. In these ten mega principles I summarize much of what I've said before.

- Do thy people no harm. Keep in mind that each one tries to do his/her best but needs to be understood, and treated as a capable and promising person
- Work with, not on, the organization. Be one of them, be a colleague
- Diagnose before you prescribe. Assess the situation before, during, and after the change process, listen the people
- Start where the system is. Accept the existing, even brutal realities and circumstances of the organization and work with them, although they might be different to your expectations
- Relieve pain as much as possible. The change process can be painful, be compassionate

- Walk- the- talk. Lead through modeling
- Call everyone to your aid, mainly those in power. Everybody can make significant contributions. Add, never subtract
- Don't marry any model. Keep a scientific mind, be as objective as possible
- Don't work uphill. Do not work so hard, be more smart
- Sincerely faith people. Recognize the different talents and capabilities of the group
- Stay alive and have a lot of fun**.** Keep on going, be persistent, and enjoy the journey

Summing up, perhaps the greatest gift educational leaders can give the world is to help students and teachers find connection, meaning and compassion in their lives. In our personal scenarios we can give them the greatest gift… being honest and telling them the truth: *organizations only improve, as Jim Collins says, "where the truth is told, and brutal facts confronted.* So, let us tell them that there are no given formulas, only a deep loving connection with our own lives. It is only through finding meaning and connection, and passion in what we do and why we do it, that the path to happiness and success can be found. Thank you very much.

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