

Where Have all the Flowers Gone? Reconnecting Leadership Preparation with the Field of Organization Theory

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Abstract

Given the importance of organization theory to our field and the increased absence of a substantive organizational perspective in our dialogue, this essay argues that it is time to revisit how we conceptualize and package the organization theory component of our leadership preparation programs. A justification of the field is offered and two notable concepts from the literature reviewed. This is followed by a discussion of the use of this literature in our preparation programs. Instead of teaching students to look to organization theory for *definitive answers*, we should teach them to be artists who look to this literature for *creative insights*.

Questions regarding the effectiveness of leadership preparation programs in colleges of education have provoked heated debates within the policy and practitioner communities. Animated by a discontent with the *status quo*, these debates are rooted in various assumptions and focus on an identifiable set of questions: What is effective leadership? What knowledge, skills and dispositions does the effective educational leader possess? Can these be taught? What are the defining features of an effective leadership preparation program?

While troubling to some, these debates are healthy. They provide us with opportunities to rethink our definitions and assumptions of the training challenge. How have we defined this challenge? What are we assuming? Are these definitions and assumptions valid to the demands of the educational leader's role? Current preparation programs embody enacted definitions and assumptions of the past and present (Weick, 1995).

These debates also provide us with the opportunity to critically assess current preparation programs and the elements that define them. These elements include but are not limited to program structure, program sequence, admissions criteria, knowledge, skill and dispositional foci, and teaching-learning strategies. A given program should be assessed in terms of its content and predictive validity. Does it reflect the knowledge, skills, dispositions and demands associated with this role? Is success in the pre-service experience a predictor of success in the role?

Entertaining these questions also provides us with the opportunity to address the leadership preparation challenge in novel ways. Epistemological and methodological debates coupled with theoretical developments in the social sciences have provided a broader range of tools with which to frame and address this challenge. New frames and perspectives allow for new ways of seeing; new ways of seeing generate new questions. The net effect has been a heightened sensitivity to epistemological perspective. The questions we ask and the issues to which we attend are a function of the perspective we adopt. These and other reasons provide a reasonable justification for the examination of leadership preparation programs. Education preparation programs can be improved and their validity with practice increased.

In the context of this debate, the purpose of this essay is to reflect on one specific aspect of pre-service preparation programs: the knowledge base as it relates to *organization theory*. By necessity, the focus here is narrow, much narrower than the broader debate. Neverthe-

less, given the relevance of this literature to leadership, reflection on this content-domain and its place in preparation programs is justified.

Much has been written on what knowledge domains should be reflected in leadership preparation programs. Ours is an eclectic, conceptually messy field. As with other types of administration - business, hospital and public administration - it is rooted in what Barnard (1938), Simon (1976) and March (1965) refer to as *administrative science*. The label is consistent with the context in which each worked. Today it is suspect on two fronts: Is what we do as educators administration or leadership? Is this activity a science or an art? As reflected in the resistance surrounding attempts to change the name of AERA's Division A from *Educational Administration* to *Educational Leadership* (or some variant), both questions remain problematic.

The field of administrative science draws from a variety of knowledge domains and literatures. As such, it is an *aggregated* field. There is a place for aggregation in our thinking. In statistics one aggregates to a given unit of analysis and offers a description of that unit in terms of variables of interest. Yet there is a cost to aggregation. When aggregating, one masks the differences among aggregated sub-units. One can aggregate to the school level, but the variability that exists across classrooms is masked. This masking underscores the need to *disaggregate*.

Administrative science may be conceptualized as an aggregated field. It is an aggregate of multiple knowledge domains, e.g., leadership, supervision, planning, budgeting, politics, etc. There is a loose organic quality to this aggregate which has—in principle—defined the core of many preparation programs. Yet its components are neither static nor fixed. To help clarify, there is utility in dis-aggregating this aggregate and reflecting on the domains that have come to define it. To what extent do these domains inform the leadership endeavor? To what extent should they define our preparation programs? These are fundamental questions.

My intent is to focus on one content-domain component of this aggregate: *organization theory*. This focus is motivated by a perceived drift away from this literature in our programs. In addressing this domain, I offer a set of concerns that justify an examination of the organization theory domain. This is followed by a review of select concepts and frameworks from this literature that serve as powerful tools for informing our thinking about schools, leadership and reform. I conclude by reflecting on the theoretical use of the organizational theory literature in our leadership preparation programs.

Importance of Organization Theory

The inclusion of organization theory as a component of preparation programs can be justified on several fronts. Two will be noted here. As the dominant feature of modern society (Scott, 2003), organizations provide the principal mechanism for realizing ends beyond the reach of the individual. For this reason a wide variety of organizations can be found. Much of the activity of life is organizational activity. Not only are we members of multiple organizations, we feel the effects of many of which we are not a part. Organizations are *ubiquitous*. This ubiquity provides a justification for the study of organizations in leadership programs.

As a defining venue for social interaction, the organization provides a context for understanding this interaction. Organizations exhibit tendencies that exist in various human groups and provide the context for a variety of basic social processes. The numerous activities witnessed in educational organizations—leading, teaching, learning,

counseling, coaching, etc.—take place in an *organizational* context. One cannot discuss these activities without considering the context in which they occur. This context provides a justification for the study of organizations in leadership preparation programs.

Yet despite these justifications, much of the reform dialogue reflects a superficial grasp of the organization theory literature and an incomplete understanding of the fundamental character of school organizations. This is expressed in at least three ways. It is reflected in the attitudes that many in our field exhibit toward the organization sociology literature and the lack of perceived relevance it has for our understanding of educational leadership and organizations. Whether unwilling or unable to wrestle with the abstract nature of this literature or frustrated by the theory movement on which it rests, the press of practice creates for many an impatience that leaves little use for organization theory. This superficial understanding is also reflected in an undue preoccupation with narrowly defined outcome measures and the manner in which these are abstracted from the contexts in which they occur. Absent is an appreciation of the relationships shared by these and other outcomes with key organization variables. The parts are considered apart from the organizational context in which they occur.

This superficial grasp is likewise reflected in the cut-flower approach in which many concepts derived from the organization theory literature are used in policy and practitioner dialogues. One need only point to the concepts *loose-coupling* and *teacher autonomy* as examples. As originally used by Bidwell (1965), loose-coupling describes one aspect of the structural features of schools: the link between classroom units and the larger organization. Without an understanding of this concept, many carelessly underestimate the number and strength of structural links which bind classroom sub-units with the larger school. To say that the structural link between the classroom and school is *loosely coupled* is not to say that it is *de-coupled*, i.e., that no or a single structural link connects the classroom sub-unit to the school. Not only are there multiple structural links which connect classroom to school, the number and strength of these vary across and within schools (Gamoran & Dreeban, 1986). Whether expressed as a prescribed curriculum, a required text, a teacher evaluation system or an end-of-year standardized student-exam, these links place constraints on teacher autonomy. While the uncertainties associated with teaching call for a structure which allows for autonomy, teacher autonomy has its limits. It is a *constrained* autonomy (Gamoran & Dreeban, 1986; Willower, 1986; Corwin & Edelfelt, 1977). The influence of the larger school structure in the classroom is always felt. There are multiple linkages of varying strength which bind classrooms and define the autonomy experienced by teachers. The superficial, cut-flower manner in which these (loose-coupling and teacher autonomy) and other concepts have been used perpetuates an incomplete view of educational organizations.

The inclusion of courses grounded in the organization theory provides an important set of conceptual tools that complicate our thinking about educational organizations (Weick, 1978). This literature offers insights and a level of analysis that compliment the contributions of other curricular foci. Two examples provided by this literature are the classification of schools as *human service organizations* and the *dual challenges of teaching*.

Insights from Organization Theory: Two Examples

Theorists have long sought to identify the common and distinctive features of organizations. While concepts such as structure, culture, and core technology represent common organizational features

(Hall, 2002), numerous typologies have been offered as a means for highlighting distinctions along key variables/dimensions (Blau & Scott, 1962; Carlson 1964; Parsons, 1967; Etzioni, 1975; Scott, 2003). One concept that has received less attention in the literature but which highlights the distinctiveness of educational organizations is the descriptor *human service organization*. Human service organizations are those organizations whose primary function is to protect, maintain or enhance the well-being of individuals (Hasenfeld, 1983). Whether through the definition, shaping or altering of personal attributes, the core task of these organizations is transforming humans. Organizations such as schools, universities, counseling agencies, churches, rehabilitation clinics, hospitals and prisons share this defining feature. Walmart, Safeway, and the IRS do not.

With the goal of changing people, human service organizations operate in a value-laden, morally-charged milieu (Scott, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The moral character of this endeavor is reflected in several ongoing challenges. First, because clients are self-activating and can resist, the organization must develop acceptable mechanisms for compliance. The core activities in human-service organizations consist of relations between staff and clients. These relations serve as the vehicle through which the organization assumes jurisdiction over clients and accomplishes desired results through client transformation.

The nature of the staff-client relationship is a critical determinant of organizational success. For example, when in educational organizations students dislike a teacher, the motivation to learn suffers. Maintaining cooperation with clients who resist is an ongoing challenge for human service organizations, particularly in organizations where client participation is mandatory, e.g., public education, prisons, etc. The essential tasks of such organizations consist of a series of transactions between clients and staff in which compliance is negotiated. This negotiation is a moral process.

Given the centrality of staff-client relations, the tasks performed by human service organizations require considerable levels of autonomy. Lipsky's (1978) frequently referenced *street-level bureaucrat* provides a description of the discretion experienced by line-staff while performing their duties. This autonomy creates coordination challenges for human service organizations. Because the quality of staff-client relations is a function of the personal attributes of staff and clients, the capacity of human service organization to coordinate the work of sub-units is limited. The ability to efficiently coordinate these sub-units is defining challenge for human service organizations.

The goals of human service organizations are likewise ambiguous and problematic. Toward what end should the organization seek to change the individual? What attitudinal or dispositional outcomes should be sought? These are perennial questions. Many of the attributes human service organizations are asked to change cannot be readily observed. Because disagreement exists over outcomes and end-states, the goals of human service organizations are typically multiple and vague. The moral ambiguity surrounding debates over goals underscores the turbulent environment in which human service organizations operate. This environment consists of multiple interests. While consensus among environmental interests may exist at an abstract level, implementation necessitates that human service organizations make normative choices in a society of multiple interests and competing values. Operating in a highly institutional environment (Scott, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 1982; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), an important challenge facing leaders in human

service organizations is managing this environment.

Given that the activities with clients are laden with significant moral consequences (i.e., the means used to foster dispositional change), the technologies used by human service organizations must be morally justified. Such organizations are limited in what they can do with clients; the technologies they employ are morally constrained and indeterminate. This ambiguity is rooted in multiple sources. Humans represent complex yet variable entities. As raw material, they are variable and unstable. Knowledge of how to effectively foster change is incomplete.

Because the goals and technologies they use are indeterminate, human service organizations lack valid and reliable measures of effectiveness. Deprived of these measures, these organizations tend to reify claims to dominant service ideologies and measures of success (Meyer & Scott, 1992; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The absence of reliable and valid performance measures also diminishes the capacity of such organizations to innovate.

Like other human service organizations, the relationship between the organization and its clients is critical for schools. For learning to occur, the teacher must create and maintain an orderly classroom environment. The creation and maintenance of this environment is a function of the student-teacher relationship and is complicated by two factors: 1) attendance for public school students is mandatory; and 2) the maturity level of students is such that the educational goals, demands and values personified in the school's representatives (i.e., administrators and teachers) are often incongruent with student interests and motivations. Simply stated, students are *captive clients with immature tendencies* (Jackson, 1990, 1986; Muir, 1986; Carlson, 1964; Waller, 1932).

These factors make creating orderly classrooms problematic for schools. Teachers must coax, negotiate and occasionally resort to "strong arm" tactics with students. Whether through an appeal to the authority-status of the teaching role or to the bureaucratic rules of the school, these tactics are impersonal and potentially alienating for students. If used in excess, passive resistance can easily escalate to overt student rebellion. However, if used with skill these tactics can create an environment conducive to learning.

Teachers must also motivate students to learn. The effectiveness of human service organizations rests on the cooperative participation of clients. In educational organizations, effective learning requires the active participation and cooperation of students. This cooperation requires that the teacher energize and establish affective bonds with the class. Since teaching is an individualized and interactive activity, motivating students is a function of close, warm relations. To maximize the learning experience, teachers must connect with students.

The irony of these dual teaching challenges is not the mutual relationship they share. Rather it is the paradoxical and countervailing tensions they create, tensions that must be skillfully balanced. Whereas the need to establish classroom order rests on the use of impersonal bureaucratic tactics with students, the need to motivate students rests on the affective, personal appeal of the teacher. Reflected in this tension is the juxtaposition of the *personal* and *impersonal*. In dealing with students, the teacher must behave in personal yet impersonal ways. This highlights a basic dilemma in school organizations: the need to motivate students to learn (i.e., the need to solicit student cooperation) while creating an orderly environment in which this learning can occur (i.e., the need to threaten and force compliance as needed while running the risk of undermining student motivation). The environment which exists in a given classroom is a function of the teacher's ability to effectively balance these countervailing tensions. Teachers vary in their abil-

ity to address these challenges and the subtle nuances associated them.

Use of Organization Theory in Preparation Programs

The issues and insights noted above beg the larger question regarding the extent to which the organization theory literature is being effectively utilized in our preparation programs. To be sure, this question is loaded. The manner in which it is asked reveals my bias. The logic and fruit of organization theory have much to offer. The field provides a perspective and set of tools that are conceptually empowering. As such, it is a bread-and-butter component of professional preparation programs and should not be abandoned.

Yet the question raises issues regarding the meaning of *effective* utilization. It assumes that there is an effective way to utilize this literature. This assumption is problematic. It highlights the puzzle that is the theory-practice relationship, a relationship of relevance for professional fields such as ours. While a full exploration of this relationship is beyond my purpose, three points are worth noting.

First, it would appear that some have placed *too much* faith in the theory-based movement. They have looked to this movement for “answers” rather than “insights,” failing to realize the limitations of theory and theorizing. As a result many have been disappointed. It is presumptuous to think that our theories—attempts at reality reduction—can *fully* capture the rich, textured complexity found in the social world. This is a myth that defines many preparation programs. Students are disappointed when they discover that the particulars of their work are incongruent with classroom material. They are also disappointed when this material is written at an abstraction far removed from lived context. The search for a comprehensive, universal explanation of complex social phenomena is much like the search for infinity: one will never find it; one will never get there. This is because all theories (and, for that matter, attempts at theorizing) are partial, incomplete and in the process of becoming.

Second, it would appear that others in our field have placed *too little* faith in the value of theory and theorizing (English, 2002). In what amounts to throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water, they have abandoned—at least rhetorically—the search for social regularities across multiple contexts. Several reasons may be offered for this. One can readily point to the influence of postmodernism and the rich epistemological critique it provides. Postmodernism reminds us of the limitations of theorizing and the embedded, contextual nature of knowledge. One can also point to our inability as researchers and educators to communicate the relevance of theory and theorizing to students. As noted above, much of the organization theory literature is inaccessible because of the level of abstraction at which it is pitched. This is not to say that this is inappropriate or of little value. What is missing is a means for making the inaccessible accessible. Accessibility may be increased in at least one of two ways: 1) communicating at lower levels of conceptual abstraction; or 2) systematically teaching students the skill of moving up and down between levels of abstraction. With the latter, it is one thing to talk about organizational environments at an abstract level; it is another to talk about the environment which surrounds Oak Ridge High (Johnson & Fauske, 2000). One of the temptations we face as educators in professional schools is to explore abstract concepts with students apart from the specific organizational context in which they occur.

After more than a decade in the professorate, I have found that most students find value in theories and theorizing. Teaching them how to systematically search for regularities across particular contexts and move up and down between levels of abstraction is empowering.

For those who resist, most cling to an intractable, narrow definition of theory, i.e., theory as utopian or impractical. What I seek to convey is that theory is a grounded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994), working, tentative, explanation of some phenomenon. As a *grounded* explanation, it arises out of lived experience. As a *working* explanation, it must be continually revised and tested within and across various contexts. As a *tentative* explanation it must be embraced yet doubted.

Weick (2001) and Mills (1959) provide insight into tensions created by inordinate adherence to past theoretical enactments. Noting that growth comes as one both embraces and doubts these enactments, both find value in the precedent and progress of the past. Weick argues that one avoid becoming a prisoner of these enactments. He encourages researchers to remain open to new and alternative ways of framing. This mind-set of accepting and doubting creates an adaptability conducive to progress (Johnson, 2003). Yet this mind-set is paradoxical, ambiguous and at times tension-inducing in that past enactments must be embraced and doubted, accepted and rejected. One must be willing to live with such dissonance.

This leads to a final point regarding the theory-practice relationship: the art of theorizing and theory use. I suggest that we teach students to use the conceptual tools provided by organization sociology to generate insights instead of answers. Without pushing the semantic envelope too far, consider these distinctions. *Answers* suggest definitiveness, a one-size fits all, *insights* suggest the identification of clues to help address the challenges and provide solutions to one's specific organizational context. Highlighted in this distinction is the Platonic-Aristotelean, universal-particulars dilemma.

The art is in how the conceptual and theoretical insights generated by organization theory are used by leaders to address contextual particulars. It is seen in the ability of students to use these conceptual tools to sense-make and manage this context. While our programs appear to present students with a nice palette of colors, we are less effective in teaching students how to creatively use these colors to paint pictures. The palette of colors is the organization theory knowledge base (or the knowledge base of any content area). The use of colors in painting reflects one's ability to creatively combine, temper and synthesize to paint the desired picture. The art is not just in knowing what colors exist, nor is it in learning to paint-by-number. It is in knowing how to creatively combine and use these colors to paint pictures (Eisner, 2002). Inherent in this analogy is the difference between knowledge acquisition and the skillful use of this knowledge. We are far more effective in our preparation programs at teaching students what colors exists; we are less effective in teaching them how to creatively use these colors to address problems of practice.

Given the importance of organization theory to our field and the increased absence of a substantive organizational perspective from our dialogue, perhaps it is time to revisit how we conceptualize and package the organization theory component of our programs. It is rich literature that has much to offer. We would do well to find creative ways of sharing it with students.



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