Organizational Theory and the Study of Educational Leadership and School Improvement: Some Reflections

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Abstract: Although educational management and leadership have drawn the attention of numerous scholars during the field’s 130-year written history, scholars have concluded it has not consistently generated strong theory and rigorous empirical research that could improve educational practices in schools. In this article, I provide some reflections on the field’s scholarly directions, focusing primarily on the aftermath of the theory movement that took place during the 1950s and 1960s—and my initial encounters with organizational theory as a framework for improving the quality of research on schools, in particular, school leadership and its role in school improvement. The application of organizational theory in key scholarly articles of the period formed a concrete reference point in the field’s historical landscape to ground programmatic empirical inquiry since 1980, resulting in cumulative knowledge regarding the coordinating role of leadership in facilitating school improvement.

Historical traditions exert a powerful, but at times unacknowledged, influence on ways that scholars pursue framing, investigating, and solving important problems in a field (Kuhn, 1962). Examining scholarly progress in the field of educational administration has drawn the attention of numerous scholars during its 130-year history (e.g., Bossert, Rowan, Dwyer, & Lee, 1982; Boyan, 1988; Bridges, 1982; Culbertson, 1988; Donmoyer, 1999; Erickson, 1967; Getzels, 1952; Hallinger, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hoy, Astuto, & Forsyth, 1994; Immegart, 1977; Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1990; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Lapham, 1964; Moore, 1964; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Willower, 1987; Willower & Forsyth, 1999). Although the field has generated much scholarly interest, reviewers have generally concluded that it has not been characterized by rigorous empirical investigation and knowledge accumulation. Since the field’s scholarly genesis, writers have struggled to identify problems, methods of inquiry, and a knowledge base that could inform management and leadership practices in schools.

Perhaps because the problems researchers seek to understand are considerably more complex than in some other fields, scholarly directions in educational management and leadership have been more affected by changes in politics and societal values (e.g., efficiency, equity, accountability) than by sustained programmatic research to resolve a set of well-defined disciplinary problems. Historical examples of external policies that redefined educational practices included the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), which was later replaced by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990), A Nation at Risk (1983), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and Race to the Top (RTTT), which was part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Hence, historically, scholars in educational management and leadership faced the dilemma of producing sustained empirical inquiry about important educational problems within a political environment where the ways in which the problems were defined and solutions framed were constantly changing (e.g., Berliner
and prescriptions of former administrators, however, knowledge that could actually be used to improve educational efficiency (e.g., Payne, 1875, 1886; Taylor, 1895) the field's early decades as a means of improving educational practice eagerly embraced by educational progressives during the 1950s and 1960s the theory movement in pursuit of efficiency were derived from rigorous quantitative research methods, and the volume of its empirical studies. Griffiths and his colleagues (1964) described their effort as “operationalizing concepts, testing propositions, and developing theories based upon evidence” (p. 3). They contended that the integration of theory, research, and improved practice was possible because management was best viewed as a generic concept applicable to all types of formal organizations (Bidwell, 1965). Yet, prior to this time, no systematic study of schools as organizations had been conducted (Gross, 1956). The results of this shift in scholarly orientation were expected to unify the field’s fragmentary, and largely non-empirical, scholarly efforts to create a comprehensive body of knowledge that could be applied to problems of educational practice (Griffiths, Carlson, Culbertson, & Lonsdale, 1964). Even if some contemporaries expressed reservations about the application of strict scientific models and quantitative methods to derive practical administrative actions within educational settings (Gross, 1964; Haskew, 1964), as Haskew concluded, empirical investigation represented a divergent, but little-used, method in a field that had been “almost solely dependent upon folklore and revelation” (p. 339).

The goal of the theory movement was to make educational administration a field of scientific study by developing its conceptual frameworks, the rigor of its research methods, and the volume of its empirical studies. Griffiths and his colleagues (1964) described their effort as “operationalizing concepts, testing propositions, and developing theories based upon evidence” (p. 3). They contended that the integration of theory, research, and improved practice was possible because management was best viewed as a generic concept applicable to all types of formal organizations (Bidwell, 1965). Yet, prior to this time, no systematic study of schools as organizations had been conducted (Gross, 1956). The results of this shift in scholarly orientation were expected to unify the field’s fragmentary, and largely non-empirical, scholarly efforts to create a comprehensive body of knowledge that could be applied to problems of educational practice (Griffiths, Carlson, Culbertson, & Lonsdale, 1964). Even if some contemporaries expressed reservations about the application of strict scientific models and quantitative methods to derive practical administrative actions within educational settings (Gross, 1964; Haskew, 1964), as Haskew concluded, empirical investigation represented a divergent, but little-used, method in a field that had been “almost solely dependent upon folklore and revelation” (p. 339).

The theory movement formed the dominant mode of inquiry in the field as it matured during the 1960s and 1970s. The promise of a scientific knowledge base derived from rigorous quantitative research methods, however, never fully materialized. During the two decades following the theory movement’s introduction, its intellectual underpinnings, methods of inquiry, and utility for improving practices were harshly criticized within the scholarly community (e.g., Bates, 1980; Foster, 1980; Greenfield, 1978; 1980). In its aftermath, serious divisions among scholars emerged regarding whether the theory movement had given too much emphasis to particular ways of looking at the field’s key problems, its methods of inquiry, and its proposed solutions—some even suggesting it had led the field down the wrong road. In one influential review, Bridges (1982) characterized the accumulated research on school administrators following the theory movement (1967-1980) as “the more things change, the more they re-
main the same” (p. 24). He chastised the existing research as “intellectual random events” (p. 22), concluding “there is no compelling evidence to suggest that a major theoretical issue or practical problem relating to school administrators has been resolved by those toiling in the intellectual vineyards since 1967” (p. 25).

The prolonged criticism of theory, method, and ends within the field notwithstanding, however, it is clear that programmatic empirical inquiry in the period since 1980 has resulted in cumulative knowledge in at least certain subfields of educational administration—one being the role of leadership in facilitating school improvement. As Hallinger (2013) concluded, this trend has been marked by both an increase in the volume of research as well as more stringent demands for quality evidence about the extent and means by which leadership affects schools. There were several reasons for this more optimistic review of the accumulated research including growing concern internationally with the quality of education, increased interest in using research to inform policy regarding school accountability and improvement, and better methodological training of researchers.

**Organizational Theory and the Study of School Leadership**

We all begin our scholarly careers at some point in a field that is in a certain amount of stability and flux. I entered the field as a graduate student aiming to become a school administrator during the 1980s, somewhere between the field’s scholarly effort to describe what school administrators do during the school day (i.e., desk work, meetings, verbal exchanges, phone calls, campus tours, and monitoring teachers) (e.g., see Martin & Willower, 1981); their background, traits, and preferences (e.g., Sally, McPherson, & Bachr, 1979); their creative insubordination vis-à-vis the central office in large school districts (Crowson & Porter Gehrke, 1980) and some emerging calls for a shift in emphasis toward what they do that directly affected the quality of children’s schooling experiences. This latter call concerned the role of the school principal in coordinating and controlling the school’s instructional program and its impact on student learning (e.g., see Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Bridges, 1982; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). As Bossert and his colleagues (1982) described the state of research in educational management:

> However, aside from the standard educational administrator admonitions that describe what a good manager should do, the research and practice literatures do not present models that describe how certain management or leadership acts actually become translated into concrete activities which help children succeed in school. (p. 34)

This point was especially relevant to me, since as an elementary school teacher, I had an outstanding principal who was a mentor to me and, with his sponsorship and guidance, after completing my certification requirements I assumed I would also become a school principal.

We all likely remember that particular article or two during graduate school that seemed to speak specifically to us in terms of how to conceptualize and study an important problem in the field. For me, the Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982) article on the instructional management role of the principal was an exemplar because it focused attention less on the work routines and preferences of individual school administrators and more on the features of schools as formal and informal organizations which provide structures and conditions that principals might coordinate to enhance student learning. I came to see the Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee argument as rooted in the application of organizational theory to understand the structure of schools and its impact on the processes of schooling. I remember one of our professors telling us, “The strongest theory for understanding schools is from sociology” and, consequently, in the same academic quarter, I also encountered Charles Bidwell’s (1965) chapter, “The School as a Formal Organization.”

Whereas the Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982) article dealt directly with the principal’s role within the structure and processes of the school, Bidwell’s chapter identified the dimensions of a broad organizational framework for describing and studying school systems. After explicating this conceptual framework and its key propositions, he proposed a research agenda that would be concerned with the actual functioning of schools and school systems in order to identify the complex set of variables which bear on their operation. This chapter is still an excellent read today, 50 years after it was published, and I recommend it to those who have not encountered it yet—I referred to it again recently in thinking about organizational tensions underlying current federal teacher evaluation policy as touted in the Race to the Top initiative. For me, Bidwell (1965) provided a structure and a language for describing and making sense of what goes on in class-
rooms, schools, and school districts. His thesis was that the functioning of the school system could be best understood as the outcome of complex interactions between the environment of the surrounding community and the school system’s structural arrangements, the attitudes and orientations of staff and board members, and its recruitment processes to organizational roles.

Bidwell (1965) illuminated a basic organizational dilemma between the instructional role of individual teachers in meeting differential student needs in the classroom and the overall responsibility for the school and district to deliver its collective instructional program in a relatively uniform manner. Regarding individual teachers, as he argued:

The problem of dealing with variability in student abilities and accomplishments, during a school year, thus is vested in the classroom teacher, and one important component of his professional skill is ability to handle day-to-day fluctuations in the response to instruction by individual students and collectively by the classroom group. (p. 975)

In terms of the overall school and school district, however, Bidwell reasoned that a different organizational responsibility existed in moving large age-grade cohorts through a sequenced system of instructional experiences with some uniform expectations for educational attainment:

Thus, the temporal division of labor is tied to the age-grade placement of students.... Students are assigned as class or grade units to members of the teaching staff.... This close correspondence of school grades and age-grade...[requires] that students must be moved through the system in batches and cannot be assigned to school grades individually on the basis of achievement. (p. 974)

This dichotomy regarding individual differences in achievement within classrooms and age-grade collective achievement expectations resulted in the necessity for administrators to grant teacher autonomy within their classrooms, which created a certain amount of structural looseness. Teachers, often working in relative isolation, developed broad discretionary power for applying the curriculum during the period of time students are assigned to them. In contrast, school principals and school district administrators faced the challenge of coordinating student academic outcomes sequentially in the interests of sequence and uniformity, not only spatially dispersed, but also structurally discrete and relatively independent subunits such as classrooms and schools. Bidwell identified principals’ key role in the middle of school systems in terms of selecting and assigning teachers to classrooms and students, as well as having the responsibility to ensure standards of academic achievement were met for the promotion of students from grade to grade through the school.

As I thought about my experiences as a teacher, it seemed to me principals made at least two important decisions regarding the instructional staff. The first was the initial hiring of teachers, which provided them with some control over the orientations and competence of the teaching staff; and the second was their assignment to courses, grade levels, and groups of students each year, which facilitated possible adjustments in curriculum implementation and teaching procedures as they occurred in separate classrooms based on information collected from various sources about individual teacher and student performance. My observation was that for many students, these placement decisions were consequential in terms of their movement through various combinations of peers and teachers within the school over several years—an issue in which, after I decided to extend my graduate studies, eventually became the focus of my dissertation.

As Bidwell (1965) argued, both the temporal division of labor and the structural looseness of school systems reinforced the professional basis of school-system activities—the necessary professional discretion provided to teachers and school subunits to determine what and how educational services should be delivered—balanced against the necessity of the academic product produced in each classroom and school to be uniform and routinized with respect to the next stage of students’ educational careers. He referred to this first key task of school systems as the coordination of the instructional activities of classroom teachers and individual school units in such a way as to maximize the sequential articulation of these activities and ensure reasonable uniformity of outcomes. He reasoned that because “...most students remain in school systems for periods of 10 to 12 years, the coordination of educational activities so that they are coherent and sequential moves more and more to the center of school-system administration” (p. 975).

Bidwell (1965) suggested this necessary task was likely best accomplished through interweaving staff orientations with professional norms and social policies to
maximize their commitment through collaboration rather than through establishing rules and procedures aimed at restricting teachers’ discretionary autonomy in the classroom. I have recently considered this latter point in terms of attempting to describe strategic leadership efforts focused on the coordination of the work of individual teachers with the goal of increasing schools’ capacity for improving instructional practices in ways that increase student learning. This focus on strategic within-school action contrasts sharply with an externally imposed approach to personnel evaluation as a policy lever for improving schools. As Bidwell described this tension:

Variability across students in classrooms and in individual schools calls for flexibility in the choice of the content and methods of instruction. The isolation of classrooms permits the development of intensive teacher-student relations, while the autonomy of classroom teachers and individual schools resulting from the looseness of school-system structures permits variation in teachers’ responses to student performance and flexible decisions but individual teachers and school facilities. But, as noted, the autonomy of these subunits of school systems is the chief structural source of difficulties of coordination. At both the system-wide and individual school levels, then, coordination resolves itself into two tasks, the reinforcement of the official component of the teacher’s role and the focusing of the commitments of teachers as professionals on the goals and policies of the system. (p. 1013)

He concluded that this dilemma led school leaders in the direction of recognizing the professionalization of teaching staffs and building collegial interactions between administrators and teachers in terms of the sequence of instruction and student academic outcomes, rather than emphasizing a reward-versus sanction approach that constrains teacher and student performance in the classroom.

The contrasting second task Bidwell (1965) emphasized was that school systems must gain (and maintain) some latitude with respect to their public constituency (e.g., board, parents) for exercising professional judgment regarding the kinds of educational outcomes that best serve students and the procedures that are best adapted to these outcomes. I view both of these school system tasks as contested space today, given more diverse demands for increased local educational options (e.g., choice, vouchers, charter schools) in recent decades, as well as current efforts to implement national “common core” curricular standards and federal prescriptions for required test-score evaluation of principals and teachers stemming from RTTT. Regarding these latter national efforts, however, there is little actual empirical evidence documenting their relevance to school improvement (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012; Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013).

Studying Organizational Changes and School Improvement

It is clear that the bureaucratization of school administration in non-instructional activities dominated much of the research on school administration into the late 20th Century. In part, this can be attributed to the increasing scale and complexity of school districts (e.g., Crowson & Porter-Gehrie, 1980). At the same time, instructional practices and processes for moving students through schooling (i.e., instructional periods, age-grade cohorts, single-subject instruction in middle and high school) remained relatively stable and unaffected despite periods of considerable societal political and social turmoil (Cuban, 1990). As I reflect back on the calls for more theoretically-informed research stemming from the theory movement, Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee’s (1982) article on the organizational basis for principal effects and Bidwell’s (1965) chapter on schools as organizations suggested important concepts that formed the basis for much of my research on schooling.

First was the concept that schooling took place within a multilevel educational system (e.g., classrooms within schools, schools within districts, districts within states). This suggested different bases of authority within states, school systems, and schools related to bureaucratic office, public trust and accountability, and workplace collegiality—in combination, the structural looseness of these different layers provided challenges for school leaders in terms of coordinating external demands (e.g., varied initiatives and goals of states and districts, testing and accountability measures) and internal school actions to meet student learning needs (e.g., resource allocation, curricular alignment and implementation, observation and evaluation of individual teachers) as they progressed through a series of years within a school and school district. Second, the multilevel nature of educational systems and the potential of different organizational units to gate-keep various strategic...
As a result, increased attention has focused on educational skills students need in tomorrow's workplaces. In educational terms, this shift in desired student outcomes unfolds, work their ways through semi-autonomous educational structures, and perhaps reach their intended targets.

Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982) drew attention to the causal ordering of variables in describing leadership and school processes and the limitations of cross-sectional studies of these relationships:

Although it is thought that strong instructional leadership facilitates school success, it is equally plausible that the perceptions of strong leadership result from the process of becoming a successful school. The “black box” and correlational approaches of most of these studies obscure the causes and effects of school structures. (p. 36)

This provided an important theoretical post for our early research to test their proposed model positing indirect effects of leadership on school academic outcomes through mediating instructional practice and school climate constructs (Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990) and subsequent research to assess the impact of strategic changes that school personnel make in educational practices to improve student learning in response to changing external conditions (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 2011). This latter study incorporated temporal relations more directly to identify latent classes of elementary schools within a state educational system differentiated by their patterns of changes in leadership, educational processes, and student outcomes.

As America's global standing educationally has slipped over the past two decades, increased public concern exists regarding the state of K-12 and postsecondary education with respect to student attainment. The image of the stability of the formal, bureaucratic organization against external demands has given way to different sorts of workplace design and decision making in dealing with “wicked and messy” problems (Conklin & Well, 1997)—highly unpredictable, and requiring insight, innovation, and collaboration to solve due to their complex nature—a common one being the shift in one product generation to the next in any industry. In educational terms, this shift in desired student outcomes requires a corresponding change in the type of educational skills students need in tomorrow’s workplace. As a result, increased attention has focused on schools as the target for educational improvement and, more specifically, on teachers regarding differences in their instructional skills in enhancing student learning.

Collective international research has begun to conceptualize school improvement as a journey and to propose that the challenges which schools face in changing their practices are determined, in part, by their location in that journey. Empirical studies have begun to develop explicit links between the context of schools and patterns of successful leadership practice (e.g., Day, Sammons, Leithwood, Hopkins, Harris, Gu, & Brown, 2010; Jackson, 2000; Mulford & Silins, 2009)—that is, the environmental and organizational conditions that moderate the school’s educational capacity for improving student learning. Phil Hallinger and I (2011) have referred to school improvement as “a process that involves change in the state of the organization over time” (p. 230)—a definition which implies that the empirical study of leadership’s contribution to school improvement requires dynamic models that take into account changing relationships among relevant organizational processes over time (Blalock, 1970; Williams & Podsakoff, 1989).

This suggests the possibility of examining leadership in facilitating school improvement as an adaptive process, that is, where leaders may both propose changes and also react to changing environmental conditions and organizational processes over time. In this more dynamic view of school improvement, a reciprocal-influence conceptualization becomes one possible analytic lens. To illustrate, school leadership may initiate changes in teacher work structures, management processes, or curriculum coordination. Changes in these conditions may subsequently produce effects on leadership behavior, as well as changes in mediating classroom teaching and learning processes and, ultimately, in distal outcomes such as student learning—in total, these may describe a mutually reinforcing system (Heck & Hallinger, 2010).

This view is consistent with the notion that school improvement is more of a journey than a simple series of events (e.g., moving from “non-effective” to effective) and that leadership, as an organizational process rather than individual role (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995), plays a key part in facilitating the improvement process strategically by building collaboration, commitment, and instructional capacity that can self-sustain the fluid participation of individuals in solving persistent problems that inhibit growth in student learning. School
leadership exists at the center of heterogeneous demands from the community, parents, district office, as well as the relative divergent or convergent goals, values, and informal networks of the teaching staff. This heterogeneity suggests the need for adaptive organizational behavior in response to changing internal and external contingencies. We noted that reciprocal-influence models could provide a means to frame and investigate questions about whether proposed organizational process relationships are mutually reinforcing over time \((A \leftrightarrow B)\), rather than solely unidirectional \((A \rightarrow B)\). This conceptualization provides a means to assess changing demands, institutional adaptations, and results as they unfold over time. Our initial results suggested that reciprocal interaction entails a clear assumption that behavioral response and organizational adaptation unfold over a period of several years. Overall, we are enthusiastic about the potential that reciprocal influence models offer for the study of external demands, leadership response, change in organizational routines, and school improvement. We encourage other researchers working in this area of school leadership research to explore the potential of these types of models as a means of clarifying and expanding our understanding of the relationship between school leadership and school improvement.

**Concluding Thoughts**

It is clear that over the past 30 years research has illuminated much about the nature of schools as organizations and the varied ways in which strategic leadership actions can facilitate changes in organizational processes (e.g., teacher working relationships, the quality of teaching and learning environments) that lead to improved student learning. Rather than framing school principals as heroic agents of change, as they often were portrayed in the early school effectiveness literature, the current perspective offers a path towards the study of school leadership as an adaptive process that can both facilitate the strategic implementation of new programs resulting from external demands for improvement as well as respond to unfolding school improvement practices and results. A deeper concern in my view is the current political turmoil regarding the purposes of public education, efforts aimed at the implementation of a national common core curriculum and assessments of student progress, and the narrowing of states’ collective approach to the evaluation of principals and teachers required under RTTT—without adequate programmatic research that demonstrates the relevance of such strategic efforts in actually producing desired educational improvement. Concurrently, there has been a lack of scholarly response to this simplified and flawed means of pursuing educational reform.

In the aftermath of the theory movement, we may query whether there is a role for organizational theory to play in understanding the interplay between static and dynamic aspects of school organizational structures, existing educational routines, and necessary changes in what and how student learn. Organizational theory can help us to understand the basis for, and to reduce, the current tension surrounding policy-imposed accountability of individual teachers for year-to-year gains in student learning resulting from value-added evaluation models in the face of legitimate concerns regarding their validity, accuracy, and equity in capturing actual differences in teacher skills. Research suggests teaching is complex behavior and, while there is considerable accumulated evidence on aspects of teaching that influence student learning (e.g., Seidel & Shavelson, 2007), there is limited existing evidence regarding the optimal mix of instructional strategies, skills, and behavior that might actually account for observed differences in student learning in high-stakes assessment. Teachers have little trust in decontextualized external evaluations of their day-to-day work, and decades of research on school leaders has shown little inclination on their part to engage in this type of refined statistical evaluation of teachers’ effectiveness in enhancing student learning, or in conducting observations focused on teachers’ instructional adaptations to differences in student learning needs and academic progress, especially as it relates to making high-stakes employment decisions (Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013).

As organizational theorists remind us, there are powerful organizational explanations why principals have not and do not exercise tight control over teachers, especially in the domain of classroom instruction. In short, teachers work within a school environment of dynamic and complex interests and demands for performance, unsure of their technical footing (Bidwell, 2001), while school administrators must earn the trust and support of teachers to ensure that the school functions smoothly. Research suggests school leaders will be more likely to impact instructional quality positively if they allocate their direct efforts with teachers into facilitative channels, such as developing professionalism and building instructional capacity, enhancing teamwork, and sharing responsibility for results (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Explicating the relationships between the work of teachers and principals that lead to school im-
Improvement within a less “punishment-based” view of evaluation (i.e., for hiring, firing, and increases in pay) would be one practical line of needed research that would follow from our understanding of the nature of schools as organizations and the strategic and sustained leadership action required to change them in ways that lead to improved student learning.

References


