

**SCHOOL LEADERSHIP MAKES A DIFFERENCE: A
SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC
PLANNING AND INTEGRATING REALMS OF MEANING INTO
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

The leader of the school with an embraced philosophy and understanding of the six realms of meaning (*Symbolics, Empirics, Esthetics, Synnoetics, Ethics and Synoptics*) can lead the educational system of the school towards the direction of celebrating the success of the children attending the school. Kritsonis states: “World-Wide, people are aware of the need for the most effective possible educational system if we are to meet the challenges and demands of life in a highly precarious and rapidly changing world” (2007,p.vii).

Introduction

The results of a successful strategic plan require that all stakeholders are moving in a constructive direction. Many school leaders fail in this important task. Parental involvement is one of the key areas where most schools face challenge. Facing this challenge, leaders of the school must strategically plan towards enhancement of the holistic educational system by knowing and understanding each component of the realms of meaning written by Dr. Kritsonis. For us to fix today's educational problems, we must deeply analyze the problems of the past system and implement a postmodern theory into today's educational system. Educational leaders must escape from their fear to bring change and take it as a challenge to fix the educational system but it does require the passion for change, meeting the needs of all stakeholders of the school.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss how school leaders' understanding of the six realms of meaning (Kritsonis, 2007) can be strategically integrated in solving the educational problems of today and improving the schools of tomorrow. Dr. Fenwick W. English (2003) has described how postmodernism can change the educational system today. School administrators must believe in postmodernism theory to bring change in the educational system.

Values of Educational Leader

What are values and where do they come from? How do our values make a difference in the educational system today? In the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007), Dr. Kritsonis highlights traits for developing a person holistically. According to him,

A person should be skilled in the use of speech, symbol, and gesture (symbolics), factually well informed (empirics), capable of creating and appreciating objects of esthetic significance (esthetics), endowed with a rich and disciplined life in relation to self and others (synnoetics), able to make wise decisions and to judge between right and wrong (ethics), and possessed of integral outlook (synoptics). (Kritsonis, 2007, p.15)

Educational leaders have an enormous responsibility to carry on the vision of the school. According to Haydon (2007),

Educational leadership today promotes critical thought and constructive analysis about underlying values that involve aims and moral purpose in education; individual qualities in educational leadership, vision in education, school ethos and culture, and schools as an educational communities. (p.1)

Creating a road map of the school's strategic plan helps educational leaders increase parental involvement. A lack of strategic planning can cause financial loss for the school. Brain and Reid (2003), stated: "The more expansive the view of parental involvement, the greater the costs in running such projects and, hence, particularly in poor areas, the less chance of them is being sustainable" (p. 293). Parents are expected to take ownership of different programs in schools. Parents are responsible for the children's attendance, behavior and willingness to learn in schools and provide support to schools.

Brain and Reid stated, "Parental involvement is seen as a mechanism for simultaneously raising standards, developing new partnerships between schools and parents in the local community and promoting social inclusion" (2003, p. 291). Parents and teachers are full partners in raising the children today. McNamara (2000) mentioned that the current labor government has placed a renewed emphasis involving parents as active partners in the production of educated children (McNamara, Hustler, Stronach, Rodrigo, Bresford, & Botcherby, 2000, p. 474). Postmodernism guides educational leaders to use innovative and creative ways to improve the educational system. Educational leaders with the postmodernistic approach can take the school so many years a head, where all students are successful and schools are technologically advanced. According to English (2003),

Postmodernism is about constructing a way of looking at the world of ideas, concepts and systems of thought through the historicity of context and the shifting nature of linguistic meaning and symbols as they are manifested in discursive practices which run through educational administration and related fields. (p.3)

Educational leaders that are the true role models of the stakeholders of the school enforce epistemological and axiological framework; they believe in the positive change of the school's educational system.

Strategic Planning for Educational Leaders

For educational leaders to be successful at creating effective schools where all stakeholders are highly involved in attainment of the school's vision, the educational leader needs to know how to apply steps of strategic planning in enforcing the vision of the school to all stakeholders. According to the Center of Organizational Development and Leadership (2007), there are six planning phases:

1. Mission, Vision, and Values,
2. Environmental Scan,
3. Goals,
4. Strategies and Action Plans,
5. Plan Creation, and
6. Outcomes and Achievements. (pp. 3-4)

Each step of strategic planning relates directly and indirectly to the six realms of meaning. Educational leaders usually get in their comfort zone and never think beyond changing the system of the school. They have a fear to align everyone's vision and as they see obstacles, educational leaders stop and continue operating in their comfort zone.

English (2003) states, "The mental baggage of modernism is represented in the way conceives of itself as a compelling singularity: total, final and absolute" (p. 62). School administrators' tunnel vision directs them to never think beyond modernism, they find everything absolute and seldom make any changes. English (2003) said, "Postmodernism is not so much interested in the answers as the questions" (p. 4). We have to ask questions such as where we went wrong, and seek solutions instead of continuing to play the blame game.

The First Realm: Symbolics

Symbolics play a major role in the development and improvement of the educational programs. Dr. Kritsonis states: "The first realm, symbolics, comprises ordinary language, mathematics and various types of nondiscursive symbolic forms, such as gestures, rituals, rhythmic patterns, and the like" (Kritsonis, 2007, p.11). This realm focuses on the key component that creates a successful organization. One of the areas that it focuses on is communication. Effective communication is one of the areas that are also highly emphasized in the strategic planning. According to the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership (2007), "Without careful communication, planning organizational change is likely to meet with resistance by colleagues. Successful communication requires attention to each group likely to be affected by the planning process and the plan's goals" (p.5). This realm is the essential component of the educational system. Leaders of the school must know how to effectively communicate with all stakeholders of the school. Symbolics addresses communication instruments, which can be utilized for conferences and professional development for educators. Educational leaders with the vision of involving parents and stakeholders of the school must know the power of communication effectively through different sources and how it can bring people towards the mission of the school. Electronic communication through electronically such as websites, emails, automated phone messages, text messages and newsletters are excellent forms of communication. Leaders also need to know the power of written and oral communication and how it impacts people differently. Kritsonis stated, "Ordinary language is the forms of discourse employed in every day speech and writing" (2007, p.111). Educational leaders need to know the significance of using ordinary language defined by him. Dr. Kritsonis defined ordinary language, "It allows humans to communicate on a personal level. Many like to take a break from "shop talk" from time to time and become comfortable with associates" (2007, p.114). Educational leaders should learn to communicate effectively knowing when and where to use ordinary language. Dr. Kritsonis said, "The objective of using language is communication (2007, p. 114).

Language is a binding force in society. It is a means of establishing human relationship” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.116). Building, maintaining and sustaining relationship with people are highly important for educational leaders and meaningful relationships can be established with effective communication. Kritsonis said, “Perhaps the deepest of all human needs is to be understood and accepted by others” (2007, p.116). One of the biggest challenges of educational leaders is to gain parental support. To overcome such a challenge, strategic planning of an organization must be planned where the idea is to empower parents and gain their trust by involving them in the campus improvement meetings. According to Fisher (1994),

To increase parental involvement, Mount Cammel High School has adopted strategic-planning change model. Successful strategic plans are connected to school mission and core values, gain staff support, remain open to input from all parties, build trust and rapport among participants, ensure open communication with stakeholders, ensure high principal visibility and feedback systems, and consider successful efforts elsewhere. (pp. 69-74)

The Second Realm: Empirics

“The second realm empirics, includes the sciences of the physical world, of living things, and of man” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.12). This realm’s focus is on Science that deals with measurement. “These Sciences provide factual descriptions, generalizations, and theoretical formulations and explanations that are based upon observations and experimentation in the world of matter, life, mind and society” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.12). Leaders must take measures based on the data that is available before making decisions. According to Center for Organizational Development and Leadership (2007),

Ongoing attention to assessment is necessary to monitor a plan’s progress and assess its outcomes. This appraisal provides guidance for developing preplanning strategies, monitoring the planning process, and judging whether a plan’s activities and strategies are successful in fulfilling the organization’s goals. (p.5)

Effective principals of the school continuously assess and evaluate different programs. Principals use different evaluation tools that are available to evaluate teachers’ competency in different areas and provide support as needed. One example is the Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS). The professional communication domain helps principals measure and assess the effectiveness of parent teacher communication. Reviewing teachers’ parent contact logs also helps principals track the teacher’s interaction with the parents. This is one way to assess parents’ involvement and its impact on the students’ achievement. Principals can encourage teachers to effectively communicate with parents and provide professional development on communication strategies to bring high parental involvement.

The Third Realm: Esthetics

The third realm, esthetics, contains the various arts, such as music, the visual arts, the arts of movement and literature” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.12). Arts and music are excellent ways to develop the children. Dr. Kritsonis said, “Humans teach their children the arts to help them achieve what we consider a well rounded education” (2007, p.284). School leaders see the beauty of education in their own ways just like teachers see the beauty in their own ways. The most important idea is to recognize that beauty exists in every child. Before making any decisions about the school, passionate educational leaders keep in mind the children’s beautiful faces, prior to finalizing decisions. In other words, all decisions should be made for the benefit of the children and prior to making a final decision, one should ask a question: “How this decision will impact the students?” Principals need to strategically develop the talents within the faculty and staff. Every member of the school has the talent and can be discovered by the leader of the school. Principals must strategically identify the talent within the faculty and staff. Transformational leaders develop and identify the teachers’ talent and empower them to apply those talents and skills in the improvement of the school. According to Center for Organizational Development and Leadership (2007), “Collaborator and Beneficiaries- Identifying critical stakeholders with particular attention to the expectation for the plan’s development and implementation is of major importance” (p.3). Identifying not only teachers’ talents but also any stakeholders of the school can help play a vital role in the improvement of the school.

The Fourth Realm: Synnoetics

“The fourth realm, synnoetics, embraces what Michael Polany calls “personal knowledge” and Martin Buber the “I-Though” relation” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.12). This realm emphasizes on things that are personal and important to a person. Synnoetics signifies “relational insight” or “direct awareness” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.12). It is important that educators strive to keep learning and discovering strategies to personally motivate students. The students will be successful once this thought process is developed and personally meaningful to the educators.

The Fifth Realm: Ethics

“The fifth realm, ethics, includes moral meanings that express obligation rather than fact, perceptual form, or awareness of relation” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.13). Ethics play an important role in the educational system. Unethical behavior practiced by the members of the school can destroy the educational system and school’s performance. Members of the school community following poor ethical standards usually have low productivity. Group dynamics suffers and communication becomes

more elusive and complex. The result is the decline in the schools' environment. Proper ethical behavior will have positive effects on the educational system.

Members who follow high ethical standards increase their productivity. Group dynamics and communication improve and the risk in the failure of the school decreases. Ethics must be enforced by educational leaders in every school system because it creates a positive environment and will lessen negativity within the school. It builds the structures in the school and holds each member accountable. Educational leaders must follow ethics and enforce ethics at work through providing trainings for the staff. Enforcing collaboration among staff and brainstorming ideas in the faculty meetings helps promote high professionalism at work where the members of the school follow all rules, policies and procedures. This is one way to achieve success collaboratively.

Morality must be enforced in policies and procedures. "Morality has to do with personal conduct that is based on free, responsible deliberate decision" (Kritsonis, 2007, p.13). Educational leaders must hold high ethical standards for themselves and for the rest of the stakeholders of the school. They should hold high expectations for all stakeholders to demonstrate high moral standards. According to Kritsonis (2007),

The good life consists in the realization of meanings, in all of the realms: in the ability to communicate intelligibly and forcefully, to organize the experience of sense into significant generalizations and theories with predictive power, to express the inner life in moving esthetic constructions, to relate with others and with oneself in acceptance and love, to act with deliberate responsibility, and to coordinate these meanings into an integrated vision and commitment. (p. 442)

All employees must be adhering to hold high ethical standards. The strategic planning approach should provide a blue print for establishing ethical standards for the school. The leader of the school must be able to effectively communicate and emphasize to the stakeholders of high ethical standards that the school holds. Values are established in creating an organizing the plan. "Reviewing the organization's guiding principles as a useful reference point for planning, especially when determining how to allocate resources and measure achievements" (Center for Organizational Development and Leadership, 2007, p.3).

The Sixth Realm: Synoptics

"The sixth realm, synoptics, refers to meanings that are comprehensively integrative. This realm includes history, religion, and philosophy" (Kritsonis, 2007, p.13). All of these areas are important to uphold one's ethical and moral level of understanding. History, religion and philosophy shape our understanding of life. Kritsonis said, "Of all the branches of philosophy the two which are the most comprehensive in scope and hence the primary basis for synoptic function of philosophy as a whole are the theory of knowledge (or epistemology) and

metaphysics” (Kritsonis, 2007, pp. 546-547). Educational leaders must have an extensive knowledge (epistemology) and metaphysics’ understanding to help shape the school community’s vision. History allows the educational leaders to interpret the past events with the current, to build the effective learning community, and to help plan accordingly for the improvement of the school. Effective educational leaders continuously assess and analyze data from the past to the present. “The educational leaders can work to a largely influence synoptics while developing the Campus Improvement Plan and heavily define the school’s culture” (Cloud & Kritsonis, 2006, p.7).

Educational leaders must be highly involved in the planning of the Campus Improvement Plan working closely with all stakeholders of the school, to modify and improve programs, which did not support the school’s vision and mission. The Campus Improvement Plan should focus on ways to improve parental involvement of the school.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, there are many deficiencies in our educational system today. Facing these deficiencies require educational leaders’ deep understanding of the problems to help improve schools. Educational leaders must strategically plan by incorporating six realms of meaning recommended by Dr. Kritsonis to solve educational problems. Issues such as lack of student motivation, parental involvement, and unaligned vision of the stakeholders can all be aligned with the postmodernistic approach emphasized by Dr. Fenwick English, but it takes the strong and effective leader’s belief in applying the steps of strategic planning and integrated realms of meaning into school improvement.

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