DOCUMENT RESUME

ABSTRACT
                This paper explores the concept of critical thinking
as it applies to school administrators and offers ideas for
incorporating it into their operative skills. Following a review of
pertinent literature, recommendations are made to: (1) develop an
assessment process in educational administration programs to ensure
that future school leaders have a capacity for critical thinking; and
(2) redesign general education instruction at the college level. The
need to challenge the critical thinking skills of administrators is
based on the belief that principals can made a difference only if
they abandon the "cookbook mentality" whereby administrators want to
be able to have an answer to every problem faced rather than
processing the information to make valid and responsible individual
decisions. The ability to apply critical thinking to the school
setting is the essence of improving instructional leadership and
academic performance. Educational administration must move from the
cookbook mentality to one that fosters critical thinking. (Contains
19 references.) (LMI)

CRITICAL THINKING FOR ADMINISTRATORS:

THE COOKBOOK MENTALITY SYNDROME

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ABSTRACT

We in school administrator preparation programs have a problem. Our students have a cookbook mentality when it comes to the issue of critical thinking for themselves. They can somewhat explain why critical thinking skills are needed by the students in our k-12 schools but they seem unable to apply it to themselves. What is particularly disturbing is that preparation programs requiring tiers of certification contain students who as beginning administrators have developed "thinking paralysis."

INTRODUCTION

Student A is in his first year as an elementary principal. During a typical day one of his teachers came to his office and while discussing her class began to cry. Later, when he related this story in an advanced administration class, it becomes clear that he did not know what to do with the crying teacher. So he asks the professor, "What am I supposed to do?"

Student B is in her second year as a secondary administrator. One day a parent came to her office complaining about the teaching ability of a math teacher. The parent demanded that the principal "straighten out the teacher" so that the child can learn. Again, the practicing administrator asks the professor, "What am I supposed to do?"

The anticipation seems to be that professors should supply the students with a cookbook that allows the student to turn to page 73 which contains a recipe for a crying teacher or to page 102 for a recipe on an upset parent, view the list of ingredients and determine the length of time necessary to cook the correct response. Then, as if by a magic recipe or at least a well-cooked process, the problem will be solved. The "cookbook mentality" has struck!

Do our students know how to think critically? Did we not teach critical thinking in our preparation programs? Did we assume that the students entering our program could or would do critical thinking upon completion of our program? Do we as providers of the preparation programs know why critical thinking is a key component in the characteristics of an effective school administrator? As Alderfer (1987) so precisely stated:

> Inadvertently, instructors "teach" students to explain the difficulties and dilemmas of human affairs in organizations by projecting onto others. People so taught are less likely to examine their own behavior and relationships as a means of dealing with situations they face (p. 217).

Do we want our students to think critically, or do we use the normative model of the teaching learning process? As Alderfer (1987) concludes:

> . . . the material to be learned . . . had the form of a mix of abstract generalizations and concrete applications. . . .The

task of the teacher was to transfer the material . . . into the minds of the students. The task of the student was to absorb b the material. The learning-teaching process succeeded to the degree that the teacher was able to transfer and the student was able to absorb the material (p. 216).

If this is the teaching technique predominantly used in educational administration programs. is it any wonder that our students cannot think for themselves?

Critical thinking by administrators

There has been considerable focus on the issue of critical thinking in our schools. The focus has been on how to teach critical thinking to our students and the role of the school administrator in this process. However, it appears that a major component of the critical thinking debate is totally missing. If the administrators of our schools do not. will not or cannot do critical thinking for themselves, how are they going to be able to make valid, responsible decisions on the instructional program and the educational future of our children? It is an unnerving feeling to realize that many of our administrators, especially beginning ones, operate on a "cookbook mentality" with regard to the decision making process. By "cookbook mentality," we mean that the school administrator wants to be able to have an answer for every problem faced rather than processing the information and making a valid, responsible decision for oneself. Getzels, Lipham and Campbell (1968) labeled this type of approach as administration by technology

"applying appropriate techniques to the solution of relevant practical problems" (p. 3). They go on to illustrate:

> The administrator is similarly concerned with the solution of practical problems, with reaching specific goals, with attaining certain ends. He too must know and apply rules, principles, and techniques; he also must follow an appropriate itinerary of getting from where he is to where he wants to be . . . It is maintained that for each practical problem facing the administrator there are certain techniques applicable to its solution. If he knows the techniques and follows the steps prescribed, he will solve the problem . . . The practical problem is: How can an administrator gain the confidence of his subordinates? The solution is given in fifteen rules . . . This prescriptive approach is not limited to narrow day-to-day problems but is applied also to issues of major policy . . . From this point of view, the improvement of administration depends on the discovery and communication of more effective techniques and prescriptions--the production of more expedient administrative itineraries, as it were. The successful administrator is one who knows and applies the techniques and prescriptions--who follows the itineraries (pp. 3-5).

The focus here is to explore the concept of critical theory and thinking as it applies to school administrators and ideas for incorporating it into the operational skills of those administrators.

Related Literature and Research

The related literature and research deals primarily with the teaching of critical thinking to students as mentioned previously. Collins (1991) addresses ways in which to help students think better in our schools. Trotter (1986) cautions administrators to be aware of bandwagon approaches in teaching children to think. Zenke (1985) discusses how school effectiveness can be improved by teaching thinking skills. The closest we come to a discussion of critical theory and thinking for administrators is a monograph on the importance of ethics for educational leaders (Kimbrough, 1985).

We need to give more attention to critical thinking skills for school administrators. As Maidment (1986) states, ". . . we challenge anyone to identify professionals who make more decisions that are *life-enhancing* than school principals . . . Obviously, it's the *quality* of those decisions that count" (p. 3). If we believe this to be true, then the quality of those decisions can only be obtained through the development of critical thinking skills.

The issue of critical thinking skills has been addressed in various manners. When asked what were the special characteristics of principals who are effective, John W. Gardner (1991) responded:

> I put judgment in action first. Judgment is the capacity to sort
> out a complex situation and come to the answer that proves to
> be right. But by judgment in action I mean judgment while
> people are shouting at you . . . judgment when the deadlines are

short and the stakes are high . . . the capacity to function under cross pressures (p. 3).

Lipham (1981) stated that "The principal must understand thoroughly the dimensions of decision making--whether the process is rational, nonrational, or, even at times irrational" (p. 11). Greenfield (1982, 17-18) adds that ". . . certain enduring characteristics of the role which research suggests are critical to effective performance . . . the ability to think and to exercise discretion in formulating action plans and decisions responding to the contingencies of a system in constant motion . . ." need to be addressed.

One note of caution needs to be sounded. Depending on the attitudes of the superintendent and the school board, critical thinking skills may not be nurtured or even encouraged if the outcomes conflict with their viewpoints. As Wayson (1988) states, "Even insiders are often disciplined if they make suggestions for correcting problems in the school" (p. 104).

Critical Thinking Defined

Ennis (1985) defined critical thinking as "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 54). If critical thinking is reflective in nature, then Schon (1983) went further to define

> . . . three types of reflective practice: reflection in action, reflection on action, and reflection while in action. The first, reflections in action, exists when the professional reflects about the problem rather than acting impulsively. The second, reflection on action, exists when the professional thinks critically about something that she has

already done. The third, reflection while in action,

suggests a condition in which the professional is on

'automatic pilot' with professional routines and engages in

critical inquiry about other things (p. 7).

It may be important to make a point regarding the issue of critical

thinking versus creative thinking skills. As Marzano, et al. (1988) pointed

out quite vividly,

people tend to view critical thinking as primarily evaluative

and creative thinking as primarily generative. But the two

types of thinking are not opposites: they complement each

other and even share many attributes . . . Critical thinkers

generate ways to test assertions; creative thinkers examine

newly generated thoughts to assess their validity and utility.

The difference is not of kind but of degree and emphasis (p.

17).

In reality, distinguishing clearly between them is impossible.

What Do We Do?

The need to incorporate critical theory into the preparation program

for school administrators requires more than adding an additional course to

the certification programs. It requires an assessment of those entering

educational administration programs in an endeavor to ensure that future

school leaders have the ability to think clearly and logically. The existing

literature can serve as a basis for developing such an assessment process,

but it also demands the willingness to move beyond existing parameters of our current programs.

One of the specific ways in which critical thinking can be addressed is found in Critical Thinking: Shaping the Mind of the 21st Century (1992):

One of the best places to start the process of redesigning instruction at the college level is in the general education program. General education courses should not merely transmit information, but should include significant amounts of critical reading, writing, speaking, and listening. To be effective, professors must do more than lecture. They must ask probing questions, stimulate students to think independently, listen carefully to what students say, discuss reasons and evidence, draw out implications and assumptions, seek examples, analogies, interdisciplinary connections and objections, raise and reason within multiple points of view, and be willing to play the devil's advocate. They must design classes so that students actively interact with each other as well as with the professor and text. They must set out definite intellectual standards that students can use to assess their own work in progress. They must establish means to verify that students are indeed assessing their own work (p. 21).

Theory versus Practice

Is this discussion about a new way of preparing future educational leaders or about the seemingly endless debate concerning the dichotomy

between theory and practice? Bennis (1987) concluded that

> This problem--how do we translate knowledge into action?--
> is both complex and deep, as well as chronically elusive.
> Perhaps this is why the question is either studiously avoided,
> or worse, written about in such a boring, monotonously
> shallow manner, uniformly ending up with bromides about
> "dire straits, " dilemmas, and resistances of all kinds . . .
> What I'm impressed with is not the reality of obstacles
> (which is self-evident) but the challenge, excitement, and
> promise of a theory of practice (p. 30).

Whether this dichotomy is between the discouraged practitioner, the hopeful theorist of the skeptic, educational administration is rapidly pursuing a usable body of knowledge which will enhance the ability of both practitioner and theorist. In fact, Kurt Lewin was preoccupied with the relationship between theory and practice: "The research worker can achieve this [creating a bridge between theory and practice] only if, as a result of a constant intense tension, he can keep both theory and reality fully within his field of vision" (p. iv).

The need to address critical thinking skills for administrators, especially beginning ones, is founded in our belief that the principal of the school can make a difference. As Blumberg & Greenfield (1980) stated, ". . . it takes a unique person to help give a school, first, an image of what it can be and, second, to provide the drive, support, and skills to make that

image approximate reality" (p. 12). We believe that person is the principal. As the United States Senate stated so eloquently in 1979:

> If a school is a vibrant, innovative, child-centered place; if it as a reputation for excellence in teaching; if students are performing to the best of their ability, one can almost always point to the principal's leadership as the key to success (p. 11).

Implications

The implication for the profession of educational administration is clear. As professors we must critically examine how we instruct and prepare our students for careers in educational administration. The implication is implicit also that professors of educational administration must themselves possess a knowledge of critical theory and be able to transmit that knowledge to the practitioners. We must move to a certification standard for future school leaders that includes a positive determination of their ability to understand critical theory and actively use it.

The profession of educational administration can no longer tolerate the certification of future school leaders who operate in the arena of decision making by the use of a "cookbook" for problem solving. As Getzels, Lipham and Campbell (1964) stated:

> The educational administrator who was aware of the context within which . . . decisions were being made, and who had an explicit framework (instead of a bagful of prescriptions and precedents) within which to work, was in a more strategic

position not only to understand what was going on but also to decide for himself [herself] rather than follow the crowd, ask someone, or just do nothing al all (p. 13).

The need for critical thinking skills by those in and those preparing to enter the profession requires more than a cursory agreement on its importance. The issue of critical theory and the ability to apply it to the school setting is the essence of improving inst uctional leadership and academic performance. The move must be from administrators with a "cookbook mentality" to school leaders with a foundation on critical theory and the ability to use it do conduct critical thinking for themselves.

Conclusions

Our conclusions are probably more questions than answers to this apparent dilemma. Is the problem indigenous to all education? Is this a more common problem in educational administration? Have we, as professors, failed our students? Are our students not throughly prepared, both mentally and emotionally for the trials of administration? Do potential administrators see a need to use critical thinking skills? Are there other possibilities? The questions are easy. For us the answers are complex and involve much more study and research.

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