



THE EDUCATIONAL
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Responsible Leadership

by Robert J. Starratt

The world in which educational leaders operate is changing—from one dominated by national interests to one of a global community. In this transition, schools must prepare the present generation of young people to participate as active citizens of the global community, rather than as spectators or tourists. Schools face major challenges as they prepare their charges for a world which requires (a) agreements among nations to share in managing the earth's fragile ecology; (b) sharing ideas on human, cultural, and economic capital and on manufacturing and medical technologies to improve the quality of life for all people; and (c) guarantees of global peace and security. Schools need to target their curriculum toward preparing youngsters with the desperately needed understandings, perspectives, and skills this global transition will demand. A different kind of school leader will be required—a multidimensional leader that understands the various dimensions of the learning tasks which schools must cultivate. In turn, these leaders must have a moral vision of what is required of them and of the whole community. A moral vision of taking proactive responsibility for making this kind of learning a reality is required.

This paper outlines a framework for moral educational leadership in an effort to get beyond the traditional ethical analyses of educational administration (Strike, Haller, and Soltis 1998; Maxcy 2002) and recent attempts to open up more synthetic and late modern perspectives (Starratt 1991; Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001). This paper attempts to identify a deeper substratum of ethical issues at the core of the educating process which calls forth specific, proactive responsibilities for educational leaders. By illuminating the do-

mains of the ethical enactment of leadership responsibility, I hope to provide a vocabulary for practitioners to use in describing their experiences as they face the leadership challenges in their schools.

When the terrain of educational leaders acting ethically is explored, various domains of ethical responsibility are found. The term “domain” is used to refer to a constructed cluster of ethical concerns around common themes or issues that can be found in educational leaders’ work. There are, I believe, five domains of responsibility that are central to educational leadership:

- Responsibility as a human being
- Responsibility as a citizen and public servant
- Responsibility as an educator
- Responsibility as an educational administrator
- Responsibility as an educational leader

Responsibility as a Human Being

The first and most basic domain of ethical responsibility is as a human being. In this domain, an educational leader considers the humanly ethical thing to do, taking into account the intrinsic dignity and inviolability of the other person. For example, when one is being annoyed by a mosquito, one simply slaps it and kills the annoyance. When one is being annoyed by another human being, such behavior is ethically objectionable. There are other, more humanly appropriate ways to respond to the annoying person.

When a chair is in our way, we pick it up and move it to the side; when a person is blocking our way, we find a more humanly acceptable way of opening up a passageway. If your spouse overcooks the noodles, there may or may not be an appropriately human way to respond; a lot depends on the circumstances that preceded the overcooking. In other words, human beings have to observe considerable delicacy and diplomacy in dealing with one another, because there is a basic level of respect and dignity

with which human beings deserve to be treated. To violate that respect—to deny people their dignity—is to violate their humanity, which is an ethical violation.

If educators violate the rights and trust of people in the school, they are not only breaking the law, but they also are acting unethically in their role of citizen and public servant.

The Buddha taught that the defining quality of human beings is compassion. Human beings exercise humanity in their compassionate response to the propensity of human beings to make messes. Though we have heroic aspirations and high ideals, we often fall short. We forget birthdays, we act selfishly, we misinterpret others’ motives, we explode in anger, and we stereotype and ridicule strangers. In other words, all hu-

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man beings often need forgiveness and compassion, because despite good intentions, we continue to miss the mark. On the other hand, human beings are often at their best in working through messes. The best marriages are those where the two partners work with the shortcomings of one another and still find much to love. On the human level, therefore, being ethical means working with the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, and the heroic and prosaic side of any and all human beings, knowing all too well our own feet of clay.

Responsibility as a Citizen and Public Servant

The second domain of ethical responsibility for an educational leader is as a citizen and public servant. As a citizen, one has ethical obligations to respect the rights of one's fellow citizens and to respect the public order. Educators are citizens who act for the good of fellow citizens. They seek the *common* good first, before their own benefit or the benefit of one person at the expense of others. As public servants, educators are entrusted with responsibilities to provide certain services to the public. In a sense, educa-

tors are the state-in-action. We all have watched the opening parade of athletes at the start of the Olympic Games. When our country's athletes march into the stadium carrying our nation's flag, a surge of pride wells up within us. They represent us; they represent the country; they represent the best that is in us. If an Olympic athlete violates the rules, he or she disgraces the nation because the athletes are the nation on the public stage.

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So too, when educators arrive at school, they represent the state and the ideals for which it stands. The state has been established by the people and for the people. Those who work for the state represent the state working for the people in that particular institution. Schools are chartered by the state to serve the interests of the people. Public servants who work in schools are there as citizens who provide a public service to fellow citizens, namely the opportunity to learn about the natural, cultural, economic, and political world. They are there to see that democracy works—to lend their work to the furtherance of democracy. If educators violate the rights and trust of people in the school, they are not only breaking the law, but they also are acting unethically in their role of citizen and public servant.

Responsibility as an Educator

The third domain of ethical responsibility for educational leaders is as an educator. At this level, educators have the responsibility to know curriculum material in sufficient depth to understand the multiple applications and uses that knowledge provides to the

community. Likewise, educators are obliged to be familiar with the most recent advances in the various academic disciplines. Otherwise, they could propagate inaccurate or misleading knowledge about that subject. Furthermore, educators are obliged to scaffold learning activities to enable learners to translate the subject matter into terminology and provide examples that younger, less mature minds and imaginations can comprehend. If not, the educators' obligation to present the curriculum in developmentally appropriate formats to youngsters is neglected, and the very possibility of their learning is thwarted—the activity of educating would be frustrated by the educators' inept pedagogy. In that instance, the integrity of education is violated. Thus, one can begin to discern that there is an ethic intrinsic to the activity of educating (Sergiovanni and Starratt 2002).

The ethic of educating is connected to the ethic intrinsic to learning itself (Starratt 1998). Learning always should be an activity of coming to know and understand something, because knowledge and understanding are always incomplete. They are lacking because of cognitive and experiential development limitations, and because the accumulated knowledge of scholarship and practice itself is always developing. The activity of attempting to know should respect the integrity of what one

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is seeking to know. One should not approach the study of something superficially or carelessly, because that violates the intrinsic integrity of what is being studied. Neither should one start with a preconceived notion of what one is attempting to learn, because that will distort what one will accept about the subject one is seeking to know (e.g., don't confuse me with the facts). When one consciously distorts what one purports to have learned, the integrity of what one is supposed to have learned is violated. This is most obvious in ideological reductions of facts to one dogmatic interpretation, such as in politics, economics, and warfare.

Learning must not rule out the activity of interpreting what one is studying. Interpretation enters into nearly everything one is trying to learn. Interpretation, however, should be transparent—the learner is aware of and acknowledges the interpretive perspective being applied in the study. Furthermore, the interpretation should be based on a thorough familiarity with factual information and backed up with references. An example of respecting the integrity of the subject under study can be found in the public censure of scholars who have been exposed as distorting their scholarship for self-interest or out of some ideological or commercial commitment. Their distortion is seen as an ethical violation of the notion of scholarship.

Educators who fail to insist on the integrity of knowledge can be accused of ethical laxity. Those who gear the work of teaching and learning to the achievement of high test scores—with little or no regard for the lasting meaning and significance of the curriculum—at best, are teaching a superficial pursuit of knowledge and, at worst, a meretricious mistreatment of knowledge

Educators are citizens who act for the good of fellow citizens.

which empties the pursuit of knowledge of all but a crassly functional and self-serving purpose. To encourage a continuous violation of the very integrity of knowing is a prostitution of the learning process. As the metaphor implies, the student is

taught to feign learning to please those in authority—teachers, parents, and politicians—in exchange for the coin in the realm of schools, namely, grades.

Someone might counter, “But you are talking about teachers, not educational leaders.” These comments could apply to teachers, especially in this era of encouraging teacher leadership. However, educational leaders who are administrators need to attend to this domain of ethical enactment. It is their responsibility as leaders of the whole school or school district to see that classroom teaching and learning do not violate the learning content and process and that they are of a high level of ethical enactment. Educational leaders must ensure, through their hiring, evaluation, and professional development programs, that teachers will:

- know the curriculum they are expected to teach and the academic disciplines that stand behind that curriculum;
- know how to communicate that curriculum in a variety of ways that enable youngsters to comprehend and appreciate the many facets of what they are studying;
- insist that students take away from their learning important life lessons that will shape how they look upon the natural, cultural, and social worlds, and appreciate the human adventure more deeply because of their studies; and
- know their students well, enabling them to craft learning tasks to respond to the background, interests, and prior experience of their students—in short, to respond to their moral quest for and ownership of their authentic identity.

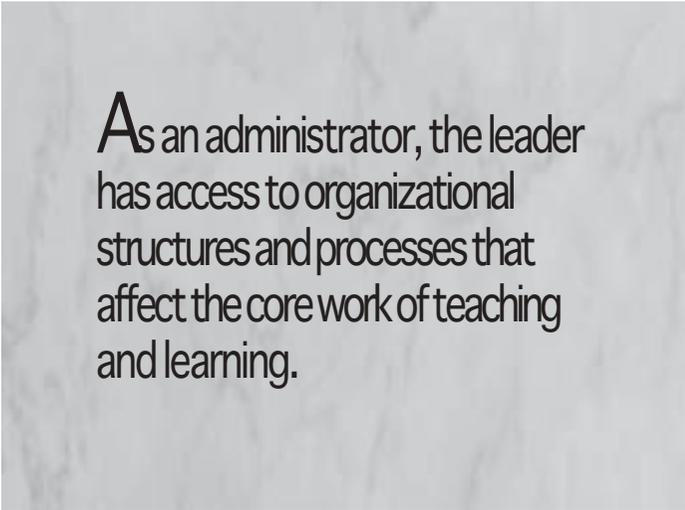
By cultivating these aspects of teaching and learning throughout the school, educational leaders will enact their ethical responsibilities as educators.

Responsibility as an Educational Administrator

The fourth domain of an educational leader’s ethical responsibility is as an educational administrator. As an administrator, the leader has access to organizational structures and processes that affect the core work of teaching and learning. These structures and processes are not ethically neutral. They either promote the integrity of the school’s core work—authentic learning—or they curtail or block its integrity.

They often do both at the same time by working to the advantage of some students and to the disadvantage of others. Schools are organized most often to benefit brighter students and to punish lower performing ones. The way schools organize learning within uniform time blocks—daily, weekly, and semester schedules—is an example of how a one-size-fits-all learning schedule benefits the quick student and leaves the slower student struggling to stay up with the class, seldom enjoying a clear enough understanding of the material to move with confidence to the next unit. One teacher fits all 20 students; one textbook fits all; one assessment system fits all. Rarely do school administrators seriously consider what the term “opportunity to learn” actually means, though it is written into many school reform policies. For example, we find special-needs children and second-language learners unjustly victimized by the state’s high-stakes tests, though they have not received an adequate opportunity to learn the material on which they are tested (Starratt 2003).

Teacher evaluation schemes are another example of how many schools use a one-size-fits-all process to reward some teachers and intimidate or frustrate others (Danielson and McGreal 2000; Sergiovanni and Starratt 2002). Some of these schemes sustain intimidating power relationships that routinely issue negative or paternalistic judgments from superiors. Veteran teachers and administrators are resigned to the evaluation process as a burdensome bureaucratic task. Many evaluation schemes are a colossal waste of time for everyone involved. As an alternative, Danielson and McGreal (2000) presented a comprehensive teacher evaluation system that attempts to benefit teachers and students. Their system is particularly sensitive to the ethical treatment of allegedly ineffective teachers by imposing obligations on the school system to show that it has provided generous remediation support to those teachers.



As an administrator, the leader has access to organizational structures and processes that affect the core work of teaching and learning.

The subtle bias in the classifications of special education children (Hehir 2002), the tracking of students into dead-end, low expectation programs (Oakes 1985), and the scheduling of the “best” teachers in honors classes and the least experienced teachers in the lowest performing classes are examples of organizational arrangements that disadvantage students in schools. These are human inventions, not arrangements of divine decree. They can be changed by educational administrators so that more students have a better chance in schools. Educational administrators who refuse to risk changing organizational structures and processes might be accused of ethical laziness given how these arrangements discriminate against some or most of the students (Starratt 2004).

Responsibility as an Educational Leader

The fifth domain of ethical responsibility involves the administrator as an educational leader. Much of the ethical activity in the four other levels involved a transactional ethic, while this level involves more of a transformational ethic (Burns 1978). Transactional ethics tend to focus on an exchange agreement: I'll commit to provide you this if, in return, you agree to provide me that. The arrangement is a form of contractual justice: I'll do this if you'll do that. The opposite arrangement also can be a form of a transactional ethic: If you do not do such and such, I will withdraw my part of the agree-

ment. The police officer has no personal grudge against the driver when serving a traffic ticket. When the state granted a driver's license, the driver agreed to obey traffic signals. The driver went through a red light. Therefore, the driver gets a ticket: transactional ethics.

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In transformational ethics, the educational leader calls students and teachers to reach beyond self-interest for a higher ideal—something heroic. The

educational leader does not ignore transactional ethics. He or she understands that the glue holding together the morale of the school relies on the unspoken trust that people will honor their agreements. When making these kinds of agreements is necessary, the leader does not hesitate. The leader sees the potential of the people in the school to make something special, something wonderful, and something exceptional.

Leaders bring all previous domains of ethical responsibility to new heights. They expect greater, deeper, and more courageous humanity from students and staff—humanity that embraces brotherhood and sisterhood with peoples of the globe. Leaders invite them to a transformed sense of citizenship—a local and a global citizenship—where concern for the rights of others is suffused with caring and compassion. Leaders look for transformational teaching and learning that connect academic learning to students' personal experiences and aspirations, so that students are changed by what they learn into deeper, richer human beings who want to use their learning to make the world a better place. Leaders want to transform the school from an organization of rules, regulations, and roles into an intentional self-governing community. In such a community, initiative and interactive spontaneity infuse bureaucratic procedures with human and professional values. Such idealism does not ignore the need for organizational supports and boundaries. This leadership is compassionate and expects messes, but uses the messes as learning opportunities rather than self-righteous occasions for punishment.

At this level of ethical enactment, the leader is more proactive than reactive. The educational leader's morals are less about what should be avoided or prohibited and

more about the ideals that should be sought. They are about actively creating enhanced opportunities for the human fulfillment of teachers and students through the work they coproduce. This is a distinctive, value-added ethic that often is ignored in scholarly treatments of the ethics of educational administrators. Those treatments of administrative ethics often deal with preventing harm to students and teachers, guaranteeing their security and safety, supporting equitable consideration, and fulfilling contractual obligations out of a sense of justice. Educational leaders should be concerned with these ethical issues, but ethical activity should not stop there. They should place these concerns within the larger community of teachers and learners who are transforming the mundane work of learning into something that engages deeper meanings behind the drama of the human adventure—meanings that implicate them in that adventure (Taylor 1992).

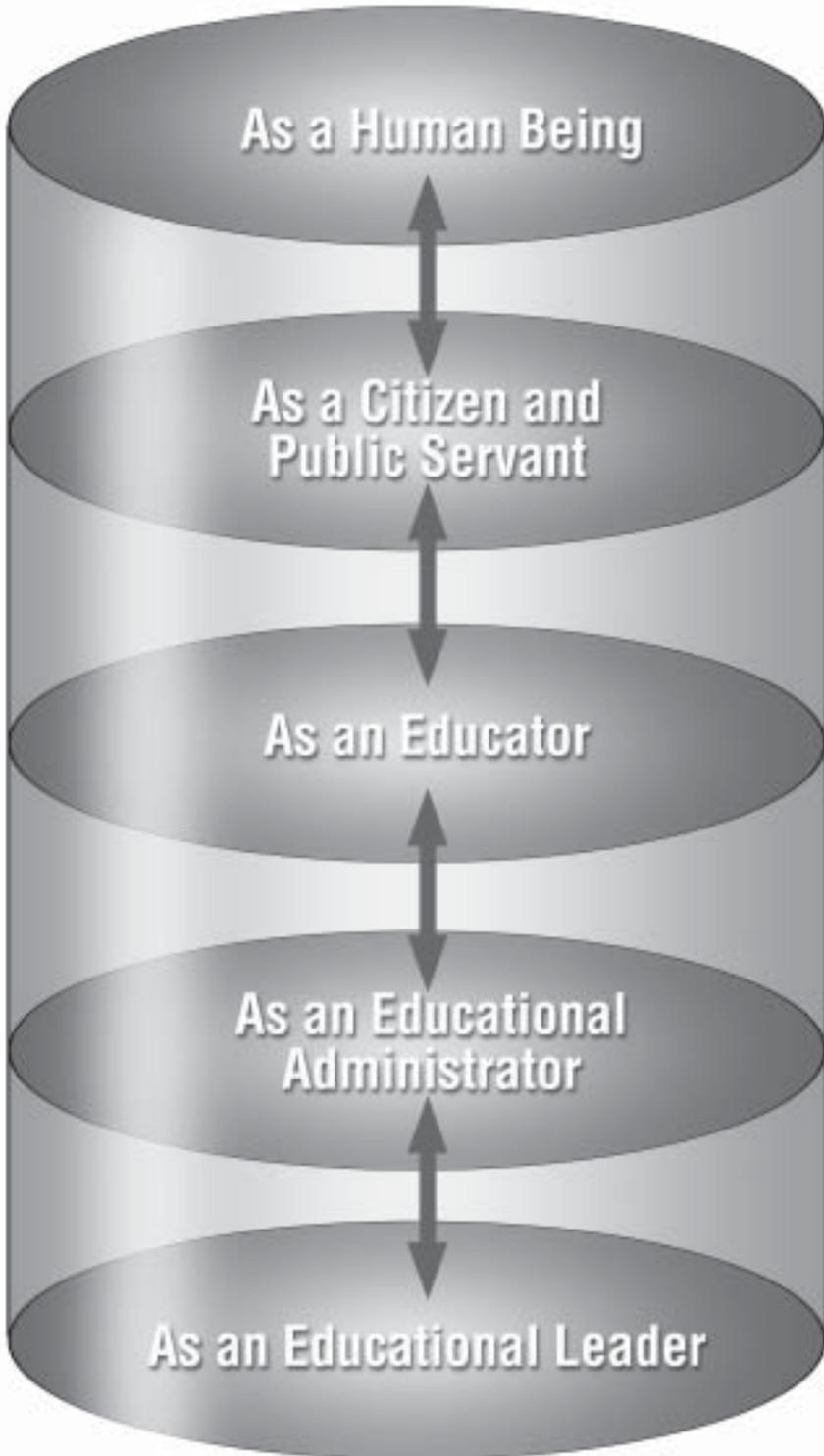
The Mutual Influence of the Five Domains of Ethical Responsibility

Each of the five domains requires and absorbs the previous domain in its full exercise (Figure 1). Therefore, the first and most basic domain of educational leaders' ethical responsibility—the ethics of acting humanely toward others—is assumed in the second domain of ethical responsibility: the carrying out of citizen responsibilities as a public servant. One cannot be a good citizen and violate one's own and others' humanity. Whatever progress the state achieves in its governing must be accomplished with and for the people it governs, respecting their rights as citizens and as human beings. Grounded in these two domains of ethical responsibility, educators then can attend to the specific ethical challenges that come from the work of educating the young.

An educational administrator must embrace the domains of ethical enactment if he or she is to be an ethical administrator. That means treating everyone in the school as human beings with care and compassion, treating them as citizens with rights and responsibilities in the pursuit of the common good, and engaging them in the ethical exercise of the core work of the school, namely authentic teaching and learning. The administrator must orchestrate the school's resources, structures, and processes with the ethical obligations of the other levels. This orchestration is usually carried on through transactional ethics of negotiated agreements about the nature of the work and the expectations from school community members who contribute to the work.

The absorption of all levels of ethical enactment is important to the educational leader. The leader has to be humane, caring, and compassionate, even while appealing to altruistic teacher and student motives. The leader must insist that teachers connect the curriculum's academic subjects to the human journey of their learners as they seek to know and own themselves. The leader has to affirm the dignity and rights of students and teachers as autonomous citizens, even while appealing to their higher civic and democratic ideals. The leader has to acknowledge the demanding nature of teaching and learning, the steady work on assignments, the routines of learning and teaching—even while appealing to the transformational possibilities of authentic learning or the individual and communal creation of their own humanity in the learning process. Finally, the educational leader must acknowledge the ethics of organizational life, the fact that every organization imposes limitations on the freedom and creativity of the individuals involved, including its leader.

Figure 1: Mutual Relationships among the Domains of Ethical Responsibility



Schools as organizations coordinate daily and weekly schedules that channel and focus everyone's effort on the production of understanding. That work imposes a daily discipline of cooperative action. Nevertheless, educational leaders must ensure that the structures and procedures that support and channel the learning process reflect a concern for justice and fairness for all students, while also providing room for creativity and imagination.

The honoring of the ethical responsibilities of all domains creates the foundation for the leader's invitation to move beyond transactional ethics and engage in transformative ethics. When the community responds to that invitation, it begins to own a communal pursuit of higher, altruistic ideals. In that communal leadership, individuals call out to one another by their example and the quality of their work to carry on the pursuit of those ideals.

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