Agency Fragmentation:
The Dilemma Facing Participative Management School Principals

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ABSTRACT: Participative management has been lauded as the best administrative approach of the contemporary school principal. With an expectation for continuous, reciprocal consultation, the job of the school principal has become increasingly complex, with resultant significant effects on the manner in which role and identity, both personally and professionally, are constructed. Agency, the enabled will we seek in order to develop a consistent value pattern and to make decisions in conformance with that pattern, is much more likely to be challenged and diffused. The purpose of this article is to explore the concept of agency fragmentation with reference to life of the school principal. This conversation may encourage renewed dialogue that addresses the unique challenges that face all administrators who seek to invite and to honour the contributions of all stakeholders in education.

RÉSUMÉ: La gestion avec participation a été acclamée comme la meilleure approche administrative des directeurs d'école d'aujourd'hui. Tout en étant à l'écoute des suggestions permanentes et réciproques, le travail du directeur d'école est devenu de plus en plus complexe. De ce fait, cela affecte véritablement la manière dont le rôle et l'identité sont positionnés d'un côté personnel comme d'un côté professionnel. La communauté de participants que nous cherchons à rendre effectif afin de développer un modèle de valeurs cohérent et afin de prendre des décisions calquées sur ce modèle, a tendance à être déjouée et à s'émietter. Cet article a pour but d'explorer les conséquences de l'éclatement de la communauté de participants en prenant comme référence la vie du directeur d'école. Ce débat peut relancer la question sur les défis uniques auxquels tous les administrateurs en faveur de la participation (invitations et écoute des propositions de participants dans l'éducation), font face.

In Canada the role of the school principal has become increasingly complex, so much so that the position is becoming viewed as unattractive. School divisions, particularly in rural areas, sometimes find it difficult even to attract candidates. In the not-too-distant past, the school was more likely to be considered closed, descriptive of the "four-walls-of-the-school" (Crowson, 1992, p. 221) theory, with the principal serving as master of a clearly defined arena. Dictatorship, even when benign or enlightened, was the expectation of and the reward for the position. In contemporary *participatory management* times, with schools becoming more open to the community, with the interests of many stakeholders being both recognized and taken into consideration, the identity of the principal within the role is uncertain, fragmented. It has become increasingly difficult for the principal to assume agency – enabled will – with the position. Conflicting agendas among stakeholder groups see agency existing in a plurality of diverse arenas, creating situations for which the principal is inadequately prepared and hopelessly fragmented. Agency, sought personally so that one might feel an ability to make decisions compatible with one's identity framework, when diffused within the role, may create extreme anxiety.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the nature and the movement of agency and to explore the relationship of agency to the construction of personal and role identity, particularly with respect to the school principal. I am assuming or at least suggesting, with the purpose and the direction of this paper, that a major source of the angst within the principal's role today lies in the frequency of incompatibility between the moral framework underlying the principal's personal identity and the variety of diverse frameworks that may be confronted within a participative management role. I deconstruct, first, definitions of human agency and explore, with examples, its interplay with the manner in which identity is formed. An examination of the nature of agency lays a foundation for reflecting upon the conflicting demands within the contemporary principal's role, and the chronic stress that in current times often seems to accompany that role. The objective of the paper is to encourage dialogue that will shed light on the contemporary role of the principal, with the aim of understanding the stress of agency fragmentation experienced by those who currently are principals and those who may aspire for the position. Such a focus may also lead to increased attention toward field research that will attend to agency and identity formation, to an emphasis on the manner in which personal and

role autobiography reciprocate in the creation of one's leadership direction.

The Nature of Agency

Human agency conjures up such words as choice, responsibility, authority, freedom, even power, all of which, on their own, beg further definition. The exploration of the meaning and the nature of agency has drawn the attention of philosophers since at least Plato's time. While I like the synonym *enabled will*, I recognize that such simplified definition begs further enquiry, as well. What is enabled will and from where does it originate? I think that *will* cannot be separated from desire, for with enabled will we are able to satisfy our desires. Taylor (1977, p. 104; 1985, p. 1) and Frankfurt (1971, p. 7) speak of the *second-order* desires that are indicative of agency. Many animals, although they may experience *first-order* desire, cannot actively evaluate their various desires. The peculiar ability of humans to evaluate desires – second order desire – connects agency with an intellectual capacity to judge. In addition, Taylor (1977) states that the "capacity to evaluate desires is bound up with our power of self-evaluation, which in turn is an essential mode of agency we recognize as human" (p. 104). With that statement, Taylor introduces the self-regulatory, restrictive tendency of evaluation and leads me to suggest that agency is intricately connected with one's identity, as whatever pattern we have created as ours will be imbued with a mode of decision-making peculiar to that pattern. That mode will serve as our moral measuring stick with which we not only evaluate choice but perceive some actions as choices while others do not enter the realm of the conscious as conceivable options.

Taylor (1977) talks of two methods of evaluation: weaker "outcome" evaluation and stronger "quality of motivation" evaluation (p. 105). In the first instance, I may as a principal evaluate whether to slot time for teacher Susan to talk with me (as she has expressed a wish) during her unscheduled class time or after school. But the deeper evaluation may enter into the decision, as well, as Susan has already told me that she wishes to talk with me about the alternatives she must weigh for her elderly mother's extended care. I am obliged to make a "quality of motivation" evaluation, for I must decide if this is a good use of my time, as Susan's issue does not directly relate to school affairs (although she has been preoccupied with her family situation, of late). I must consider Cory, who needs counseling time, as well, as he has recently returned to school after being incarcerated at a youth centre for assaulting a man

who repeatedly insulted his sister with racial slurs. As I talk with Susan about her desired appointment (hoping to take care of her concerns in a few minutes so that I can attend to Cory), John (Cory's father, an alcoholic abuser of his wife and children), whom I have been trying to reach for some time, phones to talk of and ascribe responsibility to the school for his son's increasingly belligerent behaviour. Here our categories of choice take on moral considerations, as we cast our various options, and other people's behaviour, as "higher and lower, virtuous and vicious, more and less fulfilling, more and less refined, profound and superficial, noble and base" (Taylor, 1985, p. 16). The stronger evaluation involves us in assessing the qualitative worth of the various choices not only for our time, but also for how we will relate to the various people.

As well as considering Taylor's weaker and stronger evaluation, Flew and Vesey (1987) introduce the notions of "agent causation" and "event causation" for reflection. They see the difference as similar to Plato's (circa 360 B.C./1900b) distinction between those causes that are influenced by mind and those governed by necessity (pp. 121-122). While I do not wish to spend a great deal of time on this further distinction, it is worthwhile to point out that agency causation is, to some degree at least, affected by event causation. While I do agree with Hume (1748/1994, pp. 694-695), on one level, that "the effect is totally different from the cause" – or the same cause would not result in different behavioural effects in different people – on another level I disagree, for if we, as principals, have established an identity, the effect of a particular cause may be predictable behaviour on our part. In addition, we should consider Follett's (1924) belief that stimulus and response are interwoven: "My response is not ... static for the moment of meeting; *while* I am behaving, the environment is changing because of my behaving, and my behaviour is a response to the new situation which I, in part, have created" (pp. 63-64). Such reciprocation between stimulus and response would, thus, work to restrict a principal's choice of behaviour to certain options compatible within the identity that has been established by past choices. Various stakeholders' behaviours toward us will be shaped also by a particular assumed pattern of our response. In short, others' assumptions of how, given our identity, we might act, will affect how they will structure their actions toward us, and through those actions, their own identity.

What I am attempting to illustrate, indirectly, is what happens when, within management expectations, a defined pattern of response

that is more likely with autocratic leadership is interrupted when we introduce participatory leadership with its many options and challenge an established and predictable pattern of identity for the principal. Let me explain my point with an example from Plato's (360 B.C./1900b) Phaedo in which he speaks of Socrates' words just prior to his death. I introduce Rychlak's (1992) definition of agency into the scene, hoping in the exercise to illustrate more clearly the nature and the movement of agency and its interplay with how identity is created. Rychlak has defined agency as *"framing and behaving for the sake of predications that are in conformance with, in opposition to, or without regard for biological or social determinants"* (p. 50 – Rychlak uses "constructions" as a synonym for predications).

While he lies awaiting the poison-bearer Socrates contemplates the choices he has made. He reclines where he is to be found, he says, because his body's anatomy has allowed him to recline. Yet, biological determinants are not the deciding factor for Socrates' physical presence in the particular room in which he is found. He has, in fact, disregarded biological determinants, if we assume an inherent wish to remain alive, when framing (choosing), and then behaving in accordance with his deeper choice (within a framework) of whether to abide by his sentence to die by drinking hemlock *or* to run away. Surely fleeing was a choice, as his devoted disciples surely would (or would they?) have spirited Socrates away in whatever manner was available (with regard to biological determinants, for example Socrates' age and physical ability). He did, however, behave with consideration for *certain* defined social determinants. By staying, Socrates framed and acted in conformance with his learned identity, as a man with the respect and the admiration of much of Athens' scholarly and political community would undoubtedly have damaged his reputation, his established identity, by turning tail and running. (We could also talk of Socrates' crime for which he was sentenced – "Socrates is a doer of evil, and corrupter of the youth, and he does not believe in the gods of the State, and has other new divinities of his own" (Plato, circa 360 B.C./1900a, p. 18 – with reference to Rychlak's definition). Although Socrates *could* have made a number of combinations of choices that we could mathematically calculate given Rychlak's definition, it is unlikely that he would have, as his was not a participatory management identity. Socrates exercised his agency, not in terms of radical choice or even with consideration of various options suggested by a number of stakeholders, but in conformance with how he had established his personal identity, which was compatible with his

role identity, and with regard to how he could keep his identity intact even unto death. To run would have been anti-Socratic.

The question I draw attention to here is this: What happens to the future nature of one's agency when one's identity has been established as a particular manner of person? Is further choice then immediately restricted (perhaps comfortably), not only by external expectations upon oneself, but also on one's manner of perceiving oneself (as if they could be separated)? Was Socrates, for example, really free to flee, or even more importantly, would he have wanted to be free to flee, even if the means had been available to execute a daring escape? One's evaluation (framing) reflects a pattern of values that then further guide one's behaviour. I draw attention, again, to the reciprocal nature of one's value pattern and one's identity formation: one's values reflect how one creates and maintains their identity. Identity, in its turn, guides what values one chooses and establishes how those values, if one is to remain faithful to them, direct the framing of one's choices and one's subsequent behaviour. Socrates would be comfortable with a decision that conformed with his established identity even if it meant death. Freedom to make alternate decisions would not only have been immaterial, if such freedom were imposed, it would have been resisted. But may we begin, then,

> To love Bondage more than Liberty,
> Bondage with ease than strenuous Liberty;
> And to despise, or envy, or suspect
> whom God hath of his special favour raised
> As their Deliverer? If he ought begin,
> how frequent to desert him, and at last
> to heap ingratitude on worthiest deeds?
> (Milton, 1671/1957, pp. 32-33)

We, in our position as Socrates' disciples, carve out (I choose that metaphorical verb purposefully, as we do ascribe stability to our own identity and others') our own identity with reference to our leader's identity. We expect Socrates to act, in the future, in accordance with not only his identity, but also with the identity that he has effected in us. We may consider any contradictory behaviour a betrayal, an affront to whom we are, given his influence upon us. In others words, once the connection has been made, the identities of our selves and our effecting others mesh and reciprocate. As such, we are more likely to resist drastic change, as

the effects of extreme change are so much more likely to involve many others and an affront to everyone's established identities, whereas whether we, as Socrates, recline on a sofa or poise upright by an open window (surface change) to deliver our final words may not threaten the pattern. As Shumpeter (1954) noted (and which I include here for our instruction), once created,

> Things economic and social move by their own momentum ... and compel individuals and groups to behave in certain ways ... not indeed by destroying their freedom of choice but by shaping the choosing mentalities and by narrowing the possibilities from which to choose. (p. 130)

We cling to the narrower range of possibilities, even if we recognize it as bondage, because it is within that range of choice that we have established who we are. It is not that we love bondage per se, but that we fear chaos (and freedom, perhaps), and not because there is anything inherently wrong with chaos either, but simply because its lack of perceived pattern keeps us in perpetual imbalance, with no opportunity to effect a consistent identity.

Administrators, when constantly faced with conflict, ambiguity, and paradox perhaps often choose the narrower range of possibilities in order to minimize the chaos and achieve some semblance of balance. We thus resist radical choice with its unpredictability of evaluation, or even diverse choice that presents too many options, for we liken such freedom to chaos. If radical means value free, one decision would be as good as any other, for example. Such free choice could result in conflicting subsequent decisions even from a logistical standpoint, and certainly ignores our need to have our identity constructed within a certain framework of moral choice that then can serve to guide further choice. For example, one day I might, without parental notification, approve a 16-year-old student's request to visit her doctor during her study class for the purpose of requesting birth control pills. The student's visit to the doctor and the right to confidential medical attention may be guaranteed under law, but leaving school property without parental permission may violate our school policy (as may the acquisition of birth control pills if the school and the parents are Catholic). Yet, I might phone her parents the next day to report the visit, conforming that day to my identity as an honest person, which I translate into a strict adherence to school policy as I agreed to do when signing my contract, judging as less important, or, in fact, even ignoring the matter of student confidentiality. Alternately, I *could* decide on the choices of decisions when the student

came to see me based on a coin toss. But even such radical choice as that, we could argue, is not value free, as such a choice would be made only after evaluating that a coin toss choice were as valid as a decision deliberately guided. Further, of course, even if we did decide to toss a coin, the various choices for which we tossed the coin would have still been arrived at through evaluation.

Agency Diffusion

I would like to talk more of the participatory expectation within the contemporary principal's role. You will have noticed, in the example I chose of Socrates, that I spoke of his *disciples*. In such relationships, although master and follower reciprocally affect each other's development and range of choice, the pattern still has consistency. If the master, we expect to lead; if a follower, we expect to follow. In the past then, although principals, teachers, parents, and students had definite expectations that affected their respective roles and identities, each role was more clearly demarcated. Patterns of behaviour were more clearly defined and expected within an established identity. The principal's role and personal identity would more likely to have been commensurate, as was Socrates' role and personal identity. Within the closed school the principal alone was more likely to have both the decision-making power and the responsibility and could, subsequently, behave comfortably in conformance with an established identity as the one who both made the rules and meted out the punishment to those who did not obey them. In the example I provided, a principal may have been within their rights to allow the young woman to visit her doctor without informing her parents of the decision because they were not only acting *in loco parentis* under the law, but were also acting as the legitimate interpreter of the school rules. The parents, on the other hand, may view the principal's decision as violating the role of the careful parent and bring charges of negligence.

The point is that we no longer enjoy Socrates' clarity of identity. In current times the school is viewed as more an open system or a community. We talk of the ecological approach (Butterworth, 1995; Montuori & Purser, 1996). No longer is the school only teacher Socrates and his admiring followers. A great many stakeholders input – students, parents, teachers, and community members – is invited and considered during decision-making. On the one hand, we may laud the diversity that is introduced, the many voices that are now respected, the opportunities that are available to participate in the practice of

democracy. On the other hand, the greater the number of participants who engage in the moral framing and choosing process, the greater the opportunity for dissensus and accompanying agency opposition, fragmentation, and confusion for the principal. Identity crisis becomes a daily reality. Principals are thus facing an ubiquitous tension. Clear answers to well-defined problems within established identities and their accompanying compatible patterns of behaviour are rare within a genuine participative method of leadership in which all voices are encouraged, respected, and considered in the decision-making process. As well as being presented with ethical conundrums, if the principal must take a far greater variety of moral standpoints into consideration, the possibility of decisions compelled in violation of an established personal moral identity also exists, that is if participative leadership is to be a reality and not simply rhetoric (another moral choice). The alternative would be to act, as Socrates did, in conformance with one's own identity, but in violation of the community's (or some powerful member's) accepted code and await our own draught of hemlock.

What I have assumed here is the reciprocal nature of agency with language and structure; that is, that we exercise our enabled will within a bounded realm of choice, and given a choice, we will choose not to admit, or, in fact, unconsciously refuse recognition of a great many options. Our agency is restricted by the text of our lives; *"there is nothing outside of the text"* (Derrida, 1974/1998, p. 158). The text that establishes our life has previously been dualistic, that is, one in which clear opposites have guided our decisions. If an honest person I must follow school policy, as I agreed when fixing my signature on my contract. The requirement for honesty, within the text of my life, creates a clear polarization and outweighs considerations of confidentiality, in fact, eliminates such a choice and, therefore, eliminates any moral dilemma.

In modern times with its emphasis on a grand narrative that would guide our decisions and create a centripetal force that established our being, our locatable identities, we were faced with fewer moral dilemmas. In a postmodern time of many voices, of a "search of instabilities" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 53), our becoming identities are centrifugal, fluid, elusive, ambivalent. We deconstruct each decision and analyse it for authenticity. Have we respected Susan's, Cory's, and John's needs? How, pray tell, given logistics, for example the number of hours within a day, do we recognize everyone's needs as equally important? It was so much easier when we thought that these people's respective problems were their own responsibility (centripetal) and not

issues that interwove (centrifugal) with our identity within our role as administrator. Although Bergen states that "the healthy, happy human being wears many masks" (1995, p. 136), we are uncertain where or if, behind the masks, there is a being, an identity. We fear that after all those masks have been peeled away, like the layers of an onion, there will be no core, that we really are only a representation, a becoming, or perhaps simply a psychic force through which the needs of all others are met, a "convenient location for the throughput of discourses" (Hassard, 1993, p. 15). Do we then abandon the pursuit of being (Sartre, 1943/1956) and hopelessly assume Erikson's (1968, 1980) "identity diffusion" or "identity confusion"?

The Crisis of Ambiguity

As the educational process becomes more community oriented, the administrator takes on the characteristics of what Lifton (1993, 1995) calls "the protean style." Proteus, a sea deity, was able to take on different shapes, but found that committing to a single form in order to prophesy, as was his role, was the most difficult. Principals may long for, but find themselves unable to effect, a perfect past of easier answers, a harmonious feeling of wholeness in a locatable role. They feel endangered by a cosmopolitan identity that threatens to be nothing at the same time that it promises to reveal everything, expose all to the consciousness and present a myriad of choices previously unimaginable, let alone attainable. The result, according to Lifton (1995), is a perpetual state of angst, in which the protean self feels a hidden guilt,

> A vague but persistent kind of self-condemnation related to ... symbolic disharmonies ... a sense of having no outlet for his [sic] loyalties and no symbolic structure for his achievements. This is the guilt of social breakdown .... Rather than a clear feeling of evil or sinfulness, it takes the form of a nagging sense of unworthiness all the more troublesome for its lack of clear origin. (p. 133)

The Protean self, if unidentifiable, cannot be Socrates, will never have a following or even a group to which to belong, will never have a presence that will help both to establish and to maintain an identity. As such "often feeling himself uncared for, even abandoned, Protean man responds with diffuse fear and anger. But he can neither find a good cause for the former, nor a consistent target for the latter" (Lifton, 1995, p. 133). A changeable state suggests susceptibility to change and here I address, finally, the crux of my statement: *Agency is not an individualistic characteristic indicative of one's freedom of choice but a*

collective process of engagement in the commons through which one defines their identity. It is within one's mediation with the collective that role and identity evolve. Sometimes, but not always, that process involves the opportunity for the evolution and critique of agency. The problem arises when, with the introduction of participative management, the collective is threatened with a diversity of messages that often cannot be arranged in an comprehensible pattern (the term "collective" denotes some commonality). The greater range of voices, the movement toward a broader realm for decision-making with respect to difference, may, thus, be only our espoused theory. In spite of all our rhetoric, we remain much more able to effect a consistent identity if "respect for diversity" remains carefully managed, without its becoming our consistent "theory-in-practice" (Argyris, 1993).

In short, while we work toward respect for more choice by including the interests of many stakeholders in the education process, we are more comfortable with a well-defined, restricted structure validated by only certain, carefully selected voices. We find it difficult genuinely to respect diverse voices, not because we see anything inherently wrong with the inclusion of other voices, but simply because such allowance causes moral angst. Sartre (1943/1956) states:

> Anguish then is the reflective apprehension of freedom by itself. ... Anguish is opposed to the mind of the serious man [*sic*] who apprehends values in terms of the world and who resides in the materialistic substantiation of values .... The meaning, which my freedom has given the world, I apprehend as coming from the world and constituting my obligations. In anguish I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself. (pp. 39-40)

When we are confronted with so many voices to respect within our expanded world, that world becomes increasingly unable to provide our guiding structure. We begin, then, to look inside ourselves for the morally correct manner of behaviour, as, in our individualistic liberal culture we are led to think (espoused theory) that moral courses of action are, indeed, freely created within our beings as intelligent, independent people. Not only are the answers not to be found within ourselves, we are led to the fearful suspicion that if we cannot mediate with the outside world to provide a structure to guide our behaviour and define our beings – our identity – we may be lost, devoid of meaning: "Nothingness can be nihilated only on the foundation of being; if nothingness can be given, it is neither before nor after being, nor in a general way outside

of being. Nothingness lies coiled at the heart of being – like a worm" (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 21). Much better to have fewer options, to have a neat pattern mediated within a tidy world, rather than to respect diversity and to honour, in our practice, participatory leadership that threatens a defined framework within which we can establish and maintain our identity.

The contemporary principal's role, as diffuse in nature, threatens not only an established identity, then, but also the enabled will necessary to establish identity, causing us to look, daily, into the abyss of nothingness. The result, in my opinion and agreeing with Lifton, is often the protean person, where, on the one hand (positive for mutual respect in an egalitarian society), all voices are heard and considered, but where, on the other hand (negative for identity formation), no voice takes responsibility for a structure to guide decisions. The principal's role, however, still places responsibility for decisions with the principal, even while the decision-making power has been dispersed. In other words, role agency and personal agency are often incongruent. The principal's agency is, thus, fragmented, often at odds with its own movement. Small wonder that many teachers choose to stay in the more comfortable confines of the classroom where their roles are more clearly demarcated, where the still more isolated protection of the four-walls-of-the-classroom do not threaten such ubiquitous dissension between role and personal identity.

Conclusion

While Sergiovanni (1995) affirms what I have maintained here – "the context for administration is surprisingly loose, chaotic, and ambiguous" (p. 310) – the questions remain: What is the basis upon which principals make decisions? How can they exercise agency? For principals to maintain a sense of agency, they sometimes choose to be insubordinate, to violate their contract (written and psychological), to disregard school policies, and to massage the diverse wishes of educational stakeholders. When a principal is hired, a covenant is created between the individual and the school board and superintendent (or director). Both parties to the agreement owe loyalty (or do they?) to a contract that has been created with an underlying value structure and which provides more security, as a stable arrangement, than taking into consideration the expressed interests of a greater number of stakeholders. The principal may be able to act with greater agency within the well-established guidelines of a contract, as that document, being unable to speak, cannot

provide constant translation of its intent and so is subject to manipulation without its objection. The principal can, therefore, establish moral agency within a more stable framework than would be the case with an elusive and changeable psychological contract with human stakeholders. Whether, with a written contract, conscious moral and ethical decisions are the principal's focus each time or not, to be perceived as contractually successful and effective, the principal strives to demonstrate consistency. Notwithstanding, however, the nature of the current participatory nature of agency sees the principal's personal and role identity constantly becoming, never complete, never being. The ongoing role of the principal is never a product, but is always process, a practice in which the principal seeks constantly to maintain some semblance of personal and professional balance in the face of increasing input and demands from the environment.

Owens (2001) applies the contradictory concept of "dynamic equilibrium" (p. 89) to the interaction of a school system with its environment, but the concept of dynamic equilibrium may apply to the role of the principal, in the best of circumstances. The principal, in a state of dynamic equilibrium, through constant reflection, action, and the application of agency, helps to keep the school system in a steady (although sometimes unstable) state by being adaptable. While that adaptability keeps the principal perpetually within an evolutionary process, the same ability to exercise one's agency within an expanded realm of acceptability allows role and identity to be flexible when new and better ways of administering surface. Contemporary principals, therefore, are much more able to utilize their agency as change agents than were their predecessors, even if the exercise of agency may result in the occasional logistical or moral angst. In that respect, I see the elusive, changing nature and movement of agency, even with its accompanying role and personal identity incongruence, as a nagging but necessary side effect of the new organic, ecological, and democratic participatory management approach to the principalship, that, even with its ambiguity, is preferable to past tyrannical school administrative practices.

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