Educational Administration as (Public) Practice?

Kathleen Knight Abowitz
Miami University

> We have suggested that any conception of professional ethics that excludes from its view the role of work in the practitioner's own quest to lead a flourishing life is not truly or fully an ethics of professional life, but rather belongs to a narrower field we have called moral professionalism. If we can recover an expanded conception of ethics, one capacious enough to encompass self-cultivation and self-interest, then it follows that our understanding of applied ethics can and must be similarly expanded.[1]

Joseph Watras argues emotivism is powerfully expressed in the development of the field of educational administration, as represented in how key leaders and texts within the academic reproduction of this field construct professional ethics. Ethics, in too much of educational administration theory and practice, is reduced to technical problem solving. I very much agree with Watras on this point. I teach ethics courses in an educational leadership program that has worked for many years to distance itself from traditional discourses of educational administration conceived in managerial, technical-rational terms, partly for the reasons Watras carefully outlines here.

In my response, I discuss how Alasdair MacIntyre himself might suggest we move beyond the realization that educational administration is nothing more or less than emotive managerialism. Using Chris Higgins' extended argument for an aretaic, eudemonistic professional ethics of teaching, I sketch the distinctions and overlaps between a "profession" and a "practice." MacIntyre sees the resources of ethical life in practices, and so this distinction seems critical if we wish to pursue a neo-Aristotelian answer to Watras's critique. Higgins' work helps us approach the question, does the work of educational administration have the makings of a practice, in the neo-Aristotelian sense? It seems that if we can find an affirmative answer to this question, Watras and others can start to conceive of a professional ethics that is generated in and through the practice of educational administration. In my response, I sketch the outlines of such an inquiry.

Yet perhaps contradictorily, I want to conclude by troubling such a response to the problem. The neo-Aristotelian vision, while a satisfying answer to emotivist conditions, is insufficient as a complete ethical framing for educational administration. Most educational-administration work is vitally interdependent with the public domain, nested within the larger contexts of civic life and democratic governance. All practices are nested and interdependent, but the public context of most educational-administrative work presents a unique ethical horizon, one that troubles some of the closures and communal traditions on which neo-Aristotelian ethics depend.

Let us begin by sketching the neo-Aristotelian response to Watras's neo-Aristotelian problem. The emotivist milieu reduces moral agents to moral professionals, armed with codified though empty knowledge and universalized obligations to clients. These obligations are empty because they lack the rich traditions and parameters of communities of practice. Moral judgments mean nothing more than

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION *2012* | Claudia W. Ruitenberg, editor
© 2012 Philosophy of Education Society | Urbana, Illinois

expressions of individual feeling, providing easy cover for self-serving grabs for resources and power. Enlightenment ethics tries to distinguish helpfully what we owe to others in this world of codified, universal moral rules. Higgins points out the hollowness of the "moral professionalism" this ethics has wrought.[2] Good professionals are always driven by much more than what they "owe" their clients. As moral agents in professions, we are animated by a range of ideals and experiences emerging out of the practice in which we work. Good educational administrators are certainly compelled by what is owed to students in their school, but their obligations are far more complex than this, and their own sense of moral agency and ethical flourishing is richer than the mere duty to serve. Instead of basing a moral professionalism in what we owe our clients, Higgins suggests we instead ask about practices and the ways they holistically contribute to the moral lives of practitioners. Professional ethics are built from notions of personal flourishing within the context of a practice. Importantly, practices are not the locus of the "application" of moral principles and rules derived abstractly; they are the very source of these moral ideas. This insight then opens up a torrent of new questions that can emerge from Watras's analysis. Is educational administration a practice, in neo-Aristotelian terms? What kind of practice might it be or become in the future? What kind of telos animates the work? What sorts of internal and external goods emerge from its practice?

Such a host of compelling questions points the way toward some of the productive analyses that Watras's analysis could inspire for those interested in the philosophy of educational administration and professional ethics. While it cannot be undertaken within the limited confines of an essay response, consider the potential analysis of the provocative question, can the work of educational administration be considered a practice, in neo-Aristotelian terms? That MacIntyre dismisses one of its key interdependent activities — that of teaching — as not meeting his criteria of a practice should not discourage the inquiry. Higgins provides some of the criteria such an inquiry would consider. He writes that "practices offer their practitioners distinctive goods of at least four types: outstanding works or performances to appreciate, a rich moral phenomenology to experience, excellences of character to display and on which to rely, and a biographical genre through which to shape a meaningful life."[3]

Like the practices of chess, carpentry, soccer, or parenting, educational administration could offer its practitioners some distinct goods, such as outstanding performances or creations to appreciate. Who are the "great" school administrators in the memory of a school, a district, or in the field at large? What are the noteworthy performances of educational administration? What is the moral phenomenology in the flow of the work, the ephemeral yet distinctive feel of its moral life and quandaries? What are its excellences of character — are justice, courage, and compassion the primary virtues emerging from the practice? And what constitutes its biographical genre, or the legends, stories, and histories through which one can inhabit and compose the practice over time? At first glance, there are many productive arguments that could be made toward the envisioning of a practice of educational administration.

Nonetheless there are many facts of educational administration that cannot be separated from its modernist, institutional origins. The field emerged in the bureaucratic, managerial ethos of the contemporary school system. It is now a field whose practitioners have shorter and shorter shelf lives, thereby diminishing the chances that they can, over time, discover and create the internal goods of the practice. In both these ways, educational administration lacks a rich and widely recognized history that helps structure its practice. MacIntyre writes that "to enter into a practice, is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice."[4] New educational administrators are rarely ushered into these traditions. Such an initiation seems difficult to envision under present conditions of fast-track, technical-rational educational administration programs in the new world of revenue-generating higher education institutions.

Perhaps more damning still for realizing educational administration as a practice is its inseparability from institutions. Educational administrators are, in most cases, caretakers of educational institutions, their legal guardians. "Institutions are characteristically concerned with what I have called external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods, they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power, and status as rewards."[5] While institutions sustain practices, they are also apt to be much more concerned with the external goods rather than the internal goods and virtues that practices generate. Higgins writes, "[I]nstitutions can exercise a corrupting influence on practices."[6] Given that educational administration has no real sense of itself outside of its institutionalized contexts and demands, it seems a radical hope that it might gain enough autonomy as a profession to achieve an organization, tradition, ethos, and telos that might allow it to be deemed an authentic practice in the neo-Aristotelian sense.

A final debilitating barrier to conceiving educational administration as a practice is its interdependence with public realms. Practices are interdependent in other moral domains. The ethical lives of individual practitioners intertwine not only with the practices themselves, but with the traditions and cultures that constitute the practice, as well. The work of educational administration in most schools intertwines and is constituted by the character of public life in democratically governed states. The idea of the public is characterized by radical pluralism and conflict, responsibility to diverse citizenry, and is a space in which multiple communities of practice and culture must define shared goods and ends. That public life is currently often defined by what MacIntyre calls emotivism does not constitute all that we might expect from the public contexts of professional ethics for educational administrators. But it will require more than neo-Aristotelian philosophy to conceive of these possibilities.

---

1. Chris Higgins, "The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 2/3 (2010): 237.

2. Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell), chapter 1.

3. Higgins, "The Good Life," 250.

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd edition (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2007), 194; quoted in Higgins, "The Good Life," 247.

5. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194; quoted in Higgins, "The Good Life," 262.

6. Higgins, "The Good Life," 264.