

ONE YEAR IN THE ROUGH GROUND OF PRACTICE: *PHRONESIS* AS A MODE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN A MULTICULTURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Overview of Research

This research incorporates an action-research self-study of one year of practice as a school principal in a school community with significant diversity. Through selected excerpts from a reflective journal, the study features description and analysis of issues that arise in this newly-founded primary school with a view to seeking insight into the challenges and dilemmas that confront a principal as regards leadership role in this specific school context. This is a notable piece of action research, replete with insights for teachers at primary level, particularly school principals and teachers with aspirations to principalship.

Theoretical Framework

Set against the background description of the school, the study adopts a theoretical framework to facilitate critical analysis of practice including inter-related dynamics such as context, action, dialogue, learning through experience and critical reflection. An interpretative lens is devised to derive meaning from the research. This is linked to Aristotelian ideas while writers such as Freire, Dewey and Illich are also featured for their illuminative insight on particular incidents that emerge from the data.

Research Design and Methodology

The research adheres to the qualitative research model as the researcher chooses an 'advocacy/participatory' stance. The central element of the research design is the maintenance of a journal that captures on a day-to-day basis the principal's observations on the interactions that occur over the period of thirteen months. Drawing on the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis*, a form of knowing by which we can learn from our experiences, the research seeks to demonstrate that practice, if properly conceived through action, dialogue and critical reflection, can be transformative and emancipatory for the practitioner. The study presents selected excerpts from the complete journal to highlight and represent key facets of the principal's commentary on experience in a range of different incidents. Ethical considerations are taken into account with regard for matters such as confidentiality and timely permission in advance from management and others.

Presentation and Discursive Analysis of selected Journal extracts

The fruits of the research work are given by means of an analysis of the selected excerpts from the journal. Particular facets of school experience provide data that encompass action, dialogue and reflection leading to discursive analysis that in turn yields useful insights on educational leadership. The learning thus encapsulated comes in the form of heightened or refined understandings of practice or leadership issues over and above earlier formulations. There are eight important findings of the research and these are discussed under the following headings:

- observations on risk and imagination in school leadership
- the value of journaling
- enhancing dialogue in the school
- power relations issues and school leadership, insider research and action
- research as features of educational practice
- the influence of life-history issues in leadership
- school governance and support for the principal
- the principal as part of a community of learning

To illustrate the character of the research work, the last finding may be elaborated further. The study comments on the value of lifelong learning for the principal pointing out that learning is always context-bound, reconstructive of one's identity and can always be furthered through cycles of action, dialogue and critical-reflection. That in a sense represents a true meaning of the term 'being experienced' but the researcher points out that too often, Irish teachers and principals adopt the badge of experience in reference only to time spent in the position. Instead the researcher suggests that those principals who deserve to wear this honour of 'experienced' must only be those who throughout their careers remain open to the need to refine and reconstruct their professional identities in accordance with phronetic constructions of practice.

Conclusion

The study concludes with a drawing together of the broad theoretical framework and the conclusions derived from the research, outlining the value of phronesis as a mode of educational leadership in a multicultural school. Phronesis with its commitment to incremental growth of practical wisdom garnered through cycles of action, dialogue, and critical-reflection offers the school leader an opportunity to learn. The central argument of the study is that the eight conclusions can all be brought to fruition in one's practice with the guidance of phronesis. The conclusions refine, heighten and prioritise the dynamics of practice so as to maximize the phronetic process. They offer

the disposed school leader a way to 'become' and to 'be' a principal who is characterised as action-orientated, dialogical, critically-reflective and open to an ongoing and lifelong reconstruction of his/her life-history and experience.

The thesis frequently employs a specialist terminology that has its own connotations and resonances but it also ranges widely on the typical issues that confront teachers and principals in the modern Irish primary school context. Drawing on many theoretical and contemporary sources, the study provides valuable insights on school leadership that is responsive to the multicultural school context. The focus is on the practice of the principal as school leader faced with the issues of diversity in the school population. It is apparent that the research has accomplished its purpose of contributing to the literature of school leadership in multicultural school contexts.