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Three Proper Purposes of Education¹

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In a world where the responsibilities of educational leaders are constantly expanding, where today's to-do list is displaced by unanticipated crises, interruptions, and new external demands, it is easy for educational leaders to lose sight of what, among all the important things they could be doing, is more important than the rest. How can they, in this complex, uncertain, and even chaotic environment, develop and sustain a sense of coherent purpose—a sense of purpose that will guide their decisions about what constitutes the right work?

In this chapter I argue that the right leadership work is that which achieves the proper purposes of educational institutions. I refer to proper purpose because for the last 50 years at least, sociologists of education have identified the numerous ways in which education has served improper purposes, such as perpetuation of social and racial inequalities through policies and practices like tracking, streaming, and disproportionate suspension and exclusion of certain student groups. My aim, as is appropriate for a book on virtuous educational leadership, is to identify the proper purposes of educational institutions so their leaders can steer a course towards the ideal.

Since it is the proper purpose of education as an institution that should shape leaders' role-related responsibilities, my first step in arriving at the right work of educational leadership is to settle on the proper purposes. That is the subject of this chapter. Once some clarity is gained about purposes, I examine the evidence (Chapter 2) about how students learn and how teachers foster that learning, because leaders' pursuit of the purposes should be strongly informed by the science of teaching and learning. It is from that evidence that I then derive the implications for the right work of educational leaders (Chapter 3).

¹ Portions of Chapters 1 and 2 are a slightly revised version of Robinson, V. (2022). What is distinctive about educational leadership? In R. Tierney, F. Rizvi, E. Kadriye, & G. H. Smith (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (4th ed.). Elsevier.

The Proper Purposes of Educational Institutions

So, what are the proper purposes of educational institutions? I tackle this question with a brief foray into philosophical writing on the proper functions, or purposes, of educational institutions. I then check the extent to which the three broad purposes derived from this philosophical analysis are reflected in the statements of purpose found in the policy and curriculum documents of seven educational jurisdictions. Next, I argue that at least one of the three broad purposes is unique to education, and that since the role obligations of educational leaders are derived from institutional purposes, educational leadership itself is distinctive from leadership in other domains.

Philosophical Accounts of Purpose

Over many decades, philosophers of education have debated the proper purpose of educational institutions (Hand, 2014). Those debates, which are never finally resolved, have traversed such issues as the relative importance of vocational preparation and broader civic education (Winch, 2002).

The stance I take with respect to these debates is that educational institutions have three purposes and that a crucial role of leaders is to make decisions that integrate rather than set up an opposition between them. Such integration requires not only the right philosophical commitments but also knowledge and skill in formulating curricula and pedagogies that enable integration of purposes that are too readily set in opposition to one another.

I call the three broad purposes of education:

- Preparation
- Socialisation
- Autonomy

Purposes related to **preparation** are focused on the acquisition of knowledge and skills that enable children and young persons to lead satisfying and productive lives, including enabling them to make choices about the type of paid employment they desire (MacAllister, 2016; Winch, 2002). The valued knowledge and skills range from various forms of literacy and numeracy to the specialist skills required for particular trades and professions. The importance of preparation is justified in terms of individual fulfilment (Winch, 2002), the relationship between a

strong national economy and a skilled workforce (Biesta, 2009; Winch, 2002), and the strong expectation of young people themselves that their schooling will prepare them for the pursuit of fulfilling paid employment (Winch, 2002).

Purposes related to **socialisation** are concerned with the initiation of students into particular cultures and communities, which may be associated with subject disciplines, professional groups, or political, social, religious, and ethnic traditions (Biesta, 2009). In democratic societies, socialisation includes providing students with the experiences and critical abilities that enable them to participate freely in community and civic life at school and beyond.

Some philosophers of education see it as critical that students are exposed over extended periods of time to members of different traditions, so they are equipped to engage in the type of debate that characterises an educated public (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002). The choices educators make about socialisation contribute to the formation of students' identity and to the historical continuity and renewal of cultures and traditions.

While the socialisation purpose is more obviously pursued in religious or special character schools, socialisation is involved in the way in which any knowledge and skills are represented. In teaching math, for example, the subject can be taught in ways that, wittingly or unwittingly, communicate to students that the purpose of their maths lessons is fluency—that is, to get the right answer as reliably and quickly as possible. Alternatively, math can be taught in ways that induct students into a mathematical community of practice through explicit teaching of mathematical ways of thinking and problem-solving. In making these choices, educators are socialising students into very different ways of doing math and being mathematicians.

This socialisation purpose is an inevitable concomitant of pursuing the first “preparation” purpose. It is the worth of what students are being socialised into and the mode of that socialisation that needs explicit debate. For example, it could be argued that student management practices such as detentions, lining up, and hall passes constitute an improper form of socialisation if they unnecessarily limit student autonomy.

My third set of purposes is the development of autonomous persons, with **autonomy** understood as the ability to manage one's life. This purpose provides a counterpoint to socialisation, for it involves the freedom to make choices about how to live in the world—choices that might

question or even reject the cultures and traditions into which one has been socialised (Biesta, 2009).

The development of autonomy requires educators to focus on three personal attributes (Winch, 2002). First, as students grow older, they begin to get a sense of the kind of life they would like to lead, and so the development of autonomy involves exercising choice about how they can achieve the fulfilment they envisage.

Second, students need sufficient knowledge, including self-knowledge, to make informed choices. Autonomy, in this educational sense, requires the development of a critical capacity to examine one's life so that judgment is not surrendered to the will of others or to uncontrolled inner drives. Third, students "need to be equipped with the self-mastery to pursue projects to a successful conclusion in the face of doubts and difficulties" (Winch, 2002, p. 103).

Teaching knowledge and skills (preparation) must be integrated with the deliberate development of autonomous persons so that students can lead lives that are personally meaningful and socially worthwhile. American philosopher of education Hugh Sockett explains the importance of integrating these two purposes as follows:

There is little point in business and industry's demanding people with knowledge and skills from the schools, if graduates lack integrity, are closed-minded, lack judgment, are not prepared to take risks intellectually, and have little self-understanding. Required, are not people with critical thinking "skills" but people who are critical thinkers. . . . Education's primary emphasis must be on those moral and intellectual dispositions that characterize the free, autonomous individual in a democratic society, developed through content embedded in official educational standards. (Sockett, 2012, pp. xi–xii)

In an era of fake news, science denial, and siloed social discourse, there has never been a greater need for educators to focus on how schools can strengthen the development of the moral and intellectual dispositions to which Sockett refers.

Official Statements of Purpose

To what extent are each of these three purposes (preparation, socialisation, and autonomy) enshrined in the official statements of educational purpose in Western democracies? This question is important because it

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does not make any sense to anchor the work of educational leadership in purposes derived from a philosophical analysis if there is little relationship between those purposes and curriculum policy.

While school districts and individual schools have some discretion about how they tailor policy to their local context, official statements of purpose are powerful because they signal what is valued by governing authorities and, in democratic societies, by those who elect them. In addition, such statements shape the frameworks against which local curricula are developed, schools are evaluated, and their leaders are selected and appraised.

I reviewed the official curriculum documents of seven jurisdictions (New Zealand; Victoria, Australia; California, United States; Ontario, Canada; England; Scotland; and Norway), paying particular attention to explicit or implicit statements of purpose. Since all seven jurisdictions have strong democratic and liberal traditions, I recognise that other purposes may be more relevant in countries with different political and cultural traditions.

Unsurprisingly, the first preparation purpose was the most salient. More surprising, perhaps, was the ambitiousness and richness of the nature of the preparation that was envisaged. Preparation was much more than the mastery of curriculum content in a range of subjects. Rather, it involved the development of students' competencies, requiring the integration of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to meet complex demands.

A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating. (OECD, 2005, p. 4)

The documents reviewed refer to such competencies as collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, adaptability, taking responsibility, and a strong sense of agency—competencies that are thought essential to living a fulfilling and productive life in the complex and uncertain world of the 21st century.

The more specific curriculum objectives that follow from the high-level purposes describe the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that

learners require to understand their world, analyse and solve problems in collaboration with others, transfer their learning to new contexts, and manage their own learning. The proper purpose of teaching history, for example, is not for students to learn screeds of facts but to understand the structure of a discipline in which facts are organised into bodies of knowledge and to engage in the forms of historical inquiry that are particular to the discipline (Bransford et al., 2000; OECD, 2019a).

Developing such competencies requires students, teachers, and leaders to embrace what has been called deep or deeper learning—terms I use interchangeably throughout this book. The U.S.–based National Research Council defines deeper learning as “the process through which an individual becomes capable of taking what was learned in one situation and applying it to new situations (i.e., transfer)” (National Research Council, 2012, p. 5). The individual becomes expert in a particular knowledge or skill domain and knows when, why, and how to apply that knowledge in solving newly encountered problems within that domain.

For many educators there is nothing new about deep learning. The goals of teaching transferable knowledge and of having students analyse and solve real-world problems, both independently and in collaboration with others, are articulated in the local curricula of many school districts. Similarly, there is already a great deal of research evidence about how students acquire and how teachers can foster the competencies involved in deep learning (Bransford et al., 2000; National Research Council, 2012). What is much more problematic is creating the conditions that make it happen in every class and in every school. My assumption is that if leaders understand that the preparation purpose of education requires deep learning and they have access to the research evidence on how it happens, they will be in much better position to pursue the purpose and responsibilities of their role.

The official documents I reviewed gave less explicit emphasis to socialisation and autonomy than to the preparation purpose. For example, official documents from California, Victoria, and Ontario all refer to the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to contribute to society but make little reference to the role of educational institutions in socialisation. In contrast, the English national curriculum document states that the English curriculum introduces students to “the best of what has been thought and said” (Department for Education, 2014, p. 6), and the New Zealand Ministry of Education makes the socialisation purpose explicit in its vision that every New Zealander “is strong in their national and cultural identity” (Ministry of Education, 2018).

The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research goes further by making explicit the values into which students shall be socialised in such statements as:

Education and training shall be based on fundamental values in Christian and humanist heritage and traditions, such as respect for human dignity and nature, and on intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality, and solidarity, values that also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 5)

Norway also stood out in its explicit reference to autonomy in such statements as “pupils and apprentices shall develop knowledge skills and attitudes so they can master their lives . . .” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 5), and “[educators] should stimulate pupils and apprentices/trainees to develop their own learning strategies and critical-thinking abilities” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, n.d., p. 2).

In summary, both philosophical writings and official statements suggest that educational institutions are charged with multiple complex purposes. While it is tempting to assume from these abstract formulations that there is tension between them (e.g., between socialisation and autonomy), the actual degree of tension will depend on their precise specification and on how they are pursued. For example, the pursuit of knowledge may be done in ways that indoctrinate, in which case there is considerable tension between the preparation and autonomy purposes, or there may be little tension, if preparation is pursued through a pedagogy that is educational in the sense of cultivating reason and independent thought.

The Distinctiveness of the Purposes

I turn now to the question of the distinctiveness of these three purposes. A great deal turns on that question, for if the purposes of educational institutions are not distinctive, then neither is the role of educational leadership. Educational authorities would be justified in recruiting and appointing school leaders from noneducational organisations, because leadership skills and knowledge would be treated as largely generic; that is, as readily transferable from one type of organisation to another (Shamir, 2013).

In other words, if the knowledge and skills needed to lead a school were the same as those required to lead a hospital or a business, then authorities could legitimately waive requirements that principals be registered

teachers. They could also justify the inclusion of business and management courses in preparation and development programmes for senior educational leaders. If, on the other hand, the skills and knowledge required to lead educational organisations are seen as particular to those organisations, then generic approaches will be found wanting, and more emphasis will be given to such things as how adult relationships in a school are conditioned by the requirement to achieve excellence in learning and teaching (Robinson, 2006).

European philosopher of education Gert Biesta argues that “what is special and most likely unique about education is that it is not orientated to *one* purpose . . . but actually is orientated to three purposes or, as I prefer to call it, three domains of purpose” (2020, p. 92).

For Biesta, the complexity and distinctiveness of education lie in the need for leaders to think about the implications of every decision for the quality of students’ preparation, socialisation, and opportunity to think and act autonomously. Educational leaders need to think in this three-dimensional space because students learn not only from content and how it is represented but also from the quality of their interactions with their teachers. That is why Biesta and other philosophers of education are calling for more attention to the values that leaders and teachers espouse and enact in pursuit of the three purposes.

My own view is that it is the substance of the purposes, rather than their number, that provides the stronger ground for claiming that the purposes of education are distinctive. While it could be argued that educational, religious, and cultural institutions all share a socialisation purpose, only education has preparation as a major purpose. Preparation involves developing the distinctively human qualities and abilities, such as reasoning, wisdom, and understanding, that enable people to manage their lives more intelligently and to appreciate the world in which they live (Pring, 2014). Only education is charged with developing students’ competencies by teaching the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are valued by a particular society and that can, at least at the secondary level, be accessed only at school.

Some may object that I have exaggerated the distinctiveness of educational institutions by overlooking the ways in which running a school is like running a business. That similarity is seen in the increasing intrusion of the language of business (e.g., *inputs, outputs, targets, performance indicators, chief executives, and clients*) into education and in calls for principals and other senior leaders to be trained in business management (Pring, 2014). Such intrusion is undeniable, particularly

in those jurisdictions where decisions about budgets, staffing, property, and health and safety are devolved to the local or school level.

The necessity for some managerial work in any organisation, including schools, does not undermine my claim about the distinctiveness of the purposes of education. The proper function of business, subject to relevant ethical constraints, is to produce “goods and services in such a way as to increase owner value . . .” (Swanton, 2016, p. 689). The proper function of education is to educate students in ways that achieve the three purposes.

The danger is not only that managing the school diverts leaders’ attention from pursuit of its educational purposes but also that its language and activities so infect the educational activities that they undermine or displace the pursuit of the educational purposes. Such displacement occurs, for example, when, in pursuit of exam targets, teachers are pressured to concentrate on those students who are achieving just below the required standard and to reduce their attention to those who are well below it (Pring, 2014).

In such examples, the proper purpose of preparing all students with valued knowledge and skills is displaced by an improper purpose—increasing the school’s ranking and reputation. One of the contributions of the philosophers of education discussed earlier is their call for constant vigilance in ensuring that the necessary management aspects of schooling serve rather than displace educational purposes (Pring, 2014; MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002). Such vigilance can be fostered by making certain that leaders have a deep understanding of the purposes and a strong commitment to achieving them.

The position I take is that the distinctive purposes of educational institutions lead to the unique role-related responsibilities of educational leaders and the unique core technologies required to achieve them. Although there are commonalities across educational and noneducational leadership, the unique purposes of the former, and the distinctive knowledge and skills required to pursue them, have been given far too little emphasis. It is these distinctive purposes that should shape the work of educational leaders.

Less Satisfactory Approaches to Identifying the Right Work

It is unusual in a book on educational leadership to devote a chapter to discussion of educational purposes. I have done so because

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The proper function of education is to educate students in ways that achieve the three purposes: preparation, socialisation, and autonomy.

I am anchoring my account of the work of educational leadership in the distinctive nature of the purposes of educational institutions and in the consequent distinctiveness of the work of its leaders. Since this approach is quite different from more typical strategies for identifying the right work of educational leadership, I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of these more typical approaches and why I have found them wanting.

One typical approach to identifying the right work is to use descriptive research on what educational leaders currently do in order to build frameworks for recruiting, identifying, and developing educational leaders. The qualitative and quantitative methods involved include field observations, diaries, logs, and surveys of leaders' involvement in various activities (Grissom et al., 2013; Sebastian et al., 2018; Spillane et al., 2008).

The classic example of such descriptive research is Wolcott's (1973/2003) anthropological study of the school life of one elementary school principal. It resulted in a view of the work of principals as comprising fragmented and short activity sequences in which there was little time for reflection. Wolcott also noted the frequent political intrusions and, in comparison to other higher-status professions, the lack of technical expertise that characterises the role.

Such descriptive research provides important information about how the role is currently enacted and, as such, offers an important reality check on those who promote a radically different vision for the role. For example, descriptive research on the time principals spend being instructional leaders has prompted important questions about why, despite the espousal by most principals of this type of leadership, it is so difficult for them to make the shifts that they desire (Hallinger, 2005; Shaked, 2019).

But while utopian visions for educational leadership are to be avoided, the reification of the status quo is equally undesirable. Descriptions of how educational leaders currently do their work should not be interpreted as setting the standard for how they should work. Nor should such descriptions be used uncritically when formulating policies and procedures for identifying, preparing, and inducting the next generation of educational leaders. Rather, we need a normative standard for how educational leaders should work and detailed descriptive research that enables us to identify the gap between that standard and current leadership practice. I am suggesting that the standard should be derived from the work required to achieve the distinctive and proper purposes of educational institutions.

A second typical approach to determining the right work of educational leaders is based on evidence of the differential impact of different types of leadership on valued student outcomes. In this approach, tighter links are made between leadership work and educational purposes because student outcomes are used as a standard for what counts as the right leadership work.

Sufficient research on the relationship between different types of leadership and student outcomes has now been published to warrant the conduct of several meta-analyses (Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2008; Witziers et al., 2003). Despite the considerable theoretical and methodological challenges involved in tracing causal paths between leadership and student outcomes, the overall conclusion from this research is that “the more leaders focus their relationships, their work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 636).

While the current focus on the links between educational leadership and student outcomes has brought us closer to identifying the nature of the work involved in achieving the purpose of educational institutions, it still falls short of enabling us to precisely identify the nature of that work. It falls short because the standardised tests of student achievement that are typically used do not capture the richness and ambitiousness of the three educational purposes. Preparation is no longer only about promoting student achievement in literacy and numeracy and gaining qualifications—important as those are—but about all students achieving the competencies associated with deeper learning. The purpose of schooling is now specified more precisely as the development of learners who understand their world and are able to collaboratively analyse important problems, transfer their learning, and be self-managing (Graesser et al., 2018). The autonomy purpose is now strongly shaping how the preparation purpose is to be understood.

The standardised assessments used in the great majority of research on the impact of school leadership on student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2008; Sun & Leithwood, 2015; Witziers et al., 2003) do not capture the complexity of the deeper learning competencies described by Graesser et al. (2018). While a programme of research and development for the assessment of key competencies is underway (OECD, 2019b), it will be a long time before research will provide reliable evidence about the relationships between various types of leadership practice and the development of those competencies.

When leaders are knowledgeable about the science of deep learning and its implications for teaching, they can lead in ways that are more likely to be successful in achieving the distinctive purposes of schooling.

That is why we need to be cautious in how we use the current evidence about the impact of leadership on student outcomes to determine the right work for school leaders. Even if we had a strong evidence base describing the links between leadership and measures of deeper learning, a great deal of wisdom would be needed to identify how leaders ensure that teachers provide high-quality opportunities for deeper learning.

The position I take is that an important starting point for gaining such wisdom is the science of how students learn. When leaders are knowledgeable about the science of deep learning and its implications for teaching, they can lead in ways that are more likely to be successful in achieving the distinctive purposes of schooling. In the following two chapters, I summarise what I think leaders should know about how students learn for understanding, and about how to teach for such deep learning, before discussing some of the implications of that body of research for the distinctive work of educational leaders.

SUMMARY

The right work for educational leaders is the dedicated pursuit of the distinctive purposes of educational institutions. Drawing on recent debates in the philosophy of education, I argue that those purposes are preparation, socialisation, and the development of autonomy.

Purposes related to preparation are focused on the acquisition of knowledge and skills that enable children and young persons to lead satisfying and productive lives, including enabling them to make choices about the type of paid employment they desire. Purposes related to socialisation are concerned with the initiation of students into particular cultures and communities, which may be associated with subject disciplines, professional groups, or political, social, religious, and ethnic traditions (Biesta, 2009). Purposes related to the development of autonomy foster increased student choice about the type of life they wish to lead and how to pursue it. It is the duty of educators to develop students' knowledge, skills, and critical capacities so they can exercise their autonomy without surrendering to the will of others or to uncontrolled inner drives.

The challenge for educational leaders is to make decisions that integrate these three purposes rather than set up oppositions between them. Such integration is promoted by the emphasis on competencies in many modern curricula, for they require that students be increasingly self-directed in their application of their knowledge and skills to real-world challenges.

Educational institutions are distinctive because their purposes are distinctive. While educational, religious, and cultural institutions all share a socialisation purpose, only educational institutions have preparation as their major purpose. The distinctive purposes of educational institutions lead to the unique role-related responsibilities of educational leaders and the unique core technologies required to achieve them. Although there are commonalities across educational and noneducational leadership, the unique purposes of the former, and the distinctive knowledge and skills required to pursue them, mean that deep educational knowledge and experience are critical to performing the role of a school leader.

REFLECTION AND ACTION



1. In your context, how much importance is given to each of the three purposes of education as an institution? What shifts do you think might be needed?
2. The development of autonomy is not just a matter of giving students choices. How well are the three conditions required for the development of autonomy met in your context?
3. In your system, is educational leadership seen as distinctive from other forms of leadership? What makes it more or less distinctive? Do you agree with the argument for distinctiveness put forward in this chapter?