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Resurrecting Pragmatism as a Philosophical Frame for Understanding, Researching, and Developing Performance in the Small District Superintendency

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Rhonda McClellan,
and Adrienne E. Hyle

We propose in this article that pragmatism is a perspective with great promise for understanding and researching the work of small district superintendents and developing the abilities of both pre-service students and in-service practitioners to do that work. We maintain, based on our reading of focus group interviews with small district superintendents, that pragmatism adds important dimensions to understanding, researching, and developing the superintendency largely absent in other philosophical frames currently in use.

Pragmatism has three characteristics: (1) a disinterest in metaphysical questions, i.e., questions dealing with ultimate realities beyond the physical world; (2) related to the first characteristic, a disbelief in absolute eternal truths and thus a disbelief in foundations, certainties upon which we can build all our knowledge or morals; and (3) most important for our views, a focus on the practical and on successful problem solving as the only validation of beliefs. Hilpinen (1999) explained that pragmatism began with the work of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce in the early 1870's who held that the meaning of any expression is determined by how practical everyday life would be affected if it were true. Precisely because of traditional philosophy's efforts to focus on truth and meaning beyond practical everyday life, Peirce's criteria led some to characterize pragmatism not as a philosophy, but as an anti-philosophy. John Dewey is the pragmatist with the greatest direct effect on education in the United

States of America. Because of pragmatic criteria that ideas were to be evaluated on their practical utility for a given society at a given time, Dewey (1957) viewed traditional western philosophies as conceptual schemes of only limited usefulness to him and his contemporaries since traditional philosophies had not addressed the problems of people who lived after the occurrence of scientific, political, and industrial revolutions.

First, because pragmatism depends on a non-foundational epistemology, it seems to us consistent with how our participants described their work, problem-solving amid great conflict and uncertainty, with no clear, final, uncontested ends to guide them. As one superintendent stated:

Probably the one thing that I've realized is that everything is not black and white. Everything is not in policy. Everything is not mandated, and you have to make decisions pretty much daily on things that are not black and white. You have to enter that gray area and you have to make decisions on what's best for your students (Superintendent 20, Southwest & West, 2005).¹

Second, since pragmatism emphasizes solving problems, it is relevant to how our participants described their work. According to pragmatism, the main understanding worth searching for (including in all the academic disciplines) is the effort that "has been found to yield the maximum of achievement" (Dewey, 1957, p. 138). We see the small district superintendents doing precisely this kind of thinking.

This is less a research article than an argument intended to motivate discussion. That is, we do not review the literature, derive research questions, and then mine the data for answers to the questions. Rather, we discuss how we are inspired by our reading of the transcripts and our considering the perceptions of our participants to review philosophical perspectives currently in-use in scholarship on educational leadership. We contrast pragmatism with three other commonly-used epistemological frames: positivism/postpositivism, postmodernism/poststructuralism, and critical theory to explain why we think pragmatism brings a perspective essential to researching and developing the superintendency.

Methods and Results

Six Voices 3 focus groups were conducted with 37 superintendents. Three of the focus groups were with superintendents from the Midwest, two from the Southwest and West; and one from the Southeast. We considered only the words of those superintendents in small districts (student enrollment less than 1,000) in our review.

We read each transcript and derived themes that seemed persistent. Then, we revisited these themes, refined our definitions of them and identified other themes. Once we had agreement between two authors on each revised theme definition, we selected two themes that seemed to us, to capture the small district superintendents' view of problem solving. Then two of us each took the revised theme definition and coded the original set of six transcripts according to it. Finally, each of us reviewed the other's coding. We considered validly coded segments where two of us agreed on the coding, and none of us objected. We describe these two themes below and explain how pragmatism clarified our understanding of superintendents' perceptions in important ways missing from the other three perspectives: positivism / postpositivism; postmodernism / poststructuralism; and critical theory.

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Small District Superintendents Must Keep People Focused

The first theme is consistent with pragmatism's attention to problem solution and, in particular, with pragmatism's interest in knowing what one "is about," intending "certain consequences," being able to "anticipate what is going to happen," and "therefore, get ready or prepare in advance so as to secure beneficial consequences and avert undesirable ones" (Dewey, 1966, p. 77). Superintendents must focus stakeholders' attention on what is best for students. Based on their experiences and the consequences they have faced in education, superintendents have to spend time trying to rectify thinking, action, and situations. They turn people away from minutiae or personal agendas and steer them back to doing what is needed for students. They described carrying out this action with students, teachers, principals, parents, local elected officials, and other community members, even their own friends. For example, Superintendent 17 said of board members:

I think the challenge also is that—we've all had this experience—is getting board members elected or appointed with a specific agenda that doesn't always seem to be focused on what's good for kids. The thing that we've got to do, gently, and sometimes not so gently, is to bring them back around in their focus on every decision that's made by the board and ask the question, how does this approach benefit our children versus this other approach? (Southeast, 2006)

Small District Superintendents Monitor Positive Effects

The second theme is consistent with pragmatism's focus on the effectiveness of superintendents' efforts as the main guide for considering their work. Superintendents monitor the positive effects of their decisions, actions, or experiences. In the focus groups, they discussed positive effects of the following: pursuing their visions; making decisions about students; hiring good people; promoting accountability and getting people to base decisions on data; fostering professional developing; terminating ineffective personnel; securing resources and channeling them effectively; soliciting meaningful input from employees, parents, and other community members; building relationships; dealing with crisis and tragedy; getting boards to respect their decisions; and improving student achievement. In the following example, Superintendent 25 described seeing the positive results from her efforts:

But then from the superintendency end—again it's not one specific thing—it's a series of things that just by very small movements or very small suggestions, all of a sudden out of that grows so much positive in things you can do. It's not just at the board table, but it's at the correspondence that comes across your desk, the offers that are out there, and it's that linker. And you realize that you're the only person there that's doing that, and if it would not be for you making that phone call to this or latching on to that, all of sudden a whole series of things set in motion would never be (Midwest, 2004).

Contrasting Pragmatism with Three Other Perspectives

We suggest that three other perspectives—positivism/postpositivism, postmodernism/poststructuralism, and critical theory—fall short in guiding study of the work of small district superintendents because they lack the emphasis on either uncertainty or practicality. We offer definitions of these three perspectives often found in the curricula of

leadership programs and used as guides to research and to develop administrators' work. We then summarize their strengths and weaknesses.²

Positivism/Postpositivism

Positivism/postpositivism emphasizes the merits of science. We use the term "postpositivism" because "positivism" is often associated with logical positivism, a movement simultaneously used to explain scientific knowledge philosophically and to make philosophy as rigorous a discipline as the natural sciences. Logical positivism, specifically, has few adherents among scholars of educational administration; postpositivism is still seen as a viable approach. Lincoln and Guba (2000) described postpositivism as a perspective that recognizes the limitations of positivism to get at reality, but still holds to an assumption that there is an external reality that can be apprehended, though "only imperfectly and probabilistically" (p. 165). Postpositivism was most relevant to educational administration during the theory movement of the 1950s through the 1970s. "The theory movement sought . . . correctness of administrative decision-making as a matter of fact to be validated by evidence of effectiveness, and the development of context-free, law-like generalizations" (Ivory, 2006, p. 781). Echoes of positivism can still be found in efforts to identify best practices, "leadership practices [that] are valuable in almost all contexts" (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005, p. 19).

Postmodernism/Poststructuralism

For purposes of this study, we conflate postmodernism and poststructuralism to describe a variety of approaches that: repudiate the idea that "there can be any absolute foundation for knowledge" (Schutz, 2000, p. 216); work to understand and expose "that objects are constituted or defined by underlying linguistic, cultural, economic, or mental distinctions" (Bredo, 2006, p. 19); analyze texts for "antinomies, contradictions, silences, and hidden hierarchies" (English, 2006, p. 783); and reveal "the way in which the social sciences have served as instruments of 'the disciplinary society'" (Rorty, 1982, p. 204). We refer to such perspectives henceforth as "postmodernism."

Critical Theory

Critical theory refers to a "range of scholarship critical of existing economic, social, or political arrangements" (Bredo, 2006, p. 23). These arrangements color and shape the efforts of participants, who are regularly unconscious of this and believe they are being objective. Furthermore, critical theory warns "of the moral failings of our acquiescence to the system" (Grogan, 2004, p. 223). For purposes of this article, we emphasize critical theory's efforts to point out where systems fail to foster justice and human development.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Three Perspectives

Postpositivism, postmodernism, and critical theory provide important insights into public education and school leadership. We respect postpositivism's emphases on "obeying the normal conventions of your discipline" (Rorty, 1982, p. 194), attending to evidence, attempting to separate personal hopes and fears from interpretations, and being open to inquiry and falsification. We appreciate postmodernist approaches for their reminders "to look behind the new freedoms which political democracy has brought, at new forms of constraint which democratic societies have imposed" (Rorty, 1989, p. 62). We

value critical theory in our field, specifically, for its emphasis on social justice and for constantly raising the question, “Who benefits from our educational policies and practices and who loses out” (Grogan, 2004, p. 223), but all three, we argue, are limited in the scope of their application to understanding and guiding the work of small district superintendents.

Postpositivism’s search for an objective, or nearly objective, reality seems to miss the point in public education’s efforts to produce a better human future. Its emphasis on generalities seems misplaced. As Dewey (1957) wrote, “Conceptions, theories, and systems of thought are always open to development through use... We must be on the lookout for indications to alter them as for opportunities to assert them” (p. 145). We illustrate our point with Leithwood and Reihl’s (2005) “four strong claims about school leadership” (p. 14). One component, for example, refers to “identifying and articulating a vision” (p. 20). We have no argument with any of what Leithwood and Reihl offer. The limitation of postpositivism are revealed when its exponents present findings as established truths, rather than as promising insights that turn out “to be good for some purposes in some situations, rather than wonderful in all respects” (Bredo, 2006, p. 3). In this regard, we note that the challenges of the small district superintendency seem to come precisely from variability in specific situations. Our reading of the superintendents’ words suggests that the challenge is not in knowing that it is important to identify and articulate a vision, but in carrying out that task in the specific time and place in which the superintendent finds him/herself. In fact, one of the themes we presented here is the effort superintendents devoted to steering stakeholders away from minutiae and other distractions so that they could return the emphasis to the district vision. We do not find postpositivism wrong here so much as limited in what it can offer. Its findings seem irrelevant “to most of the interesting decisions people really face” (Feuer, 2006, p. 67).

The potential of postmodernism is that “it can promote a level playing field in the competition of ideas and perspectives” (English, 2006, p. 783) and thus enable new, more promising, ideas to surface. Grogan (2004) advised that superintendents learn from postmodernism the importance of constructing narratives other than those proposed by the dominant establishment, but postmodernism approaches often seem to evoke despair of improving situations. For example, Foucault admitted, “To participate in this difficult displacement of forms of sensibility and thresholds of tolerance—I hardly feel capable of attempting much more than that” (cited in Bredo, 2006, p. 19), but small district superintendents need more than that if they are to foster good educational experiences.

We agree that superintendents may benefit from considering a wide range of ideas and from gathering and listening to a multitude of perspectives, but for our superintendents, it was not merely a matter of being open to other narratives. It was also a matter of distinguishing between stakeholders who sincerely wanted to work toward reasonable solutions and those who merely wanted to push decisions in a particular direction. Superintendent 7 cautioned:

The tricky thing is that some people are bullies... and they speak louder than everybody else. They push people down.

So how do you orchestrate it so that everybody who wants to have a voice has a voice, and it’s heard?” (Midwest, 2006).

We see little in postmodernism to guide them in accomplishing such work or in monitoring its success. Postmodernism emphasizes

questioning assumptions behind definitions of problems; it has shown comparatively little interest in problems once they are defined.

We find illuminating and helpful Schutz’s (2000) work to identify ways in which postmodernism could contribute to the teaching of freedom. He affirmed that postmodernists often argue for greater freedom while simultaneously urging the questioning of all assumptions, including assumptions about freedom. Schutz wondered how postmodernism could guide movement toward working for freedom in the midst of questioning the worth of all efforts and the assumptions on which those efforts were based. He concluded that there was still room in postmodernism (despite its skepticism) for selecting strategies to achieve goals. We are convinced by his argument, and note that it seems compatible with our understanding of pragmatism. Pragmatism has given up on epistemic foundations as postmodernism has, but it deals more directly than postmodernism with the need to solve problems in day-to-day life. We contend that a postmodernist who desires to work with the superintendency might best consider him/herself a pragmatist for that purpose and consider, amid the necessary work of deconstructing unquestioned assumptions, how to work to solve practical problems.

We assess much writing from the critical theorists the way Szasz (1976) assessed the platonic view of ethics. To paraphrase, it is fine for those to whom the superintendency “is a spectator sport; the players, however, need something that gives them a little more protection in the clinches” (p. 33). Those who lead, those who aspire to lead, and those who teach them must come down from the ivory tower and into the arena and problem solve amid great complexity with insufficient information to guide them. Their efforts can then always be critiqued by anyone who did not have to make them. We find critical theory too often guilty of what Feuer (2006) referred to as after-the-fact assessment “of the ‘rightness’ of any particular answer” (p. 67); and the question emerges: What good is critique if we do not provide clues about initiating positive action? We believe that critical theory provides too little in the way of positive guidance.

In fact, we think critical theory is caught in a trap it has worked diligently to perfect. Evans (2007) illustrates our point. She recounted in positive terms the work of the Highlander School for African American adults. We noticed that in describing this positive example of a school that fostered social justice, she largely neglected the discourse of critical theory. Then, once she had completed her description of the Highlander School, she urged researchers to focus “on oppression and discrimination and the analysis of empirical data as possible methods to reveal the ways that schools may perpetuate inequalities” (p. 267), a tactic she herself did not deploy in describing the school. We believe the citing of positive examples is outside the critical theoretical repertoire because it is outside of the critical theory perspective. To sum up, we believe that critical theory makes important contributions to school leadership but falls short in recounting positive examples that can also make important contributions. We find critical theory incapable of providing this second contribution. We believe Feuer’s (2006) caution is appropriate here against a stance “in which *no* findings are tolerated except those that point to flaws in... policies and practices” (p. 69).

We note that Evans (2007) is not the only researcher who seems to step away from the strict confines of critical theory when engaging with the world of practice to see how it can be improved. Hoffman and Burello (2004) began their study of superintendents by noting

Foster's division of leadership into protest leadership and institutional leadership, with an implicit nod to protest leadership that "is designed to overthrow systems of domination" (p. 271), but by the end of their study, they wrote mostly approvingly of the work of several superintendents who were in fact not trying to overthrow anything, but merely rethinking their efforts. Hoffman and Burello provide another example of critical theorists having to step away from their own preferred approaches when they engage with the real struggles of education leaders.

Can Pragmatism Guide Understanding, Researching and Developing the Small District Superintendency?

We see pragmatism as vulnerable to criticisms as postpositivism, postmodernism, and critical theory. We highlight two here: (1) pragmatism can easily devolve into a narrow instrumentalism that justifies any action by its short-term gains; and (2) pragmatism can restrict itself to problems and solutions of only the dominant members of society. Instrumentalism shows up, for example, in school district responses to accountability systems that overemphasize scores on standardized assessments, exclude children from standardized testing, or outright cheat to meet political or public relations goals. Some who justify such actions announce that they are being pragmatic, but we note that there is nothing inherent in writings of major pragmatist writers that makes such narrow views necessary or even likely (Rorty, 1982, 1989, 1999; West, 1989, 2004). The writings of these scholars show them grappling with as serious and profound ethical issues as writers from any other perspective. Their writings also show that pragmatism has the wherewithal to criticize a narrow focus on goals.

The second critique of pragmatism is that it focuses on the concerns and perspectives of white men like its most famous progenitors. West (1989) argued that James and Dewey aspired to bring about social reform, but he accused them both of seeing such reform overwhelmingly in terms of the concerns and values of people like themselves and the actions that people like themselves could take. Pragmatism must be open to the perspectives and participation of marginalized people and must deal with the concerns they bring to discussions. We believe there is sufficient evidence in pragmatist writings, particularly Rorty's (1982, 1989) discussions of the creation of new vocabularies and his arguing for "taking the needs and interests of more and more diverse human beings into account" (1999, p. 82), and West's evocation of what he calls "prophetic pragmatism" (1989, 2004), that pragmatism can rise to the task of considering a wide range of perspectives.

Recommendations

Since it seems to us from reading these transcripts that pragmatism coheres with how small district superintendents describe their work, we see promise in pragmatism (that we do not see in the other three perspectives) for researching the superintendency and developing both candidates and practitioners. How do we think things would look different in the academy if research on and preparation for the small district superintendency were guided predominantly by pragmatism rather than the other perspectives? An implication of our view is that our research and our teaching should focus on examples from practice, specifically on practical problem-solving efforts and consider them from different points of view, including those of superintendents.

Feuer (2006) described pragmatism as, "doing the smartest thing possible under the very real constraints of time, resources, and context" (p. 69). We suggest that striving to understand and improve the problem solving capabilities of superintendents and aspirant superintendents may be the most productive work in which we academics can engage, and we agree with Feuer (2006) that effective problem-solving does not entail that superintendents' efforts always result in "maximal solutions" (p. 74).

Therefore, we should not expect studies of the superintendency, our preparation of candidates for the superintendency, or our professional development efforts with superintendents to culminate in superintendents who never make mistakes, never lose their jobs, or always make optimal decisions. Rather, we should strive to provide the most sophisticated understanding of relevant concepts and the richest variety of experiences we can with a view to having those who learn from us develop the greatest variety of problem solving approaches possible in the finite time we have. Dewey's (1966) claim, "The purpose of school education is to insure the continuance of education" (p. 51), is relevant to our efforts to educate superintendents. We should consider our efforts in terms of whether they foster continued learning in our superintendent and aspirant-superintendent clients.

We think the suggestions of Björk, Kowalski, and Browne-Ferrigno (2005) are promising in light of a pragmatic framework to guide preparation of superintendents. First, create university/district partnerships that provide candidates both intellectual development and practical experience, "expanding work embedded learning and performance-based assessment" (Björk et al., p. 88). Second, replace admissions processes that are largely based on self-selection with university/district partnerships that actively recruit promising candidates and increase admission requirements and prepare candidates in cohorts with demanding performance standards. Third, identify "where knowledge and practice align" and develop learning experiences based on the alignment "to enhance learning and work performance" (Björk et al., p. 92). Fourth, provide internships in which candidates can develop their espoused theories into their theories-in-use. Fifth, foster mentoring relationships between veteran superintendents and aspirant and beginning ones. We would add to Björk et al.'s fifth recommendation that our investigations suggest that as superintendents develop in experience and competence, the definition of mentoring broadens and a wider variety of individuals can provide mentor-like guidance (McClellan, Ivory, & Domínguez, 2008). Sixth, systematically push candidates to develop reflective-thinking processes. We must find ways to monitor our efforts, not in terms of whether they prepare graduates for every challenge they will encounter in the superintendency, but whether they prepare superintendents to continue learning to deal well with the challenges they will encounter.

As for research, we think the UCEA Voices effort from Kochan, Jackson, and Duke (1999) to the present is essential in enhancing understanding of the real work superintendents do, the challenges they face, and the way they think about them. We also believe research on the superintendency should focus at this point on in-depth case studies of superintendents' problem-solving experiences. The UCEA Voices studies have enabled insights into how superintendents self-report their beliefs and work. Case studies can now draw on perceptions and reports of others to enhance our understanding of the complexity of the problems superintendents face, the variety

of efforts they make to solve them, the chain of events and effects that follow from their actions, and how superintendents see themselves learning from their experiences (Sosniak, 2006). We do not argue that superintendents' actions should never be critiqued by academicians, and even if we as researchers do occasionally emphasize critique, our critique must be guided by our understanding of the need to help people carry out the superintendency more effectively.

Throughout the years of Voices research, we academics have been grateful to the practicing administrators who have given their valuable time to share with us their perspectives and opinions. We can show our gratitude most appropriately by making the guiding star of our scholarly work the need to support these leaders in their practical problem-solving efforts to develop schools that are effective for all who participate in them and all who are served by them.

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Endnote

¹ See the introduction to this special issue for a full description of the methodology of the Voices 3 project. Below is an excerpt describing the methodology for the superintendents' focus groups:

"With regard to the articles in this issue, we have protected the confidentiality of participants but, at the same time, tried to give readers a flavor of their individuality. From the beginning, we were concerned that some states had such a small number of superintendents that they might be identifiable. As a result, superintendents' locations were identified only in terms of regions...Next, we randomly ordered the superintendent focus groups and numbered each superintendent consecutively from the first focus group to the last...In addition to a number and a region, superintendents were identified by the size of their district...Both superintendents and principals were identified by the year the focus group took place."

² Space limitations force us to use definitions that oversimplify complicated stances, with long histories of their use in scholarship. We realize this, but we proceed as we do to clarify how we use the terms.