Review Essay: The Pedagogic Principal by Rodney Evans, 3(19)

Hans Smits

hsmits@ucalgary.ca

University of Calgary


Rod Evans' book, The Pedagogic Principal is guided by the question "what does it mean to be a principal, an educational administrator?" Whether or not the word play is intended, the title reflects the unswervingly normative argument of the book for pedagogic principles that ought to constitute the work of school administrators. As I will discuss in this review, that argument is both a strength and a weakness of the book. It is a strength because Evans reminds us of what is lost when principals take on the trappings-the language, methods, and dispositions-of a modern management approach to school administration. Principles of management, largely derived from the study of modern business and government organizations, have come to dominate conceptions of school administration. As Evans convincingly maintains, what becomes lost is an understanding of the meaning of being a principal that is oriented by educational and pedagogic intentions. In his words, "To be a principal in a strong sense is to have a feel for the deep meaning of education, to understand how education cannot be reduced to behavioural competencies, management-by-objectives and so forth without losing all that is human and pedagogic in schooling" (p. 56).

Unfortunately, the strong moral tone of the book also constitutes its weakness. While Evans' argument is largely defensible on moral grounds, it ironically lacks a greater sensitivity to that which both constrains and enables what he terms "pedagogic" approaches to school administration. Thus, a reader of this book may well agree in principle with the normative orientation of the book-if it is not outrightly dismissed-but perhaps feel that Evans has insufficiently attended to the complexities of lived experiences. The book often reads as if it is too quickly judgmental, unintentionally conveying an absence of more empathic understandings of the difficulties of daily life in schools. Likewise, Evans' book is interesting as well in its claim for the strength of a certain methodological approach, but as I will contend, this is also a significant weakness of the book.

Evans builds his analysis of the "pedagogic principle" on the basis of what he terms a "hermeneutic phenomenological" approach: one that derives meaning from an interpretation of life-world experiences, with an analysis that resists a priori and abstracted theoretical
presuppositions. Methodologically, the book is, in Evans' terms, a "strong" and committed reading of the experiences of being a principal. The most interesting parts of the discussion are in fact the "stories" of principals' experiences. These accounts, derived from interviews conducted by Evans, invite the reader to share in the interpretation of the meaning of everyday situations encountered by principals in schools.

The stories evoke, as is Evans' intent, a moral response: what is the right pedagogic response to particular situations, which occur everyday in school, and demand action by teachers and principals? And how does one make decisions that have pedagogic results for the child? Would I have done it differently if I was in that principal's shoes? In order to interrogate the stories of principals for their pedagogic content-or lack thereof-Evans provides excerpts of principals' accounts, and then applies what he terms a "strong" reading of them. Several kinds of situations are described, all of them familiar to anyone who has worked in a school. In one story, entitled, "Defending the Rules", a principal recounts to Evans his decision to suspend a student who has used abusive language in his resistance to an act of teacher authority. The following is an excerpt of Evans' "strong" reading of the story:

In this story, we find ourselves once again in the presence of a not uncommon school situation: a middle-school student violates the rule against gum-chewing and is foul-mouthed to the teacher when reprimanded. The principal feels that decisive action is called for and hands the boy a 3-day suspension. Other than justifying the action to the boy's parents, it seems as if the problem can be considered solved (p. 97). [Then further on] The main difficulty with this story is that the principal sees schools as moral places, but he does not see them as pedagogic places. Or rather he sees the pedagogic character of schools as deriving from its moral character rather than the other way around. What the principal orients to is the rule·rather than to the normative necessity for the rule (p. 98; italics in original).

Now, this particular story is representative of what I found to be a strength and weakness in Evans' book, which made it on the whole a frustrating experience to read. On the one hand, Evans clearly articulates that there is an important difference between just asserting rules and acting morally in the pedagogic interests of the child. It may well be that by simply enforcing a rule, the child or student may not learn any greater appreciation for what constitutes ethical behaviour, and from a pedagogic view, does not learn to exercise better judgement and self-control. Moreover, in simply enforcing rules, the opportunity is also lost for the child to develop an appreciation for rules within the terms of responsibility for others.

Thus, Evans' reading of this situation is a very important one in the context of current demands to have schools exercise "zero tolerance" for certain kinds of behaviours on the part of students, and indeed to become places which enforce particular views of morality. Indeed, it might be argued that there is currently a desire or hunger-if not an outright response to panic in the face of a few widely publicized tragic events-for schools to function as moral communities, where moral ambiguity is reduced through the strict application of normative standards. It is the strength of Evans' readings of encounters, like the one described here, to remind us of what can be forsaken in the rush to correct what are considered the ills of a perceived relativism in the larger society. As Evans emphasizes, schools are particular kinds of social organizations whose main purpose is a pedagogic one.
He especially builds on a notion of pedagogy that has been developed in the work of Max van Manen, one of his doctoral supervisors. van Manen has been most influential in recovering and disseminating a meaning of pedagogy, according to van Manen (1991), has tended to be forgotten in the attempt to derive principles of education that are negligent of the pre-conceptual grounding of pedagogy in the authoritative relationship adults have with children. As Evans suggests, in the excerpt cited above, there are certain normative conditions that indeed would characterize an action as "educational" as opposed to simply instrumental or efficient in the interests of maintaining order. According to Evans, a tragedy of modern educational administration is that decisions are increasingly managerial in nature and have less to do with the educational purposes for which schools exist. This is certainly an argument that makes Evans' book a worthwhile read: it tweaks, or ought to, the consciences of those who would operate schools in ways that neglect pedagogical and educational ends.

However, what diminishes the power of Evans' position is the lack of attention he pays to the complexity of schools, and the complex demands that are placed on the people who function in them as teachers and principals. While Evans does acknowledge at various points in the text that indeed schools are complex places, and that the daily and mundane decisions that need to be made cannot always be certain of hitting the pedagogic mark, the overall effect of Evans' work is to define "pedagogic principles" and the work of principals in oddly decontextualized ways. The result is a kind of reductionism to pedagogy that occurs in Evans' analysis—one might argue that not everything in the work of the principal can be defined in pedagogic terms, or at least in terms of the kind of pedagogy that Evans adopts from van Manen's work.

Evans' description of the event excerpted above is a case in point. Evans emphasizes that the moral character of the school ought to derive from a pedagogic orientation. His analysis, however, does not attune itself to the complex life in schools. Nor does it attend to the various kinds of discourses about what constitutes good educational practice and how those get played out in the work of principal, or indeed serves to constrain such work so as to limit its pedagogic significance. Thus, he fails to adequately respond to the question he poses for the practice of school leadership: "where do we turn to locate that which authorizes us as principals, as educational administrators?" (p. 79; italics in original). In the complex interrelationships suggested by the story, "Defending the Rules", as in many of the others related by Evans, it is simply too naïve, and indeed willfully so, to ignore the way in which the principal attempts to play out his responsibility in the context of multiple realities and pressures.

The incomplete way that Evans chooses to construct his interpretations of the principal's stories included in the book can perhaps be blamed on his methodological approach. The strength of the approach is that Evans' readings of the diverse stories open up to multiple and even contesting interpretations, although, he does in advance want to limit the correct interpretation to what he terms the pedagogic responsibility of the principal. But that approach perhaps demonstrates both the limits of a strictly phenomenological approach and the particular way that Evans takes up phenomenology. He does not take up nor adequately defend, in substantial and historical terms, the nature of phenomenology and how it may be applied to the study of school administration. As a consequence, the book is not totally convincing in either its substantive or methodological argument. In his so-called "strong readings", Evans has a tendency to read into the stories so as to be able to make a point. But that kind of interpretation does violence to the multiple
possibilities that exist, and is furthermore disingenuous in terms of understanding actual situations.

What Evans terms a "hermeneutic phenomenological" approach does provide important insights that may indeed be lost in the rush to find congruence with a style of leadership that seeks legitimacy in modern managerial theory. But Evans approach to phenomenological inquiry does not tell the whole story. One of the criticisms that may be leveled at a strictly phenomenological approach is that it carries the danger of limiting interpretation to the subjectivity of actors. Paul Ricoeur, an important philosopher of hermeneutics, has criticized the reduction of interpretation to certainty by ignoring the necessity that "every application [for example, Evans' application of hermeneutic phenomenology to stress the essential character and nature of pedagogy] must reflect upon its status as interpretation because a domain of application always has its limits" (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 304).

Moreover, Ricoeur stresses that a more substantial interpretive approach requires the interpreter to move beyond a limited linguistic approach. A fuller interpretation requires attention to not just the words of those whose actions are being interpreted—but also the interactions and interrelationships among important texts, events, institutional patterns and what he calls "personages" which may be understood as the self and identity. A significant limitation of Evans' book is that he tends to rely on the words of principals as he has recorded them. Although he cautions that these should not be taken literally or at face value, he nonetheless does so, not inquiring into the particular context of those descriptions. Moreover, contrary to his assertion that the stories are derived "dialogically", no evidence is provided of conversation between Evans and his informants. That is indeed unfortunate, because as a researcher, Evans should have questioned his informants' assertions, or at least asked them why they made these kinds of assertions-opening up to more complex and interesting ways in which meaning is constructed and contained within certain contexts, discourses and practices. By not including his side of the conversation, and an account of the give and take of conversation, he missed a vital opportunity to involve readers in the process of interpretation and how he validated his particular "strong readings."

The way in which Evans interprets the meaning and approach of phenomenology is also open to criticism. Astonishingly, he writes at one point that his readings of principals' stories is to "concretize (make visible) the secret movements of the mind that is the interpretive process" (p. 47; italics added). And further on, referring to his own interpretive prowess, he refers to strong reading as "trying to understand the situation more fully than the principal himself" (p. 57). The problem with this is that it is not quite transparent how Evans accords his interpretations-and arguments for pedagogy-privileged status. What he ignores is the kind of critique taken up of phenomenology by certain philosophers. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, is critical of Husserlian phenomenology for leading back to a foundation in individual subjectivity and consciousness as a warrant for truthful interpretation. As Ricoeur argues, however, all interpretation neither begins nor ends with the interpreter, but rather is made possible precisely through a process of mediating multiple realities in the lifeworld. He stresses the importance of interpretation in constructing a relationship between the evidence of a phenomenon and its explanation:
All phenomenology is an explication of evidence and an evidence of explication. An evidence which is explicated, an explication which unfolds evidence: such is the phenomenological experience. It is in this sense that phenomenology can be realised only as hermeneutics. (1981, p. 128)

A "good" interpretation should, then, open to the possibility of multiple interpretations, or to that which remains possible. In Ricoeur's terms, "the key hypothesis of hermeneutic philosophy is that interpretation is an open process which no single vision can conclude" (p. 109). Evans, however, appears to be negligent of this important hermeneutic insight. As a consequence, the effect of his approach is to essentialize both a particular view of educational administration and his own particular interpretive authority. What perhaps would have made for a more powerful critical study of school administration, and what would give a phenomenological analysis more critical and practical power, is to have attended more fully to the ways in which principals-and the interpreter/researcher himself-have negotiated and understood the relationships between their own subjectivities and the historical, social, theoretical and symbolic structures that frame both school administration and research. It is this important reflexive element that is missing in Evans' work, and thus limits both its persuasiveness and possibilities for informing practice in actual situations.

Nonetheless, Evans' strong evocation of and advocacy for pedagogic principles is absolutely necessary in the context of school administration that increasingly looks like business and human resource management. His book, therefore, needs and deserves to be widely read and debated. I would hope that on the basis of his own quite often thoughtful and insightful work, he explores further not only how practitioners can be involved in interpreting their work, but also how the work of administration and its calling can be more fully understood as a particular kind of attunement between principles and practice. But then what is necessary is to understand the "pedagogic principle" less as a transcendentally derived moral dictum, and more as a practice of ethical responsibility, one that lives in the fallibility of interpretations of the difficulties encountered in the lives of children, teachers, and schools.

References


Author Note

Hans Smits is an assistant professor and director of field experiences in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. He work is in the areas of social studies education, teacher education, hermeneutics, and action research. He can be contacted through email at:

hsmits@ucalgary.ca.