

Empathetic Understanding and School Leadership Preparation

By **Diane Ketelle** and **R. Pete Mesa**, Mills College

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About the Authors: **Diane Ketelle** is an assistant Professor at Mills College. Professor Ketelle began her career in education as a first grade teacher and went on to become an elementary school principal and a district superintendent. Prior to her work at Mills, Dr. Ketelle taught courses in educational leadership at Saint Mary’s College of California. The recipient of numerous awards, she also received statewide recognition from the Association of California School Administrators as Superintendent/Principal of the Year. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to dketelle@mills.edu

R. Pete Mesa is a Distinguished Professor of Education at Mills College. Professor Mesa has had a long and distinguished career in educational leadership. In his 34 years of service he served at every level of the school system from high school teacher to chief executive officer to the state school superintendent. Professor Mesa was named Outstanding Hispanic Educator in 1980 and has received numerous awards from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the California Association of School Administrators.

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Abstract: Successful leaders seem to share one thing in common – empathy. The authors posit that empathic understanding is foundational to leadership. People follow leaders who sense and articulate their deepest needs, while manifesting the capacity to organize and rally them to action in order to satisfy those needs. The authors present a conceptual tool they have developed and present preliminary findings on the development of empathy in their leadership students.

Empathetic inference is everyday mind reading...It may be the second greatest achievement of which the mind is capable, consciousness itself being first (Ickes, 1977, p. 2).

Even though there has been a great deal of inquiry into the value of empathy training for children and adults, empathy has not been considered a key factor in successful school

leadership. Although empathy has been noted as a helpful characteristic for school leaders, it has not been fully analyzed. For example, Bennis (2003) observes that for leaders, “Empathy...like charisma – may be something that people either have or don’t have” (p. 146). Burns (1978), Gardner (1986) and Kotter (1985) persuasively argue that leaders need to be able to manage relationships which may require such capacities as empathy, but do not explicate how such capacities can be developed. In this paper we will present our preliminary theory that empathy is the key leadership quality that underlies the development of empathetic insight in school leadership preparation. Our theory posits that people follow leaders who sense and articulate their deepest needs, while manifesting the capacity to organize and rally them to action in order to satisfy those needs.

We agree that leadership matters and is vital to school success, but we want to point out that rarely do scholars examine what it takes to do the actual work of leading. Our standpoint is that empathy is a pre-condition of any leadership style; however, scholars often end up in definitional disagreements in lieu of examinations of how, if at all, leadership can be taught, learned or practiced.

Empathetic understanding requires a leader to develop self-awareness that can separate the leader’s own needs from those of people being led. We believe this self knowledge can be developed through careful reflection and the patience to practice. This requires a leader to be able to identify her biases and understand what influences her. Such abilities contribute to all leadership functions, but are especially helpful in understanding the modern and diverse world of schools.

It is important to note that empathy can be used for both constructive and destructive ends. Kohut’s analysis of Nazi sadistic empathy highlights how powerful empathy can be (Goldberg, 1978). For example, when Nazis put loud sirens on dive bombers they knew the sound would create panic in the people below. Using empathy, the ability to understand others, the Nazis played on their victims’ fears in a calculated attempt to destroy them. This moral component is critically important. Just because a leader is empathetic it does not mean the leader will act morally. Our goal is for empathetic understanding to enhance moral leadership.

Empathy is sometimes identified with sympathy, while leadership is often identified with command and control. When we use the term empathy we are referring to the ability to accurately assess another person’s point of view. Empathy involves fact finding and for that reason is objective, while sympathy is subjective.

Understanding Empathy

Theorists outside of leadership studies, mainly in psychology, have suggested that empathy is an innate, core personality trait (Hoffman, 1977). Allport (1968), however, found empathy to be more elusive and concluded, “the process of empathy remains a riddle in social psychology...the nature of the mechanism is not yet understood” (p. 30). Empathy is most typically defined as including: 1) the affective capacity to share in another’s feelings; and 2) the cognitive ability to understand another’s feelings and

perspective. We suggest that cultivating in leaders the ability to synthesize understanding of feelings and cognition can contribute to successful leadership. Although the synthesis of the affective and the cognitive is a product of cognition, we believe developing greater understanding of others in a cognitive sense can simultaneously heighten affective sensibilities.

Literature on empathy has been confounded by definitional controversy that focuses on the “extent to which either cognitive processes or affective experiences formulate empathetic response” (Pecukonis, 1990, p. 60). Gallo (1989) notes:

...an empathetic response is one which contains both a cognitive and an affective dimension...the term empathy [is] used in at least two ways; to mean a predominantly cognitive response, understanding how another feels, or to mean an affective communion with the other (p. 100).

Meharbian and Epstein (1972) note a marked difference between cognitive role taking and emotional empathy. This has resulted in a split of sorts: scholars focusing on emotional aspects of empathy relate it to experiencing the exact emotions as another person, while those focusing on the cognitive aspects of empathy relate it to social understanding, based on the work of George Herbert Mead (1934). However, others have stressed the similarities between the two aspects (Buie, 1981; Egan, 1994), arguing that empathy is an emotional arousal caused by cognitive identification with the other’s role (Smither, 1977) and that both cognitive and emotional aspects are necessary for empathetic responses (Buie, 1981). We agree that both cognitive and affective features are a part of the empathetic response.

The Potential of Empathy Training

Research findings on empathetic training can inform leaders and leadership preparation programs. Every indication from the research surveyed supports the idea that empathy can be developed in adults. In addition, research supports the provision of empathy training to enhance empathetic feelings and understanding. Researchers widely acknowledge the positive role of empathy in enhancing helping relations, and training programs have been offered for empathetic development (Crabb, Moracco & Bender, 1983; Egan, 1994; Goldstein, 1981; Hepworth & Larsen, 1993; Ivey, 1994; Ivey & Authier, 1978).

Training in interpersonal perception and empathetic responding has been found to help in recognizing emotive states of self and other, enhancing empathetic perceptions (Black & Phillips, 1982; Herbeck & Yammarino, 1990; Pecukonis, 1990). Research on the exploration of the kinds of feelings children have, and how certain feelings are associated with certain situations (Black & Phillips, 1982; Dixon, 1980) can be applied as leaders come to understand themselves. Further, research has shown that activities that focus children on similarities between themselves and another are effective in increasing affective and cognitive empathy (Black & Phillips, 1982; Dixon, 1980; Hughes, Tingle & Swain, 1981).

It has also been found that exposure to stimuli of misfortune or distress on the part of others tends to also increase empathetic feelings and responses (Barnett et al, 1982;

Pecukonis, 1990). Research findings on empathetic training can be applied to leadership preparation in order to underscore the importance of empathetic understanding in the act of leading.

Research has shown that for many the ability to imagine and gain insight into another's point of view does not come easily; yet, repeated practice at taking alternative perspectives is effective in cultivating empathy (Black & Phillips, 1982; Haynes & Avery, 1979; Pecukonis, 1990). Role taking and role playing activities which call for children and adults to assume the role of another person to imagine that person's feelings are effective in increasing both affective and cognitive empathy (Barak, et al, 1987; Black & Phillips, 1982; Morgan, 1983; Underwood & Moore, 1982). Role enactment may be critical for leaders in preparation as they come to understand the structural demands of an administrative position juxtaposed with their personal perceptions. Critical qualities of leadership may emerge from imitative processes that help novice leaders gain experience through imitation. We believe more serious and sophisticated exploration of the possibilities of role play will contribute greatly to leader preparation.

Quadrants and Considerations as a Teaching Tool

Over the past two years we have been developing ways to heighten empathetic understanding in our administrative credential students. We have taught two core credential classes together and the development of this framework emerged from that work. We began conceptualizing this framework when we reflected on our experiences as school administrators. We began this work as a way to get our students thinking about a reflective planning process.

Our framework requires students to ask reflective questions and consider other points of view. In order to orient students to leadership we emphasize: 1) the need to develop strong listening skills; 2) the ability to confirm understandings through checking with others; 3) the ability to imagine another's perspective; 4) the ability to pose ideas; and 5) the ability to act. Three considerations are presented at the beginning of the program. These considerations are reflective mind-holds that help students begin to focus on markers outside themselves. Students are introduced to this major concept at the beginning of the program because it is the starting point for this way of thinking. We have observed that our students' empathetic responses are developed as reflective questions focused on the considerations are surfaced. The basic considerations are:

1. Time – This consideration requires the leader to consider the past history of change in the organization; the present readiness in the organization for changing it (the organization); and the future as it is envisioned in five years.
2. Context – What are the norms and values of the organization? What are the community norms and values? What is the psychological-emotive climate? Is the school environment troubled, conflicted or relaxed?
3. Point of View – Leaders need to actively seek out alternate points of view. This can be done by framing issues from the perspective of the leader (speaking in

the first person); the organizational member responsible for serving the organization or its clients (second person); or the organization client or an objective other (third person). Alternate points of view can also be sought in professional literature, from experienced and knowledgeable consultants, or from persons with experience in leading a specific kind of change.

The *quadrants of leadership concern* represent a way to conceptualize the school leader’s job. *Table 1* illustrates the leadership quadrants corresponding to the organization’s operational function. The quadrants help our students to consider how forces can be brought in line to support school change and organizational functioning. By addressing each quadrant, a leader is more likely to ensure that perspectives, opinions and beliefs of a wide constituency will be considered. This reduces the probability of overlooking essential obstacles.

Table 1: Leadership Quadrants of Concern

<p>Socio-Political Parent, teacher, business, government agency involvement Involve, consult with political community Union negotiations Contract management Community service Partnerships Involving collaborating with school community stakeholders Public relations Anything done to win support and collaboration of the school community stakeholders</p>	<p>Programmatic Instruction Curriculum Professional Development Subject area programs (reading, writing, math) Student academic assessment Teacher Evaluation Anything to do with teaching and learning Curriculum and instructional development, quality control, planning</p>
<p>School Climate/Culture Student welfare programs Student discipline Values, norms, considerations by which students, teachers, administrators, parents, live in the school community Environmental aesthetics Co-curricular activities Student – teacher relations Student affiliation with school Teacher morale</p>	<p>Organizational Management Allocating resources Planning, organizing, initiating actions needed for the school to progress toward its goal Delegating, assigning, distributing work Scheduling, coordinating activities and tasks Monitoring, evaluating quality of performance of school personnel</p>

Table 2 illustrates the overlay of the considerations (time, context and point of view) onto the leadership quadrants to demonstrate how reflective questions surface as a result. We

want our students to learn that insight can be gained from pursuing and identifying questions rather than seeking rapid answers.

We encourage our students to use the considerations and quadrants as a base for faculty/staff group work. Teachers can be divided into groups around the quadrants and then work together to surface questions. After that work is done, teachers can report out from their work and the whole group can set priorities and create an action plan.

Table 2: Time /Context /Point of View Overlay

<p>Socio-Political</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past: What is the socio-political history of change in this context? • Present: What is the current political climate relative to change? • Future: How to win political support for the change? What is the vision of the change? 2. Context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What/who are the contending groups who might use change to gain political power? Where do political forces stand in relation to core issues related to change? 3. Point of View <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Leader: Are there any political problems with the change related to my job status, pressure from boss/board? Is this change merely a vehicle to advance me professionally or is it advantageous for students? • Implementers: Does the change trigger union issues? Teacher loss of autonomy, academic freedom? 	<p>Programmatic</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past: What is the history of change with a similar design? What is the track record of success? • Present: How are things going with program implementation, teacher support, and relational climate? • Future: What are the prospects for program winning support—what changes are needed to gain from it? 2. Context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the school’s ability to implement programmatic change. 3. Point of View <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The Leader: Do I believe the program’s theory? Do I agree with it philosophically? •Implementers: What if they have strong doubts about it and resist implementation? If I resolve my doubts, how can they be persuaded to implement the change? •Objective or authoritative: What kind of support can be found for the innovation in the professional literature? Where has the innovation been implemented?
<p>Culture/climate</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past - What is the history of the school’s climate? What has affected the school’s climate? • Present - Assess the school’s culture and its openness to change. • Future - Assess trends that may impact school’s culture/climate. 	<p>Organizational Management</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past - What is the history of organizational management problems? What is the history of program implementation? • Present -Are there currently any organizational management problems that will impact

<p>2. Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the school’s receptivity to change. <p>3. Point of View</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Leader – What is the school’s climate like? How receptive is the school to change? • Implementers – How do they view the school’s climate? How ready do they think the school is to change? • Recipients of change – Assess parent and student attitudes toward change. • Objective or authoritative – What does the literature say about the openness of a school to change? 	<p>implementation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future - Are there any future issues that may impact implementation? <p>2. Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess management issues unique to your school context. <p>3. Point of View</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Leader – Prepare information on change and distribute. Lead discussions on change. • The Implementers – What is the average amount of time they will have to invest? • Recipients of change – Make sure they are consulted. What is the impact on families?
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Whom We Teach

The administrative preparation program in which we teach is small, enrolling about 12 students each year. The students take all their administrative credential courses together and most of them are aspiring to be public school principals in large urban school districts. Students take two foundational courses from us and in those courses we work with students on how they conceptualize themselves as leaders. Students have been asked to document their leadership growth through a series of quick writes, journal writings, and essay assignments during their one-year leadership preparation program. We have analyzed these data from last year in order to better understand how the framework we have designed is helping students identify as leaders.

We have also examined a variety of program artifacts through the lens of empathy as a way of learning where and how the program is structured to provide those types of learning experiences for students.

Findings

Three lenses have emerged from our work. The lenses emerged through a thematic analysis of journal writings, in class quick-writes and formal essay assignments that were collected during the second semester of preparation. As the lenses emerged we realized that the leadership candidates use the lenses interactively as they come to identify as leaders. The lenses we have identified are: 1) self-awareness; 2) understanding self and other; and 3) self and other in context for action. In the beginning of the program the emphasis is on self-awareness, but students are introduced to the quadrants and considerations from the outset. As our students progress through the program the quadrants and considerations take on new meaning as the novice leaders learn to use these reflective tools.

Self-awareness - Students develop self-understanding through a series of reflective exercises and readings. The development of leadership self-efficacy and greater confidence is important at this early stage (see Kettle, 2005). Students are encouraged to understand themselves in order to better understand others and the world around them. By the end of the program, during which time we visit these ideas repeatedly, we have found that students develop a capacity to share in another's feelings (affective empathy) and understand another's feelings and perspectives (cognitive empathy). At the end of the one year program Karen reflects:

Who am I as a leader? I am a learner, strong, flexible, responsive, compassionate, not always decisive, intuitive, authentic, confident, humorous, hard-working, delegatory, and collaborative... I don't need to always be right. I have gone into myself in order to go out into the world.

Joan notes:

I am much more confident. I have become a reflective educator.

Understanding self and other - Students are introduced to the reflective process of understanding multiple perspectives through written exercises, case analysis, simulation and their field experiences. Sylvia observes:

... it is important for me to seek out others' perspectives by asking questions in order to: 1) hear and try to understand the direction from which they are approaching the issue; and 2) to understand their personal feelings. Most importantly, everyone has an opinion and they should be heard.

Here Sylvia is acknowledging that she has developed both affective and cognitive empathetic understandings in relation to leadership. This will be very important for her as she moves into a school context and needs to listen and understand other points of view in order to bring people together and find common ground.

Self and other in context for action - Understanding self and other in a context for action requires the overlay of the considerations on the leadership quadrants. Students in the program work with the quadrants and considerations in order to learn how to name problems reflectively, surface barriers to change implementation, prioritize and write plans for action. At the end of the year we got many responses that reflected empathetic understanding:

The considerations and quadrants have given me a way to approach a reflective process systematically which adds depth and rigor to it. While I feel that I have been reflective in the past with respect to problems, with this process I feel that it is more of a true process rather than a hit or miss endeavor. I feel that it also gives my problem solving efforts boundaries which gives me a sense of support and accomplishment. While I'm never going to bring up every possible issue, I feel that once I've worked through the considerations and quadrants I've at least touched all the major bases (Karen).

The [quadrants and considerations] remind me that there are many angles from which to view a problem or situation...Raising questions is an excellent way to

think about change that is feasible, and to provide a way to think about change that doesn't assume it is okay to upset people and that other points of view aren't ever worth considering (Gloria).

I've learned that as a leader I'll have a great deal more to consider than I did as a teacher planning for instruction and change in the classroom. As a teacher, my primary considerations usually involve just my students and myself, and any failures in planning are rarely made public. Instructional leaders don't have the safe and insular refuge of the classroom. I now realize how valuable it will be when this type of fully considered planning becomes a habit of mind (June).

Karen, Gloria and June are synthesizing their leadership understandings and they all note the importance of empathetic understanding in their reflection. In particular, each references how she uses the considerations and quadrants to better understand the work of leadership. June, in particular, seems to understand that leading will be different from teaching and that slowing down to consider what is going on will be an asset.

We acknowledge the limitations of our method: small sample size and empathy measured in general factors through self-report. The value of this inquiry may not reside so much in its substantive findings as in its heuristic value in beginning educational inquiry into the need for empathy in leadership.

Conclusion

Contemporary school reform places a premium on leadership and school improvement. In our leadership preparation program we ask our students to grapple with issues from contending points of view in order to understand how to approach school improvement and change. Underlying our conception is the idea that people are at the heart of change and that any successful change will focus on the concerns and perceptions of the people that the change will affect. Our students analyze and weigh assumptions, goals, merits and deficiencies of varied points of view; ask themselves if some or any are really mutually incompatible; discuss and develop their own views and ideas as to how they would reconcile their personal views with their roles in developing group consensus, a common vision and goals; and discuss what leadership values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices inspire accomplishment of common goals. The idea is to help our students formulate their own philosophies, and at the same time, understand the basis for other points of view. We focus on the need for educators in leadership positions to continually ask themselves questions. Why am I doing this? Why are we doing this? Why do we believe this is important? What evidence do I have that this is true? We seek to provide a framework for understanding all aspects of issues and the various perceptions that stakeholders may have.

Cultivating an ability to consider issues from different perspectives develops empathy and also has cross-cultural implications. There is a growing body of literature that suggests that racism lies in cultural insensitivities that those students from diverse backgrounds experience in school. What is needed are leadership programs that inculcate leaders in the ideal that people should be regarded as equal. In many places, school

personnel have been encouraged to engage in “antiracism” education rather than multicultural practices in order to eliminate the marginalization of certain groups (Dei, 1996). Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1995) argue that school leaders should expect to work with school staff toward equity and social justice. We believe preparing school leaders by developing their empathic understanding can enhance antiracism efforts and contribute to greater cross-cultural understanding. This has implications for both teacher and leader preparation programs.

In our leadership preparation program we are working to prepare leaders for the challenges of an increasingly diverse society, the changing demands of the profession, newly emerging and visionary conceptions of schooling, and knowledge of administrative behavior, including management and leadership that reflect a philosophy of collaboration and reflection in teaching and learning. We believe focusing on the framework presented in this paper gives students a tool to use in distributing leadership. We are finding that when students learn to reconsider through asking reflective questions and seeking multiple perspectives, they appear to develop greater empathetic capacity, which influences the way they conceptualize the role of the leader as thoughtful, collaborative and collective. Ultimately, we seek to develop empathetic leaders who understand that people and their perceptions are at the heart of change and that perspectives can be broadened to include those of others. It appears our work is developing affective and cognitive empathy in our students and that it is useful in preparing leaders who are ready to do the demanding work of school leadership.

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