# *EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIRTUE IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP*

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The culture of a school is an instrumental factor in predicting teacher job satisfaction and student success (MacNeil et al., 2009; Shen et al., 2012), and the responsibility to cultivate a positive school culture rests, ultimately, on the shoulders of educational leaders (Blömeke & Klein, 2013; Price, 2015). Educational leaders can influence the culture of their school by increasing opportunities for socioemotional teaching and learning (Aguilar, 2018; Brackett, 2018), by encouraging teachers to assume leadership roles (Fiarman, 2017; Safir, 2018), and by emphasizing the importance of teachers' and students' civic engagement (Fay & Levinson, 2017; Tripodo & Pondiscio, 2017). Because educational leaders have the power to facilitate the personal and professional growth of both teachers and students in many significant ways, we can conceptualize educational leadership as a significant moral undertaking (Branson & Gross, 2014; Fullan, 2003; Msila, 2015; Sergiovanni, 1992; Wilson, 2014).

Indeed, there is a moral dimension to leadership within the context of any organization (Bienengräber, 2014; Dukerich et al., 1990; Pircher Verdorfer & Weber, 2016). *Educational* leaders, however, have the unique task of taking *epistemological* virtues seriously. By epistemological virtues, I am referring to the manner in which knowledge and truth are discussed. For example, consider the following questions:

- How do we judge whether or not something is true?
- Who serves as the arbiter as to whether or not something is true?
- What are the ethical implications of truth claims?
- How do teachers manage the ethical implications of their epistemological authority while teaching?

These are difficult questions; yet, because teachers and educational leaders are responsible for facilitating meaningful opportunities of teaching and learning, it is incumbent upon educational leaders to have a deep interest in epistemological concerns. In particular, if educational leaders are indifferent to epistemolog-

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ical matters, then it is unlikely that the teachers and students under their leadership will develop an appreciation for the ethical implications of knowledge.

In his book, *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions,* Sockett (2012) argues that thinking carefully about epistemology is an inherently moral endeavor. In this article, I will expand upon Sockett's conceptual argument and apply his reasoning to the context of educational leadership. Specifically, I argue that educational leaders, like teachers, are entrusted with epistemological authority, and that, accordingly, educational leaders should manifest attitudes and behaviors that reflect virtuous epistemological commitments.

I begin by arguing that epistemological virtue is a critical dimension to moral development in schools. I then highlight two particular virtues—open-mindedness and commitment—and discuss their relevance to teaching and educational leadership. I conclude by arguing that self-reflection is a critical means through which educational leaders may develop their own epistemological virtue.

## THE MORAL IMPERATIVE OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIRTUE IN SCHOOLS

The act of teaching is a moral endeavor, and the moral sensibilities of a teacher may be just as important as the given teacher's content knowledge (Fenstermacher, 2001; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013; Schussler & Knarr, 2013). Through their time spent in classrooms, students not only gain knowledge but also learn how to regard and interact with knowledge. In other words, students learn how to ask important epistemological questions: What counts as knowledge? How is knowledge created? How does knowledge shape the way that human beings interact with one another and with their world? How are interpersonal disputes about truth productively resolved?

These epistemological questions are not only relevant to the learning of academic subjects, but, indeed, are also central to being able to make ethical judgments (Anderson, 2012; Baehr, 2011; Fricker, 2007). For example, epistemological questions have vital implications for issues such as environmental sustainability (Ferkany & Whyte, 2012), interracial relations (Medina, 2013), and gender equality (Jenkins & Keane, 2014). Thinking critically about what we believe to be true (and why we believe it to be true) is, therefore, no less than a "moral responsibility" (Sockett, 2012, p. 88), and a moral education requires close attention to epistemological concerns:

> A moral classroom … is not just one where … the teacher is caring and competent.… [The moral classroom is also] a place where the major epistemological questions have to be constantly in play.… Unless all children start to crack open such secrets, they will not … [come to understand their own] definitions of themselves, how they interact with other people, how they understand themselves publicly and privately, how they control their lives, how they learn, and how they act morally. Epistemology … enables us to understand who we are. And that is a moral matter. (Sockett, 2012, p. 33)

Students develop their own epistemological virtue in classrooms where thorny epistemological questions are invited and explored. Within these classrooms, the teacher's role is to "provoke … [students'] interest in the daunting [epistemological] questions" (Sockett, 2012, p. 18). Within epistemologically virtuous schools, teachers initiate difficult dialogues about epistemological issues, for, "without that dialogue, one might say that teachers keep epistemological secrets from children, by not letting them see the complexity of truth" (p. 11). Without recognizing the complexity of truth, children will be hampered in their ability to construct moral action.

According to neo-Aristotelian ethics, individuals develop virtue by being exposed to role models who consistently embody virtue in their actions (Kristjansson, 2006, 2015; Sanderse, 2013; Sockett, 2012). Therefore, in order to cultivate an epistemologically virtuous

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school, teachers must embody epistemological virtues in their interactions with students; and, furthermore, educational leaders must embody epistemological virtues in their interactions with teachers. For example, educational leaders should not communicate matters of curriculum and instruction to teachers as "package[s] of information" (Sockett, 2012, p. 7). If educational leaders do not model an interest in "daunting [epistemological] questions" (p. 18) as it pertains to decisions regarding curriculum and instruction, then it is unlikely that teachers will acknowledge the complexity of truth when interacting with their students in their classrooms.

Educational leaders sometimes issue curricular and instructional mandates without dialoging with teachers first (Bengtson & Connors, 2014; Porter et al., 2015; Timberlake et al., 2017). This behavior, however, undermines the cultivation of epistemological virtue in the school, for, when educational leaders make curricular and instructional decisions without authentically entertaining teachers' epistemological concerns (e.g., "Is this curriculum really the most effective and/or ethical way to teach this subject?"), teachers may feel reluctant to prompt epistemological questions in their own classrooms (Brown & Weber, 2016; Burkhauser & Lesaux, 2017).

In sum, an essential dimension of a moral classroom is the presence of daunting epistemological questions. If schools are to cultivate teachers who prioritize this critical dimension of moral education, then educational leaders must themselves model epistemological virtue as they interact with teachers. I will now consider how open-mindedness and commitment are two virtues that are particularly fundamental to the cultivation of epistemologically virtuous classrooms and schools.

## *OPEN-MINDEDNESS*

One of the reasons that teaching and learning is, inherently, a moral endeavor is that our knowledge and our beliefs have implications for how we interact with others and with the world. Therefore, one epistemological virtue that contributes to the continuous development of one's character is the virtue of being *open-minded*, that is, having the disposition to examine one's own knowledge as often and as critically possible. To be epistemologically virtuous, we must perpetually ask ourselves, do we have good reason to believe what we believe? Furthermore, how do our knowledge claims affect how others think, feel, and act? What ramifications do our knowledge claims have for the world in which we live?

Teachers play a vital role in modeling this virtue for students: "The task [of the teacher is] … to get children to see their own learning and development as a moral business, for them to develop a conscience about what they believe" (Sockett, 2012, p. 83). Through their interactions with their teacher, students can learn that revising one's knowledge in light of sound counterarguments is "an intellectual and a moral virtue" (Sockett, 2012, p. 84; see also Nucci et al., 2015) and that learning and knowing necessitate the exercise of one's conscience if learning and knowing are to be ethical endeavors.

In order for teachers to value the virtue of open-mindedness in their own classroom practice, they must interact with educational leaders who are willing to listen to others and who are willing to change their mind in light of new evidence. This is consistent with research that has found that organizational frameworks of distributed leadership and shared governance are effective at cultivating a collective sense of trust and efficacy within schools (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Safir, 2018; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; see also Pircher Verdorfer & Weber, 2016). To cultivate the epistemological virtue of open-mindedness within their school, educational leaders must develop a conscience with respect to the curricular and instructional decisions that they make. They must think carefully about how beliefs about curriculum and instruction affect others; they must be willing to entertain counterarguments to their

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beliefs; and they must be willing to revise their beliefs in light of new evidence.

## COMMITMENT

Sockett (2012) argues that the "belief-holding individual … is to be regarded … by the extent of his or her commitment to those beliefs" (p. 125). That is to say, the virtue of *commitment* implies that individuals should not espouse beliefs only because those beliefs are commonly accepted and unproblematic. Individuals with commitment possess the courage of their convictions, and this has ethical implications. When one is "liberated from the conventional views of [one's] circle of friends and family … [then, one begins] using the passion [of one's] commitments to construct a world of moral purposes driven by a free intellect" (Sockett, 2012, p. 136). Without commitment to one's beliefs, an individual may lack both the impetus and the agency to construct a more just world.

Within epistemologically virtuous classrooms, "truth cannot just be delivered to children as a package of information" (Sockett, 2012, p. 7), for, in that instance, students become merely passive recipients of knowledge. Teachers who value epistemological virtue will invite students to develop their own intellectual commitments. Through this approach, students may come to have a personal investment in their knowledge, rather than memorizing and repeating knowledge for the sole purpose of pleasing teachers and policymakers.

Likewise, educational leaders can model the epistemological virtue of commitment by having the courage to stand up for their convictions, even in spite of demands and pressures placed on them from multiple stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and policymakers (Chow, 2013; Dimmock, 1999; Ho & Ng, 2017; Mifsud, 2017; Watson, 2013). When teachers observe educational leaders making curricular and instructional decisions based only on accountability pressures or policy expectations, it is unlikely that teachers and students will perceive commitment as a valued epistemological virtue. Inversely, when educational leaders commit to what they believe to be true and do not buckle under accountability pressures, they may inspire their teachers to do the same (Alt & Reingold, 2012; Klaaseen & Maslovaty, 2010).

## THE ROLE OF REFLECTION IN THE CULTIVATION OF VIRTUE

How might educational leaders cultivate open-mindedness and commitment within their thought and action? According to Sockett (2012), the primary means through which to cultivate one's own epistemological virtue is through self-reflection. Although self-reflection for the purpose of cultivating virtue has been applied to the development of preservice teachers (Koeppen & Davison-Jenkins, 2006; Schussler et al., 2010), and although there exists literature on the value of having educational leaders reflect (Diehl & Gordon, 2016; Wright, 2009), literature has not yet explored how self-reflection can help educational leaders to develop epistemological virtue.

According to Sockett (2012), virtues are a function of cognition rather than a function of personality. Hence, "virtues are … acquired by spending thought, time, and work on their development" (p. 173). Building on Aristotle's framework of virtue ethics, Sockett (2012) argues that cultivating a virtue requires both a desire to manifest the virtue as well as the willingness to reflect on one's own knowledge, beliefs, and actions. Through this process of reflection, one takes agency in cultivating oneself into a person who, habitually, behaves in virtuous ways (see also Kristjansson, 2005). In other words, we constitute ourselves by increasing our self-knowledge and by continuously molding our behavior to align with the virtues we want to embody: "Reflective practice [with respect to one's virtue] demands a balance between what I do and what I believe" (Sockett, 2012, p. 208).

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Thus, educational leaders should be encouraged to reflect on who they want to be and whether or not they are living up to those expectations. For example, educational leaders might ask themselves the following set of questions:

- Why do I value the virtue of open-mindedness? Why I am motivated to cultivate this virtue within my interactions with teachers and students?
- Am I embodying (or failing to embody) open-mindedness during my interactions with teachers and students?
- During moments when I did successfully embody this virtue, what happened? How did I respond within the situation, and how did this response embody the virtue of open-mindedness?
- During moments when I failed to embody this virtue, what happened? How did I respond within the situation, and how might I have responded differently?

Sockett (2012) writes, "being a human being demands taking responsibility for … what kind of human being one is and who one becomes" (p. 164). In this way, educational leaders can—and should—exercise agency for cultivating their epistemological virtue. This requires reflection on both one's action as well as on one's values. To become an epistemologically virtuous educational leader, individuals must, first, articulate why epistemological virtue is worth cultivating, and, then, reflect on when and how epistemological virtues are being manifest in one's actions. It may be the moral obligation of educational leaders to carve out time for these vital cycles of self-reflection.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that epistemology is a moral matter and that, as such, epistemological virtue is an essential component of moral education. In schools, students, teachers, and educational leaders must be willing and eager to confront daunting epistemological questions; otherwise, it is unlikely that we can characterize the learning that occurs within those schools as moral education. If educational leaders and teachers are to "shift from being technicians to becoming moral professionals, … [then these educators must strive toward] understanding the nature and character of knowledge" (Sockett, 2012, p. 4).

Furthermore, if teachers are to embody epistemological virtues such as open-mindedness and commitment within their interactions with their students, then educational leaders must, likewise, be expected to embody these epistemological virtues within their interactions with the teachers in their school. Evidence shows that creating a positive organizational culture begins with the organization's leaders (Bair, 2017; Carroll, 2005; Miller et al., 2015). If an educational leader is to cultivate a school where open-mindedness and commitment are valued, then educational leaders' themselves must serve as exemplars of these virtues. Although educational leaders are responsible for many outcomes, one of those outcomes must be the personal development of epistemological virtue. Because educational leaders are entrusted with epistemological authority, educational leaders have the responsibility to embody epistemological virtues if their schools are to be sites of moral education.

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