Cultivating Space for Democratic Education and Democratic Leadership[*]

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Abstract

This paper considers the difficulties inherent in providing leadership for democratic education in the context of public schooling in the U.S. The paper is developed from the perspective that leadership to support democratic education is possible, necessary, and demands conceptual and practical work that is distinctly different from mainstream leadership practice and leadership preparation programs. Drawing on that perspective, the paper proposes a model, termed democratic space, which describes the intellectual, positional, and relational requirements for enacting the kind of leadership that democratic education demands. Following descriptions of salient concepts and contexts (e.g., democratic education, the neoliberal political ideologies shaping public schooling), the paper presents a conceptual framework for the model itself accompanied by descriptions of leadership efforts that illustrate and elaborate upon key components of the model. A concluding section discusses leader dispositions within the context of considering implications for leadership practice and leadership preparation programs.

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1 Understanding Democratic Education and its Importance

This paper moves forward an important question related to the development of a democracy and democratic ways of being, a question fundamental to the vitality of democratic life in the United States: *Does democracy guide and support education or does education guide and support democracy?* By this we mean, does American education, an education formally administered through America's compulsory public schooling system, wrap itself in the foundations of democratic values or does it effectively dodge democratic values when it enacts neoliberal, positivistic and autocratic practices. As this paper unfolds, we hope that the importance of democracy and of leadership actions that can support and foster democratic education will become clearer.

It is not within the scope of this paper to fully explicate recent federal policy decisions that have moved America's schools further away from a democratic orientation (e.g., NCLB, 2002). It is important to note, however, that NCLB ensures that many students experience school as a place where the measure of their success (i.e., high stakes individual test scores that purport to measure academic achievement) dramatically outweighs their development and participation as democratic citizens. Giroux (2003) argues that those who determine the politics of education in America "are concerned less with [the] demands of equity, justice and social citizenship than with the imperatives of the marketplace, skill-based learning, and the needs of the individual consumer" (p. 76) and notes that the words *democracy* and *citizenship* are essentially missing from the No Child Left Behind educational plan.

A perennial question seems to exist: as a nation are we satisfied with pointing in the physical direction of schools and hoping that our future democracy is being nourished while not fully laboring over the question of *what happens to democracy in our schools?* Schooling in America is like a puzzle whose pieces, misplaced, broken and dog-eared, do not fit together easily. Can the United States of America maintain a healthy democratic society without teaching and practicing democracy in our schools?

2 Education and Democracy

Most citizens assume that schools in the United States are democratic because they exist within and operate as a function of a democratic nation state. After all, the U.S. has free and open elections that allow all citizens to vote. These elections ultimately result in the peaceful transfer of both leaders and administrative power. Displeasure with our elected officials is voiced through a new election process that offers citizens the opportunity to change the leaders. In addition, most schools in the U.S. are governed by elected boards of education, have student body governments, offer courses on how the United States government is designed to function, and offer students the opportunity to stop attending at a certain age.

However, most schools do not actively teach the habits of democracy (Childs, 1956; Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938; Finn, 1999; Giroux, 2003; Hutchinson, 1999; Kohl, 1994; Kozol, 1992; Meier,[2] [3] 2002; Ohanian,[4] 1999; Shor, 1992; Wood, 1992; and Wood, 2005). Moreover, most students in America's schools are not offered the opportunity to explore democracy as a lived experience of citizenship in their schools. Indeed, while it is true that most, if not all, high schools offer a class on civics, they do not always offer the opportunity to live democratically in schools. In essence, learning about democracy is not the same as living democratically. The work of this article is to better understand the role and responsibility school leaders have in helping to create the space needed to educate for a democratically educated society.

Moreover, as construed in this paper, the ideas of democracy go beyond the thin description of our basic structural and governmental democracy (representative legislature, the three branches of government, election, etc.). Rather it focuses on a thick notion of democracy meaning those characteristics and skills that citizens need in order to become fully participatory members of their democratic society (Green, 1999).

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[2]http://alice.library.ohiou.edu/search/aMeier%2C+Deborah/ameier+deborah/-3,-1,0,B/browse
[3]http://alice.library.ohiou.edu/search/aMeier%2C+Deborah/ameier+deborah/-3,-1,0,B/browse
[4]http://alice.library.ohiou.edu/search/aOhanian%2C+Susan/aohanian+susan/-3,-1,0,B/browse

3 The Need for Democratic Education

Scholars have long argued that democratic education serves to ensure a democratic society exists by providing students with the everyday experiences of living democratically (Apple & Beane, 1995; Counts, 1939; Dewey, 1916; Goodlad, 1996; Kelly, 1995; Ligon, 2005, Mursell, 1955; Parker, 2003; Sehr, 1997). Soder (1997) argues that citizens in a democracy must have the skills to govern themselves and the attitude that they are capable of that act, while Kelly (1995) writes that education cannot exist in isolation from the practices of a political life on the part of citizens. Both arguments provide warrant for the claim that a vital, viable democracy needs democratic education

4 Neoliberal Political Agendas: Follow the Money

For Au (2009) the neoliberal political agenda in education as manifested by NCLB fosters conditions wherein schools must compete with one another other in the *free market* of education. By maneuvering schools toward the free market system of competition (i.e., success defined as high [or higher] scores on standardized tests) the neoliberal agenda effectively positions schools as clients or consumers for the testing industry. In support of those claims, Au (2009) notes that the total cost of tests, test preparation materials, and testing services in the U.S. was \$2.3 billion dollars in 2006, and that the cost of NCLB-related test development, publishing, administration, analysis, and reporting for the 2005-06 school year was \$517 million.

Shaker and Heilman (2008) explain that the notion of education as political opportunity is further fueled by the economic reality that the \$732 billion K-12 education *market* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, cited in Au, 2009) is arguably the largest single source of public funds that has not been fully developed by corporate interests. As the pressure builds to respond to a neoliberal definition of success as high test score attainment (which effectively shapes the leadership culture of schools), it is easy to understand why school leaders may become increasingly unable to envision democratic space and thus increasingly unable to enact democratic education.

5 Positivism and Assessment: High-Stakes Standardized Testing

When the correct answer on a test becomes the measure of schools effectiveness, the *banking* model of education creeps into the culture of a school. As described by Freire (1970) banking education centers on the notion that students are the receptacle of a teacher's knowledge deposits. In the world of high-stakes testing, student aptitude in the practice of accurately recalling these deposits is the measure of success for the student and for that student's school, district, and state. Contemporary educational theorists have articulated outrage about the high stakes testing environment found in most of America's public schools (Gatto, 1992; Kohn, 2000; Kohn, 2004; Meier, 2000; Meier and Wood, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ohanian, 1999; Poetter, Wegwert & Haerr, 2006).

Meier (2004) contends that NCLB takes this process one giant step forward—pitting every child against every other child to look good and get ahead, and every school against every other school, and it does so with a measurement tool that barely acknowledges anything but test scores as a measure of a sound education. In schools that are poor or underfunded, the pressure to perform as measured under NCLB is problematic, because it leads to one-size-fits all practices that ignore the needs of individual children and effectively destroy the possibility for democratic leadership actions.

6 Democratic Education and Democratic Space

Enacting democratic education within the context of contemporary public schooling—as described in the previous section, a system of schooling that is informed by neoliberal thought and characterized by uniformity and compliance—demands the creation and cultivation of a kind of opening in which teaching, learning, and leading can occur that differs substantively from the organizational unit within which it occurs. The construct that we propose for describing this opening, termed *democratic space*, draws on varied literatures to articulate the intellectual, positional, and relational components that, collectively, express the kind of

space that educational leader must understand, recognize, and work to create if they are to contribute the work of democratic education.

6.1 Inner Distance

Given the comprehensive structures and dominant ideologies that obstruct and stifle democratic practices, school leaders must work against the grain if they are to serve as agents of democracy. In considering this demand, it is important to note that working against the grain has different implications for principals and superintendents than it does for other educators who do not hold formal leadership roles within their organizations. That is because administrators are not only workers (e.g., a principal is supervised by, respectively, the superintendent and the board of education), but also managers (i.e., with supervisory responsibility over others within the organizational hierarchy). As such, they have the implied responsibility for maintaining and legitimating (Weber, 1922/1968; Habermas, 1987) the organization—i.e., they are expected to embody the dominant ideologies that guide it and support the organizational culture it fosters. In light of this set of dual concerns, educational leaders who would support and facilitate democratic practice within their unit must begin by cultivating the kind of intellectual space that Weber (1956/1978) described as *inner distance*.

This concept of inner distance represents the intellectual element of our proposed construct of democratic space—the internal processes that allows the leader to think beyond the constraints and expectations of the organization as it is at present, and to conceptualize other ways of knowing and understanding. As described by Woods (2003, p. 155) Weber's concept of inner distance comprises "a self-conscious adherence to certain ethical values, in the face of the immense daily pressures to conform to a rationalized and disenchanted world, and a degree of self-mastery that resists loss of personality under the relentless pressure of the demands of routine." An educational leader who would practice democratic education must embrace and cultivate just this kind of commitment; indeed, as conceptualized in this model, the internal process of the individual creating and cultivating intellectual space—a space in which to think democratically—is a necessary precursor to the work of enacting democratic practices.

Such a process is challenging, and requires difficult work involving thinking as a focused, deliberate, and reflective activity (informed, we would contend, by rather wide reading)—work that is not typically viewed as central to the business of preparing leaders. Such a process requires leaders to know and embrace their own values, to know and understand the values of the status quo, and to know and appreciate the ideological misalignments and conceptual gaps between the two. This is not easy work, of course, but it is by this most necessary act of thinking that a positional space is best conceptualized, understood and enacted.

6.2 Creative Maladjustment

The positional element of democratic space is extrapolated from Kohl's (1994) insight into the potential dilemmas of being a democratic teacher in less-than-democratic educational settings. Kohl explains the struggle to teach well as a militant activity requiring the teacher to recognize dysfunctionality in the system and to maladjust rather than conform to practices that he or she views as harmful to the teaching and learning process. The kind of leadership described here demands the same kind of militant activity. It is a leadership that requires a belief in the importance of democratic processes and democratic ideals (the kinds of processes and ideals that support and further the kind of deep democracy described in this paper), one that understands conflict as an integral part of deliberative action and is prepared to embrace it when necessary.

Kohl (1994) cites a 1958 speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. as his first encounter with this concept of creative maladjustment:

Now we should all seek to live a well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things. (p. 129)

We would expect to find wide consensus on the question of whether an educational leader should adjust to segregation and discrimination, mob rule or physical violence. But the implications for leadership that promotes and enacts democracy are perhaps a different story. The anti-democratic policies and practices that characterize contemporary schooling are far subtler—indeed, much of what is most regressive in contemporary education is couched in pseudo-progressive language (e.g., *No Child Left Behind*) and so does not engender the kind of response that more overtly harmful actions do. The challenge for the educational leader who would think and act in support of democratic ideals nevertheless calls for the kind of creative maladjustment that King described and Kohl translated into the context of schooling. It means, perhaps, making decisions that go against best practices that are designed to satisfy accountability standards in favor of practices that broaden access and engage students in work that is meaningful to them, their families, and their communities.

6.3 The Education Gap

In our construct of democratic space, the relational element parallels Biesta's (2004) conceptualization of the gap that exists between the activities involved in teaching and the activities involved in learning. For Biesta, this gap is the location of the space where education occurs—that is, education takes place at the intersection of teacher and learner, and so meaningful theories of education should be not about the constituent parts of the relationship (i.e., the teacher and the learner) but about the *relationality* of the parts to each other. Such theories are rare if not entirely non-existent, according to Biesta, who goes on to argue for the importance of such theory as a vehicle for understanding that the gap between the teacher and the student is not a barrier or obstacle to be overcome, but rather it is the space that makes communication—and thus learning—possible (2004).

We can appropriate this conceptualization of the gap between teacher and learner to inform our thinking about the relationship between the educational leader and the educators with whom that leader works. As Biesta locates the teacher-learner gap as the relational space in which education occurs, so we locate the corresponding leader-educator gap as the relational space in which leadership occurs. Understanding leadership, then, is not about focusing on constituent parts to understand separately the actions of leaders and the responses of those that they lead; rather, it is about understanding their relationality, what occurs (and what can/should occur) in the space between the two. Understanding this relationality seems important for any practicing leader. For the leader who is committed to democratic education, moreover, it is absolutely crucial to not only understand this relationality but to acknowledge and cultivate the space defined by the leader-educator gap as the place in which the kind of leadership described here can occur.

To be specific, this is not to suggest that this space describes the location where a leader enacts practices and exercises authority over other educators to produce a desirable result—a description that would parallel Biesta's (2004) description of traditional approaches to thinking about teaching and learning). On the contrary, the application of the teaching-learning gap (Biesta, 2004) to educational leadership would suggest that the space between the educational leader and educator is the location where the kind of leadership can take place that not only supports democratic education but models democratic practice.

Though certainly not a sizable part of the extant literature on educational leadership, representations of democratic leadership in educational contexts do exist. Significantly, such works construe democratic leadership models as not only possible but even necessary (Gale & densmore, 2003; Starrat, 2001; Taylor, 1998; Woods, 2005, 2006). For Woods (2005, 2006) democratic educational leadership is grounded in an approach to developmental democracy comprising four rationalities: ethical rationality, decisional rationality, discursive rationality, and therapeutic rationality. An extended exploration of the specifics of these and other democratic leadership models is beyond the scope of the current paper. What is important to recognize here, however, is that the activities that render these models democratic are activities that take place in the space defined by the gap between the educational leader and educator.

The three concepts described in this section—inner distance, creative maladjustment, and education gap—together comprise the construct that we have termed democratic space. Attentive to the intellectual, positional, and relational commitments that are required of a leader who would support and promote democratic education, the construct offers a multifaceted description of the opening that must be created and

cultivated within a system of education that is largely guided by anti-democratic ideals and pursues ends that are incompatible with deep democracy.

7 Leadership and Democratic Space

At the center of the argument for the development of democracy in schools is the application of leadership. Let's briefly return to our argument that the location of democracy in schools can be seen as a function of what we do and fail to do in the support of democracy. As stated earlier, civics classes, student governments, and school board elections can all be viewed as the trappings of democracy in action. However, this is not the democratic space of the applied daily practices of democracy and the development of democratic life skills that will prepare students for participation in a democracy. This democratic space must be deliberately created from the existing spaces leaders in schools find important.

Against this backdrop, leaders who would engage in the work of democracy must cultivate the kind of democratic space described here if they are to enact real democratic practice within that neoliberal political climate. Such leaders may be few and far between, but they do exist. Take former Nebraska Commissioner of Education Doug Christenson for example, who while still serving in that role famously criticized student assessments in the age of NCLB as representing an

orthodoxy of "centralization, standardization, and high stakes consequences," [that creates] "cultures that literally suck the oxygen out of the work" of classroom teachers and "treat students, teachers, and data as commodities to be manipulated as variables in some kind of strange economy or in some perverse experiment." (Strange, 2006)

But Christenson didn't stop at critique; his administration designed and implemented a state assessment that relies on teacher-developed classroom assessments that are portfolio-based, are intentionally attentive to place-based learning, are responsive to both local standards and Nebraska state standards, and incorporate (but do not unduly privilege the importance of) nationally-normed tests at some grade levels. The Nebraska state assessment system was initially rejected by the federal government as inadequate to comply with NCLB mandates. Christenson and his administration persisted, however, and after a site visit by a team from the U.S. Department of Education, the state was taken off the non-approved list.

In another example, Wood (2005) wrote of his work as principal of Federal Hocking High School (FHHS), located in rural Appalachian Ohio, that high school is "democracy's finishing school" (p. xxii). In his attempt to develop FHHS as a democratic educational experience for students Wood engaged the students in their own education, and the governance of the school. Wood outlines several strategies he used in FHHS to help bring students into a democratic place of sharing the power in the school, including having students monitor their own progress toward graduation and expecting all students to engage in a meaningful internship project. However, it is the strategy of giving students decision-making power that is of the most interest to this paper. For Woods and the teachers, staff, students, and families with whom he works at FHHS, democracy is lived everyday as a community.

This kind of leadership demands the kind of democratic space we describe here, with its intellectual, positional, and relational elements. Such a leader must first conceptualize ways of leading, teaching, and learning that are not compatible with the dominant ideology of the schooling mechanism of which s/he is part; the leader must consciously position him/herself against that dominant ideology in the development of policy and practice that supports the agenda of that leaders and the colleagues and constituents with whom s/he works; and, finally, the leader must locate and maximize the potential of the naturally-occurring gaps between members of an organize to cultivate collaboration and synergy to enact the policies and practices developed through a deliberative democratic process.

8 Implications for Leadership Practice

To describe the implications of this construct for leadership practice and for the craft of preparing leaders, we turn to a model of democratic teaching put forth by Brookfield and Preskill (2005). While developed to guide the efforts of teachers working with students, the model—which describes nine dispositions of democratic

discussion—has immediate applicability to the kind of leadership we describe here and, thus, we contend that the model can and should inform leadership practice and the preparation of leaders. Here we consider each of the dispositions in turn:

- *Hospitality.* As construed here, the hospitality disposition calls upon leaders to actively create opportunities and cultivate an inviting atmosphere that allows for a free exchange of ideas, including contradictory ideas.
- *Participation.* The kind of participation described here is inextricably linked to the notion of efficacy—i.e., it is not enough to allow or even encourage participation; participants must believe that their participation matters by impacting on others if it is to be meaningful. The leader who evinces this disposition operates with the understanding that participation without efficacy (e.g., convening a committee whose decision has no force) is not real participation.
- *Mindfulness.* Centered on the realization that group cohesiveness and the interactive discussion/debate are usually more important than any particular result, this disposition demands that leaders are deliberative and attentive to the importance of process as opposed to focusing attention only on outcomes.
- *Humility.* Put simply, the leader who demonstrates humility is one who acknowledges that s/he does not have all the answers, understands that everyone can be a teacher and everyone can be a leader, and actively engages in learning and in followership.
- *Mutuality.* This disposition is demonstrated "when we muster all the resources we can to ensure that all participants benefit from the discussion" (p.12). In a leadership context, this means communicating and modeling the belief that "it is in the interest of all to care as much about each other's self-development as one's own" (p. 12).
- *Deliberation.* This disposition offers a model for shared decision-making, with the leader operating not from the position of his/her administrative authority, but as a fellow discussant open to the idea that information and arguments presented may lead to modification of the leader's original idea or position.
- *Appreciation.* Expressing appreciation for the insights, ideas, and contributions of others reinforces the importance of both the individual participant who is being recognized and the democratic processes that are being enacted through that participation. Of note, the kind of appreciation that exemplifies this disposition is targeted and substantive (i.e., not a pro forma thank you letter to a committee members, but an open and honest expression of gratitude in recognition of a specific contribution).
- *Hope.* As described here, "hope provides us with a sense that all of the time, effort, and work will benefit us in the long run, even if only in a small way" (p. 16). This disposition can sustain the leader and the organization in the face of challenges and—especially relevant here—of structural and ideological obstacles to enacting democratic education.
- *Autonomy.* The notion of autonomy put forward here is a complex one, entailing a willingness and capacity to stand alone in support of one's convictions but viewing that solitary stance as a something temporary that does not preclude submitting one's convictions to reevaluation and revision through participative dialogue with others.

The dispositions outlined above collectively describe the kind of leader that can create and cultivate democratic space within an educational setting that is predisposed to non-democratic practices. Moreover, these dispositions are described in terms of concrete behaviors and thus offer a blueprint for the kinds of capacity-building that leadership preparation should embrace. Of importance to leadership preparation programs, the benefits offered by the cultivation of these dispositions is not unique to work of creating democratic space that is described here. Indeed, these are dispositions that can be understood as desirable in a more general sense. Given the roles and responsibilities they hold within their institutions, educational leaders have the greatest responsibility (and even obligation) to develop, support, and participate in humane and democratic educational environments. Leaders can (and, we would argue, should) reject the notion that structural determinism denies the possibility for democratic education and democratic leadership, and instead recognize and cultivate the democratic potential of spaces that exist even within antidemocratic contexts. Leadership that supports and helps sustain a thriving democracy can indeed be realized through the confluence of the

above-described dispositions and the intentional cultivation of *democratic space* as delineated in the model proposed here.

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