

DEMOCRATIC VISTAS OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: AN EXAMINATION OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICE AND DISCOURSE*

Patrick Jenlink
Karen Embry Jenlink

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1 Introduction

Increasingly, there is a concern for education's role in a democratic society, at times characterized as a "crisis of leadership" (Giroux, 1994), and the distancing of education from democracy. This concern is companioned by an equally critical concern for political agendas that work to control and otherwise displace certain democratic ideologies while advancing others that are less democratic. Starratt (2001) furthers the discussion when he notes that that democratic education is comprised, in part, "by an undemocratic economy, by undemocratic communications and media industries, by undemocratic cultural institutions, and by a form of representative government many see as serving special interests and itself more than the broad needs of the people" (p. 341).

Consequently, an undemocratic setting is a contributing factor to the crisis in democratic leadership practice in education, and making equally problematic the work of fostering schools as democratic cultures.

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Pressing questions guide current discourses: “What are the democratic imperatives for education in a democratic society?” “What are the political issues that work to de-democratize schools in America today?” and “What are the challenges that educational leaders face in the work of making schools more democratic?”

In this paper, the authors examine of democratic leadership through a metaphorical framework of democratic vistas (Whitman, 1886). The authors further elaborate the metaphorical framework adopting a lens of “spatial practices” (Epstein, 1999) to explore how cultural and political meanings of democratic leadership emerge as democratic vistas. Such meanings are examined as extensions of the theoretical discussion of democratic leadership, primarily by engaging leader practitioners in a discursive examination of the democratic imperatives, challenges, and political issues related to democratic educational leadership. An underlying premise of this study was that school leaders must be mature, inquiring professionals who are predisposed to social justice, equity, and democratic practice (Foster, 1989; Heckman, 1996; Lees, 1995).

2 An Examination of Democratic Leadership

A metaphorical framework premised, in part, on the elements of “democratic vista” and “spatial practice,” was used to guide this theoretical study. The authors draw from Whitman’s (1886) *Democratic Vistas* to frame the metaphorical lens. Poststructural considerations were used in the theoretical positioning of democratic vistas, drawing to the foreground the notion of “spatial practice” as discussed by Epstein (1999).

2.1 A Metaphorical Lens

In “Spatial Practices / Democratic Vistas,” Epstein (1999) discussed the bearing that space has on historical reasoning, by asking specifically, and “in particular, what bearing might it have on how cultural and political meanings are produced, sustained, and interpreted (p. 294)? Epstein animated the discussion of spatial text and spatial rhetoric by exploring how liberal British radicals envisioned democratic space in an imaginary America during the early Victorian period. Likewise, the authors of this study explored how practitioners in American schools envisioned democratic space in terms of desired and imagined democratic practices in schools in the United States. As Epstein (1999) noted,

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This is potentially important since spatial practice and spatial imaginings, the struggles to dislodge the authority of place, suggest a way to think about the interactions between text and practice, between form and cultural production of meaning. (p. 297)

Adopting Epstein’s (1999) framework of spatial practice to guide our exploration of democratic vistas in this study, the practitioners’ discourse provided a spatial text defined by the cultural interplay, temporal structure, and “active ordering and organizing of subjective identities, social relations, and meaning” within a social space (p. 301). The narratives of the practitioners were considered in terms of their co-existence, the meaning of each element illuminated by its position and relationship to the other elements so that a circuitry of spatial rhetoric was created. The representation of democratic space, or vista, was explored through the trajectories of practitioners’ discourse dependent entirely on spatial circuits of meaning.

Within this framework of spatial practices/democratic vistas, the authors contend that the construction of democratic text through the lived experiences and storied narratives of practitioners necessarily acknowledges a “politics of reality” (Scheurich, 2003, p. 291); the representation of spatial practice/democratic vista is situated within the practitioners’ individual attitudes and beliefs about what stands as the role of education in democracy and for whom democracy exists. If others were included in a discourse of social imagining on democracy, such as students in schools or school community members, new vistas would be revealed through alternative trajectories of democratic space and social imagining.

Finally, just as Epstein (1999) acknowledged that it is important to consider “the prevailing literary view of America in order to appreciate the negative terms against which any democratic fiction had to contend” (p. 304), so do the authors in this study consider the prevalent views of standards and accountability, high stakes testing, and the *No Child Left Behind Act* in American schools today as important negative

terms against which the spatial text/democratic vista of this study was cast. From the standpoints of American policy and practice, and the ordering of social space and power, the authors recognize that “the very possibilities for representation cannot be understood outside historically significant specific practices and imagining attached to spaces” (Epstein, 1999, p. 310). Specifically, the historical and contemporary political mandates for education in America serve as real elements against which the democratic vista, as imagined by the practitioners in this study, was represented.

2.2 Poststructural Considerations

Poststructural considerations present the means for instructing the examination of social, cultural and political issues and patterns that ostensibly play a critical role in the practice of democratic leadership. Such considerations recognize that the theorizing and inquiry practices themselves are controlled by the discourses they are parts of (Foucault, 1978). In this sense, the theoretical framework of democratic vistas serves as discourse that controls, to some extent, the poststructural positioning of theories of democratic practices. The influence of Foucault’s (1972, 1977, 1980) analysis of discourse in relation to power and knowledge shapes the theoretical extension of democratic vistas. In positioning theories of democratic vistas, it is important to consider, as Foucault (1980) explains, that there is a relationship of power to the knowledge discourses and technologies of social practice. In a society, he explains,

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there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidate nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. (p. 93)

Such social practices occur within time and social space, they have a temporality and a locality, defined by historical reasoning and situated by cultural and political meanings. Epstein (1999) explains that such practices are “spatial practices” (p. 294), practices that originate at the intersection of language and social action with a social space. As such, from a theoretical stance, they are seen as spatial texts—discourse texts—that serve as content for poststructural analysis and theoretical positioning.

Importantly, poststructural considerations, as an extension of the theoretical examination of democratic vistas, allow for conflicting frames of knowledge – the historical constructions and constitutions of subjects/individuals without hierarchies. In this sense, theorizing looks for how historical and interested truth-effects are produced; how historical reasoning influences what is seen as true or real. However, as Foucault (1978) has acknowledged, poststructural considerations are limited in terms of what can be theorized. Taking up conflicting frames of knowledge, the discursive production of historical effects through language and social action as spatial texts, allows for, hopefully, theoretical speculations from the level of discourse and spatial practices (in this case, discursive practices within schools).

Discourses are seen as structuring mechanisms for social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivities. The production of knowledge and “meaning is never independent of the pragmatics of social space” (Epstein, 1999, p. 298), that is, the political and cultural affiliations affect knowledge and meaning.

Examining discourse, relatedly, must consider the social space that situates and is situated by spatial practices. In the case of a poststructural positioning of theories of democratic vistas, it is important to acknowledge the social space and the practiced place of schools, and more specifically of leadership practices concerned with democratizing spatial practices within schools.

As example, political issues that work to de-democratize social practice affect the spatial practices of schools. Making the social space of schools political, in turn, presents challenges to democratic practices within the space of schools. The intersection of de-democratizing language and discourse and social action demarcates the social space of schools. A poststructural analysis of discourse and language enables a theorizing of what is made problematic in spatial practices by external discourses. In turn, a poststructural theorizing of democratic vistas is a positioning of the theoretical in relation to the pragmatics of social space.

2.3 The Role of Education in a Democratic Society

The authors of this study considered the theoretical, historical, and transformative role of education in a democratic society, as well as the social practice of educational leaders in relation to fostering democratic schools. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) singled out “the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of greater diversity of personal capacity” as hallmarks of democracy (pp. 101-102) sustained only by voluntary action and interest, which must be made possible by means of education. Arguably, practitioner preparation in current times has not focused “on how to educate prospective administrators and teachers to address the problems facing public schools in the United States as a crisis of citizenship, authority, and ethics” (Giroux, 1994, pp. 33-34). Preparing educational leaders for the work of creating democratic educational settings necessarily recognizes that education as a “pedagogical practice embraces all social and cultural spheres engaged in the production of texts, images, knowledge, values, and identities” (Laclau, 1988, p. 23).

The practice of democratic educational leadership serves as a referent for analyzing the emerging points of relevance that unites administrators and teachers with other cultural workers who share a similar sense of responsibility in combining intellectual work with social responsibility as part of the task of “deepening those political [and cultural] practices that go in the direction of a ‘radical democracy’” (Laclau, 1988, p. 23). The practice of considering education for democracy is described from a culturally pluralistic perspective, “how to build better schools, intellectually richer schools, particularly for those who are at the bottom of the society; how to build a democratic multicultural curriculum where everybody learns from the rich diversity of the society” (Torres, 1998, p. 259).

The real challenge of leadership for democratic school cultures is to broaden the definition of leadership beyond traditional structural-functional models, to include teachers as leaders within the democratic imperatives of educating students to live in a multiracial and multicultural world. Necessarily, democratic leadership needs to “provide the ideological and institutional space for students to...engage in struggles to eliminate structural social inequalities, and work for the creation of a number of active critical public cultures engaging in multiple literacies and democratic practices” (Giroux, 1994, p. 37). Such a democratic leadership perspective takes up the issues of power, culture and identity within ethical and moral discourses that point to those practices between the self and others that oblige one to take a socially just and moral stand.

3 Extending the Theoretical: Re-positioning Democratic Leadership

Extending the theoretical positioning of democratic vistas was accomplished through soliciting the voices of practicing educational leaders and analyzing their discourse responses concerning the challenges, imperatives, and political issues that affect leadership practice for democratic schools. A narrative inquiry was conducted with twenty-seven (27) practicing educational leaders, including central office, building level, and teacher leaders. The intent of the inquiry was to generate discourse text that was representative of the democratic (or undemocratic as was at times shared) practices of each practitioner’s school, spatial practices that, as Epstein (1999) notes, become spatial texts.

The practitioners were queried concerning democracy and education. Specifically, the poststructural inquiry was focused on the pragmatics of social space in which the practitioners situated their discourse. The democratic practices, as spatial texts, formed a spatial circuitry that reflected both a temporality and locality. The spatial texts also reflected the political and cultural affiliations of each practitioner’s school and district. The narratives as spatial text were analyzed, looking specifically for language and action within and across discourse, illuminating patterns and relationships related to: 1) the democratic imperatives for creating democratic schools, 2) the challenges of leadership within the schools, and 3) the political issues that work to resist democratic leadership and democratic schools.

Poststructural considerations, as an extension of a theoretical framework of democratic vistas of educational leadership, positions the theories in relation to spatial practices, in particular in relation to the space in which social practices are situated. Theorizing democratic vistas necessarily considers the political nature of the space in which the practitioners live and work; the political issues that reflect symbolic power

relationships and which influence spatial practices.

3.1 Positionings of Democratic Vistas

The analysis of spatial discourses among the twenty-seven practitioners revealed meanings from the spatial texts that enabled a theorizing of democratic vistas in this study. Three underlying ideals that emerged through theorizing the spatial practices/democratic vistas are: 1) Democracy is an ideal; 2) Democracy is an action; and 3) Democracy must be learned.

The first ideal – democracy is an ideal – posits democracy as a belief or philosophy from which one is motivated to act and interact with others. As defined by the practitioners, this ideal of democracy embraces an ethic of social justice, caring, and equity. The second ideal – democracy is an action – reflects the belief that democracy involves action; educational leaders and practitioners must consciously and actively practice in order to foster democratic schools. The third ideal – democracy must be learned – emerges from the practitioners’ spatial practices/spatial texts that reveals individuals’ differing definitions of democracy, or a lack of awareness of democracy altogether in their schools.

Educating for democracy defines the work of educational leaders, fostering conversations and dialogue within a public space to imagine what democracy means for their schools and to envision democratic practices conjointly. Following along as well as within the spatial circuitry of these three underlying ideals, the imperatives of fostering a more democratic culture and challenges to implementing these imperatives were situated.

3.2 Democratic Imperatives and Challenges for Educational Leaders

Communication, relationships, and decentralized power emerge as critical clusters for describing the democratic imperatives and accompanying challenges represented by the practitioners’ spatial texts. From these overlapping clusters, trajectories of individual elements are placed to form a visual display, or democratic vista, of spatial practices in this study. Within the communication cluster, listening, shared dialogue, allowing all voices to be heard, and creating a vision for democracy through conversation, emerge as patterns for defining the democratic imperatives. Collectively, these patterns represent an envisioning for democratic discursive practice in democratic schools.

In the second critical cluster, the practitioners’ spatial texts describe critical elements for relationships within democratic schools. The representation of their spatial rhetoric displays elements, such as equity, trust, mutual respect, morality, acceptance of difference and “otherness,” and community as comprising those democratic imperatives and challenges for educational leaders in fostering democratic cultures within the relationships of individuals and groups within schools.

Lastly, decentralized power emerges as a third critical cluster within the patterns represented by the imperatives and challenges that formed the spatial practices/democratic vistas in this study. Decentralized power was envisioned as an imperative for fostering democratic culture. The meaning of decentralized power was described as shared responsibility, shared decision-making, eliminating racism and cultural bias, being honest, willing to compromise, and involving the larger community in the decisions and activities of the school.

In order to decentralize and resituate existing hierarchical power structures, the democratic imperatives of decentralized power as described by the practitioners are mirrored by a set of patterns that represent the accompanying challenges facing educational leaders who seek to alter the “pecking order” or challenge the status quo. Each of these perceived challenges presents parallel threats to the imperatives for implementing and realizing democracy within the social space of schools. With respect to shared decision-making and shared responsibility, the challenges of perceived loss of power and unwillingness to give up control are explained. Undemocratic leadership styles, such as self-serving interests, are perceived as challenges to achieving honesty and compromise. Sharing power with others of differing viewpoints poses challenges to fostering collaboration and community in schools where racist, ethnic, and cultural bias exist openly. In effect, challenging the existing social order and using power to diminish undemocratic practices in schools,

presents the greatest challenge to realizing the imperatives for fostering the kinds of communication and relationships that characterizes democratic schools.

Within the spatial practices/democratic vistas (Epstein, 1999) created by the exploration of the spatial texts of the practitioners in this study, a social imagining for fostering democratic culture and democratic practices occurred. This social imaginary, or “democratic fiction,” (Epstein, 1999) accepts the differing definitions of and beliefs in democracy yet reaches for the fostering of a collective, or common, understanding through education for democracy. This view envisions education for democracy as an integral part of teacher development and the preparation of practitioners and educational leaders. Education for democracy is also viewed as an essential part of the curriculum of schools so that the democratic ideal of educating future citizens who are capable of carrying out the “unfinished work” of democracy in our country may be achieved.

In addition, this “democratic fiction” clearly understands the normative practices that seek to perpetuate imbalances of power and the socialization of teachers to become passive “factory workers,” and recognizes the existing top-down managerial styles that are maintained in schools, but it does not accept these practices. Instead, the spatial practices viewed within the social imaginary in this study reveals an image of schools as democratic spaces where time for communication to create new structures is paramount to breaking out of the routines that constitute “old methods.” Within this social imaginary/“democratic fiction”, teachers’ identities are actively evolving, nurtured into leadership roles as they conjoin with educational leaders in the collaborative decision-making to overcome the challenges and realize the imperatives in fostering a more democratic culture in schools. This imaginary vista provides a bright portal through which the three ideals underlying the spatial practices/spatial texts examined in this study, namely, the ideal of democracy, the act of democracy, and that democracy must be learned, may be richly glimpsed.

3.3 Political Issues

Whereas the imperatives and challenges represent a symmetrical design in the social imagining of democratic space, political issues explicated by the practitioners overshadow the social imaginary of spatial practices/democratic vistas and render seemingly impossible the “task of democracy” (Dewey, 1939, p. 245). Political issues reflect conflicts within the social spaces and practiced places of schools, and relatedly within the spatial practices of practitioners. Issues are most often made political by discourse, establishing “relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social” (Foucault, 1980, p. 93).

The symmetrical or asymmetrical nature of power relations makes political the social practices of those most directly impacted. Democratic discourse and practice work to reduce asymmetrical relations of power, to reduce hierarchical power structures that order space and practices politically. In the analysis of spatial texts, a primary political issue surfaced for practitioners, the issue of standards and accountability; an issue that overshadowed the social space of their respective schools and dominated the spatial practices of teachers, administrators, and students alike.

As one leader noted, “there is an irony when the government drawn from democratic ideals, takes away some of the same ideals from schools.” Hierarchical power structures de-democratize the organizational routines of schools, create relational disconnects between principals, teachers, and students, respectively. When power is unevenly distributed, an asymmetrical relation forms. The conflict that teachers and building principals experience, as noted by the participants, relates to decision-making, voice, and practices, each of which reflected de-democratizing affects on spatial practices. In example, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, combined with pre-existing high-stakes testing and standardized curriculum in Texas, fosters a competitive climate in schools and forces principals and teachers to focus on test scores and pass rates, subverting attention from learning and refocusing on accountability.

A competitive climate results from power structures that position practitioners against each other, contaminating cultural affiliations and collegial relations, thus limiting opportunity for collaboration and democratic community. Participants exemplified the problematic nature of standardized testing as they noted that narrow ranges of measurement cultivate a climate of blame in relation to individual undesired outcomes. When power is centralized, a pattern of blame and shifting of responsibility emerged in relation to test scores. As noted in the spatial texts of practitioners, blame creates an atmosphere of natural distrust, a “us

versus them” mentality, and it sets in motion a competition that positions practitioners against each; a result that is antithetical to democratic school climate and culture. In reflection, when power is decentralized, a more democratic climate exists, characterized by trust, shared responsibility, and cultural affiliations are strengthened rather than diminished.

The language of power surfaces through the spatial texts of practitioners as they recount how hierarchical structures are recast in the classrooms in their respective schools, a result of the “enormous pressure to perform” on tests. Power differentials dominate the space of schools as central office administrators make decisions without input from building principals; principals held accountable for performance of students on tests and yet who little voice in decision-making. Similarly, teacher voice is notably absent from decision-making that directly implicates them in being accountable against standards that are externally imposed. The absence of voice, principal and teacher alike, denotes an invalidation of democratic participation and devaluing of individuals are outside the hierarchical control.

Importantly, practitioners’ spatial texts reflect a belief that the political nature and contravening affect of the standards and accountability issue restrains schools from explorations of democratic practice, if they are to meet the qualifications of being successful as established under the mandates of NCLB and state accountability systems. An interesting pattern that emerges relates to being successful. As an affect of the standardizing press of political mandates, for a school to become and remain successful, it must meet the ascribed standards; in meeting these standards, over time, the school experiences devolution of democratic climate and spatial practices. And, ironically, the school—the teachers, students, administrators, other cultural workers—in being successful against prescribed standards, finds itself confronted with increasingly regulated curricula, teaching to the test, and determining measures of student performance that reflect immediate results. Notably absent from the spatial texts, in discussing the standards issue, were markers of equity, justice, caring, democratic equality; an absence indicative of asymmetrical power differentials and undemocratic social practices.

Repeatedly, spatial texts reflected a concern for freedom, or more accurately the diminishing presence of freedom as an affect of the standards and accountability issue. Characteristic of the language and spatial texts, the notion that “freedom is taken away by standards” reflects participants’ perceptions of how the standards and accountability issue works against democratic practices in schools. Such loss of freedom, as characterized in spatial practices, was discussed in relation to matters of curriculum and instructional practices, in relation to a freedom to learn for students as contrasted with a requirement to perform, and with respect to being directly involved in decision-making that affected social practices. When the freedom to speak and be heard are diminished, when decision-making is hierarchical and therefore precludes authentic participation, and when practices are mandated externally, then the real threats to democracy are made public.

Cultivating and sustaining an environment conducive to learning and fostering inclusive democratic communities in schools—an environment characterized by true and honest collaboration, shared decision-making, and where open dialogue would exist—seems futile for the practitioners, an impossible task in the current political climate of standards and accountability and competitive school culture. The spatial texts shared by practitioners reflected an environment more concerned with academic scores and results than with children’s learning. Emergent was a perspective that standards and accountability dehumanize students.

The rendering of students into measures of performance and pass rates, objectifies students into a spatial “economy” of schools, where competing markets of performance become more important than learning. Such an economy not only shifts priority from the purpose of learning, it affects the development of student social capital. The resultant concern, for practitioners, was the diminishing value schools have in educating for democracy.

4 Reflections on Theorizing Democratic Vistas

The spatial practices/democratic vistas of educational leadership, imagined through the discourse (Epstein, 1999) of this study, reveals a dim and bleak view set portrayed through the political tensions of standards and accountability, for educational leaders who hope to foster democratic cultures and democratic practices

in American schools. The imperatives of democracy, as identified by the practitioners, in relation to their work and within the spatial practices of their respective schools, are reflective of individual practitioner's social contexts for postulating challenges in creating democratic schools.

What was represented as an imperative for education in a democratic society, and by extension schools in a democratic society, mirrors emergent challenges that confront the practitioners within the political and cultural affiliations of their respective social space. The imperatives that surface in the discursive analysis are reflective of a need to create and sustain inclusive democratic communities, and relatedly creating climates within schools conducive to learning. The imperatives for schools included: communication that fosters a democratic culture and climate, relationships that reflect a sense of community, and symmetry of power that reflects a valuing of individuals.

However, realizing these imperatives as spatial practices for democracy is seemingly unrealizable when considered in relation to the existing hierarchical power structures, social inequities, mandated policies, and de-democratizing practices reflected in the spatial texts of these same schools. Participants' spatial texts echoed the political tensions and de-democratizing affects of standards and accountability; affects of federal policy and state mandated testing and accountability.

A theorizing of democratic vistas as demonstrated in this paper, makes public, importantly, issues of power and control. Making public such issues is at the foundation of working democracy. Importantly, theorizing recognizes that discourse both shapes and is shaped by the political and cultural affiliation and historical reasoning that instruct social practices within the school. Making such discourse a part of the theorizing is important to understanding and advancing democratic vistas. In effect, by analyzing spatial texts of the practicing educational leaders, we at once make visible the symmetry, or lack thereof, of power relations. Importantly, we also provide opportunity for practitioner voice to inform emergent vistas of democratic educational leadership. Relatedly, there is a limitation to a positioning of theories (Foucault, 1978). Such limitations are, in part, defined by the nature and origin of spatial texts, i.e., the intersections of language and social actions revealed through discourses of spatial practices.

As a final reflection, active participation of practitioners in giving voice to the issues and challenges related to making schools more democratic is at the heart of democratizing education. Importantly, creating democratic vistas of educational leadership serves to instruct, as Dewey (1916) believed, education's role (and therein the spatial practices that define schools) in a democratic society.

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