

4-1-2010

Teacher Perceptions of Administrative Support for Democratic Practice: Implications for Leadership and Policy

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Recommended Citation

Murphy, Audrey (2010) "Teacher Perceptions of Administrative Support for Democratic Practice: Implications for Leadership and Policy," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 40.

DOI: 10.58809/QIDU1729

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss2/40>

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Academic Leadership Journal

[Teacher Perceptions of Administrative Support for Democratic Practice: Implications for Leadership and Policy](#)

Issues: [Spring 2010 - Volume 8 Issue 2](#)

Posted On 2010-04-18 22:52:04

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Introduction

The term democracy has been defined, understood and applied (especially in the area of education) in varied ways by a wide range of scholars and theorists. For example, Kelly (1995) offers a philosophical understanding of democracy, while Soder (1997) and Goodlad & McMannon (1997) argue that democracy hinges on morality and its development in the young. Parker (2003) contends that democracy's greatest promise is one of social justice, while others offer insightful and important arguments related to the positive possibilities that the democratic ethos could have on society (Counts, 1932; Dewey, 1916; Green, 1999; Mursell, 1955; Novak, 1994; Weiner, 2005; and West, 2004). Indeed, a rich, sizable and diverse literature exists in the area of democracy, and of democracy in education.

This paper reports results from a qualitative study that examined perceptions of administrative practice expressed by members of a grassroots teacher group committed to the practice of democratic education. The group (the Friday Roundtable) was comprised of K-12 public school teachers in rural Appalachian Ohio who spent considerable time together trying to answer the collective question how can we be better teachers? A key element of that dialogue involved consideration of increased state and national pressures that often included educational expectations of their building administrators that the teachers perceived as undemocratic. Using case studies of eleven individual teachers situated in both a Narrative Inquiry and Appreciative Inquiry design, the investigation examines the democratic educational work of these teachers as they pursue educational equity in their highly-challenged schools.

Attentive to the varied constructs through which democracy has been described and operationalized by theorists, here we review the relevant literature within the framework of (1) an examination of the construct of democratic education—both its theoretical grounding and its manifestations in practice, and, similarly, (2) a consideration of the intersection of leadership and democratic education in terms of its theoretical and practical implications.

Two Democratic Understandings: Procedural versus Social Democracy

The idea that democracy is primarily a process of the structural components of governments and politics is central to the tenets of procedural democracy. Several scholars have argued that a formal or procedural democracy functions to limit the participation of members (Green, 1999; Grugel, 2002; Schumpeter, 1976). For Green (1999), such a "purely formal" concept of democracy is problematic in

relation to a “deeper conception of democracy that expresses the experience-based possibility of more equal, respectful and mutually beneficial ways of community life” (p. iv).

It was this type of democracy that concerned Thomas Jefferson and his thinking about the relationships between education and civil society in the U.S. context. For Jefferson, governmental concerns were at the center of his argument for an educated citizenry. In a letter to George Washington he wrote, “It is an axiom in my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that, too, of the people with a certain degree of instruction” (Honeywell, 1931, p.13). Jefferson understood that for a democracy to be of the people, the people needed an education that developed within them the ideas and understandings of democratic participation.

As used in this paper, social democracy goes beyond the “thin” description of procedural democracy (e.g., representative legislature, the three branches of government, elections, etc.). Rather it focuses on a “deep” notion of democracy that encompasses those characteristics that citizens need to become fully participatory members of their democratic society. Green (1999) defines “deep democracy” in the following manner,

Deep democracy so understood—as a realistically imaginative philosophical expansion of the implications of the democratic ideal into habits of the heart and a shared way of life—is profoundly preferable to a merely formal, institutional conception of democracy because it is preferable ‘all the way down. (p. xiv)

Dewey (1939) observed that “unless democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fiber of people, political democracy is insecure” (p. 721). This notion is of central importance to our understanding of how deeply the expectations of democratic participation were held by the teachers in this research study. West (2003) would describe this as a “cultural way of being” (p. 68). Democracy as such demands a faith in the “social” nature of democracy that moves it beyond the procedural and into the “bone and blood of the people” (Dewey, 1939, p. 720). Indeed, faith in the people to be active, participatory and responsible is at the core of this social understanding of democracy. Soder (1997) contends that citizens in a democracy must have both the skills to govern themselves and the attitude that they are capable of that act, an argument that offers strength to the notion that democracy demands democratic education.

Dewey (1938) offers a working understanding of the foundations of democratic education for democratic life. For Dewey, the juxtaposition of democratic and non-democratic educational practice stands as a powerful way to describe democratic education. Dewey articulated several characteristics of democratic education by contrasting what democratic education is not with what democratic education strives to offer students. Hence, Dewey includes these six characteristics as significant principles of what is meant by progressive or democratic education: (1) the celebration of expression and cultivation of individuality, (2) inspired free activity, (3) learning through experience, (4) the acquisition of skills and techniques by means which make direct vital appeal, (5) the utilization of the opportunities of present life for educational exploration, and (6) becoming acquainted with a changing world (pp. 19-20).

When coupled with the work of Apple and Beane (1995) a more complete understanding of the basic values and concepts of democratic education emerges. Apple and Beane identified seven conditions that form “the foundations of the democratic way of life” (pp.6-7):

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of the popularity, that enables people to be as fully formed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities of resolving problems.
3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems and policies.
4. Concern for the welfare of others and the “common good.”
5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an “ideal” to be pursued as an “idealized” set of values that we live and that must guide our life as a people.
7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.

Apple and Beane (1995) paraphrase Dewey in arguing that “if people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be lead” (p. 7). In expressing this position, Apple and Beane are attentive to Mursell’s (1955) position that “democratic education is education that is expressly planned and conducted to support, perpetuate, enlarge and strengthen the democratic way of life” (p. 4). For most teachers, school is not a site of contagious democracy—i.e., not a place where democratic practice is likely to thrive and be passed on to others; rather, school is often a place where democratic practice is (at worst) subjugated to the tenets of hierarchy, or (at best) ignored to the extent that it can be practiced by subterfuge.

Herbert Kohl (1994) offers an important insight into the potential dilemmas related to being a democratic teacher trying to remain committed to democratic education in a system that is not democratic. Kohl explains the struggle to teach well as,

A militant activity that requires a belief in children’s strengths and intelligence no matter how poorly they may function under the regimes imposed upon them. It requires understanding student failure as system failure, especially when it encompasses the majority of students in a class, school or school system. It also means stepping back and seeing oneself as a part of a dysfunctional system and developing the courage to maladjust rather than adjust oneself to much of current educational practice. (pp. 144-145)

Based on Kohl’s argument the tension between democratic educational values and more traditional educational expectations makes the sustained democratic effort on the part of the teachers in this study a remarkable feat of perseverance.

Leadership and Democratic Education

Historical treatments of the literature on effective leadership (e.g., Bass & Bass, 2008; Northouse, 2008) generally describe a trajectory away from individual authority toward recognition of the power of collaboration and the potential for contributions from stakeholders outside the formal leadership ranks. Parallel with this trajectory, educational reforms of recent decades have broadened notions of who contributes to decision-making, with states and local units enacting policies and governance

structures that operationalize models of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and, arguably, support the kind of democratic practices described in the previous section as procedural democracy. The more radical version of democracy characterized in the earlier section as social democracy has not typically been a part of that reform, however, and the relationship between educational leadership and the practice of democratic education remains problematic at best (Pryor, 2008; Riley, 2003). Indeed, some theorists (e.g., Gale & Densmore, 2003; Starrat, 2001; Woods, 2006) have posed the question of whether it is even possible in the context of contemporary schooling to lead democratically, given constraints imposed on schools by institutional, political, and cultural influences.

This question about democratic leadership is a rhetorical one for such theorists, however, leading to an affirmative response and descriptions of democratic leadership models that they contend are not only possible but even necessary. Starrat (2001, p. 338) construes democratic leadership as being "... primarily concerned to cultivate an environment that supports participation, sharing of ideas, and the virtues of honesty, openness, flexibility, and compassion" and, more specifically, construes democratic educational leadership as being "... focused on cultivating school environments where Taylor's [1998] richer and fuller humanity is experienced and activated by people acting in communion. For Gale and Densmore (2003, p. 120) democratic leadership is characterized by leaders who "enable the formation of social, learning and culturally responsive public educational institutions, in part by enabling contextually specific struggles to determine what is needed, and by developing a politically-informed commitment to justice for all." 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 (see figure 1).

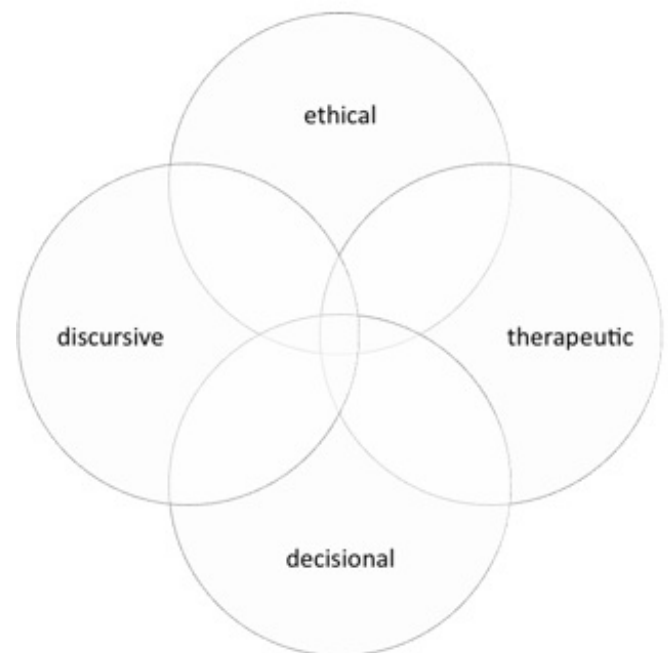
Figure 1. Four rationalities model of democratic leadership practice (Woods, 2005, p. 12).

Within the model, the four rationalities are intended to distinguish among dimensions of democratic leadership and democratic practice with differing foci, priorities, and consequences, and to illustrate how the four complement and interact with one another. The most complete form of democratic leadership would be exemplified by practices that would be positioned where these four rationalities overlap. Woods (2006, p.328) defines the rationalities as follows:

1. Ethical rationality is concerned with supporting and enabling aspirations for truth, and the widest engagement of people in this.

2. Decisional rationality is about power and freedom from arbitrary and imposed rule by others and the imposition of others' values. It concerns the right to participate, including rights to select representatives and to be involved in decision-making and to hold power-holders to account.

3. Discursive rationality is about open debate and the operation of dialogic and deliberative



democracy.

4. Therapeutic rationality concerns the creation of well-being, social cohesion and positive feelings of involvement through participation and shared leadership.

Because it focuses upon the intersection of democratic leadership and democratic practice, this model offers—from among the literature reviewed for this project—the most viable and appropriate theoretical framework for considering the ways in which teachers practicing democratic education experienced the intervention of leadership into their work. Moreover, because the model/framework explicitly engages not just theoretical perspectives but the practice of applied leadership and the exercise of leadership authority, it also offers the greatest potential for identifying implications and proposing concrete recommendations for leadership practice.

Methodolog

The primary purpose of this research study was to describe and analyze the narratives of democratic teachers, specifically those teaching in rural Appalachia Ohio. Particular attention was given to the educative context and practice in rural Appalachia as it intersects with the social construction of socio-economic class, regional stereotypes and K-12 student academic struggle and/or success. Their democratic ideas, their educational practices related to their understanding of how learning occurs in democratic classrooms, how they have persevered as democratic teachers, and their understanding of how standardization from external forces has affected their pedagogy and understanding of themselves as educators in this region. Semi-structured interviews and the interview schedule's design (see appendix 2) provided a means for participants to tell their stories, allowing for a more complete understanding of their experiences as democratic teachers.

The eleven interviews collected as part of this research project range in length from sixty to ninety minutes. The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants. With consideration for participant confidentiality, these spaces included their participant's classrooms, public libraries, and conference rooms at a local university.

The data analysis utilized verbatim transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews and worked toward the identification of emergent themes. Once organized into rudimentary thematic categories, the data was used to construct narratives and descriptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) with the intent of developing collections of instances through which issue-relevant meanings could emerge, a process resulting in direct interpretations that lead to larger themes (Creswell, 1998).

Following the work of Patton (2002), a detailed individual case analysis of each participant interviewed was created utilizing the Qualitative Data Analysis program Weft QDA. A guiding principle for this stage in the analysis was Patton's advice that "the analyst's first and foremost responsibility consists of doing justice to each case. All else depends on that" (2002, p. 448). After the individual case data was organized and coded and emergent themes were identified, the individual cases were utilized to create a cross-case analysis. Patton (2002, p. 447) refers to this process as layering or nesting, noting that ". . . layering recognizes that you can always build larger case units out of smaller ones; that is, you can always combine studies of individuals into studies of a program . . ." The emergent data from individual cases and categorical themes developed inside the individual cases were used as the primary vehicle for data presentation and analysis of the data.

Results

The impact of the powerful Roundtable experience coupled with a preexisting democratic leaning helped to solidify a deep commitment to the principles of democratic education among the teachers in this study. Importantly, these teachers exercised principles of democratic education in both (1) supportive settings characterized by leadership practices that facilitated, encouraged, and modeled democratic practice; and (2) unsupportive settings characterized by leadership practices that worked—often explicitly—against democratic practice. Attentive to the literatures examining democratic education and democratic leadership, here we explore teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership practice.

Examples of Less Than Democratic Leadership Practice

Several of the teachers who participated in this study shared stories of resistance to undemocratic educational practices in their schools. This resistance—which took various forms and was enacted in response to policies and practices involving both teaching colleagues and principals—allowed them to preserve a democratic educator ethos in schools that were (and/or were becoming) less democratic as a result of a culture surrounding high-stakes testing.

Gail. A founding member of the Friday Roundtables, Gail has taught in a rural Appalachian Ohio school for several decades. She describes being hired at her current school and the principal's expectation that she employ "assertive discipline" as her classroom management strategy:

When I was hired, the principal at the time told me that our whole building used Assertive Discipline, that that was a mandate, and that you [as the teacher] would have your rules posted in your room and the consequences for breaking the rules. It was a very teacher-heavy situation. I remember later saying "she [the principal] should have just fired me on the spot" because I asked her, "Well what if I don't believe in doing that?" The response was, "Well, everyone has to do that." I believe that the children should be involved in making the rules and that they should be part of the process, and it was not just me asserting the discipline on them, which is the whole theory of Assertive Discipline. There are still teachers in the building—at least one—who has the same rules that I think she had 20 years ago.

Quite clearly, the principal's approach here is counter to the democratic leadership models described by Woods (2005) and others. Gail chose not to employ assertive discipline, but rather to continue employing practices that resonated with her sense of democratic education:

It [being a democratic teacher] goes back to something as straightforward as that, that I was told how I would have my rules, and I said, "I don't think I'm going to do that." [Sometimes] I have just kept my mouth shut and done it my own way, probably, although I think we had to turn our rules in [to the principal] and the consequences [for violation the rules]. There were five levels of consequences if you broke the rules.

Gail noted that she had to "turn in the rules" but that this was done to appease her supervisor. With the involvement her students, she developed a different set of rules, thereby sharing her teaching power with them. Thus, for Gail, practicing democratic education was not a matter of operating democratically within a structure that supported it; rather it was a matter of refusing to comply with practices that she considered non-democratic and not in the interests of the teaching and learning experience and

environment that she sought to create and sustain. Doing so meant coming to terms with the disconnection between her own guiding philosophies and official philosophies as promulgated by her principal.

In another such instance, Gail was faced with a directive from her principal to engage in direct instruction; a teaching strategy that Gail believed was not in the best interest of her students:

I was told directly by my principal about four years ago, “You will all start Direct Instruction,” because we were saying, “We’ll start it in January. We’re going to kind of build the framework here, and we’ll start it in January.” Well at one point she said, with a pointed finger—there were three kindergarten teachers at that time—“You will all start it now.” Then I had to decide, “Do I go to her [the principal] and present my methods that I’d like to use, and my data for why I believe this can work?” and risk having her say, “No, absolutely not. Just do it the way you’re supposed to” or do I just close the door of my room and cheat a little bit and do what I believe and just enough of ... Anyway, I took the coward’s way out and I closed my door. They had the scripted program for about ten minutes two times a week, and my aide does it. I don’t even touch it.

Gail’s actions can best be understood not as an act of cowardice but as an act of what Kohl (1994) has termed “creative maladjustment,” a path of resistance marked by

... breaking social patterns that are morally reprehensible, taking conscious control of one’s place in the environment, and readjusting the world one lives in based on personal integrity and honesty—that is, it consists of learning to survive with minimal moral and personal compromise in a thoroughly compromised world and not being afraid of planned and willed conflict, if necessary. (p. 130)

Gail’s resistance was not in the form of a full blown conflict with her principal. She instead remained true to her democratic educational values and her deeply held beliefs about what is best for her students.

Sally. Gail’s experiences with her principal are similar to those encountered by Sally following the retirement of a principal who had practiced democratic leadership at her school. The leadership practices of the new principal did not support the kind of teaching and learning approaches that Sally had embraced and implemented, and so she too had to exercise stealth in order to survive in a new system without compromising her democratic values:

If you were established there and you felt strong about it, you could close your door and teach the way you wanted and you know we have always read books about teachers that make kids look right If you are quiet in the hall and you make a line and you look like you are traditional, the principal is going to let us do what we want.

For committed democratic practitioners like Sally and Gail who are faced with an administrative structure that does not support democratic practice in the classroom or allow for it in the broader operations of the school, creative maladjustment may be the only viable choice.

Examples of Leadership Practices that Supported Democratic Education

Other experiences related by the teachers participating in the study illustrate leadership practices that reflect to varying extents the developmental model of democratic leadership described by Woods

(2005). Indeed, it was these types of practices that the teachers described in positive terms—not just positive in the sense of how it impacted the individual teacher's work (and implicitly, the learning experiences), but positive in the sense of how it impacted the culture and the productivity of the school as a whole. Here we explore three teachers' experiences with democratic leadership practices within the theoretical framework of the Woods (2005) model and related work.

Sally. One of the founding members of the "Friday Roundtable" group, Sally has remained committed to democratic education for the majority of her career. In relating some of her experiences with efforts to improve literacy education, Sally described how her principal's leadership practice openly valued teacher agency with regard to improving classroom practice:

He always encouraged us to really pursue all we believed in . . . I used to want him to come to the Friday Roundtables and he said, "No, I don't put my stamp of approval on anything." You all have to figure that out. And in the end I think he felt very strongly about the things we were doing, which he was really [supportive of and] if he were a teacher he would be teaching like we were. But as the Principal, he didn't feel like that was his role.

In another example, Sally described the principal's position on teaching strategies in the context of hiring decisions:

Other times we would be interviewing new teachers. He always let teachers interview teachers. We might say something and afterwards [for example] I would say I don't really agree with that math program that she is talking about and [he] would say, "Oh, I don't make those kinds of judgments. I am just glad that person has this strong idea, the thing they really want to do, that they are very excited about. I don't decide whether it is with my philosophy or not.

For Sally, the principal's refusal to endorse a single approach or methodology (a one "best practice") created the kind of intellectual space in which committed democratic educators could wrestle with important questions, acknowledging competing perspectives and engaging in critique and experimentation in an effort to best meet the needs of the particular group of students with which they were engaged in teaching and learning. The leadership practices Sally describes reflect the intersection of ethical, decisional, discursive, and therapeutic rationalities (Woods, 2005). Teachers are free from arbitrary rule and actively engaged in both making practical and in seeking "truth" via open and respectful dialogue, resulting in a strong sense of involvement.

Jill. Jill worked as an elementary school teacher for more than twenty years. Unlike many of the initial teachers associated with the Roundtable group, who had several years of teaching experience before joining the group, Jill joined the group as a newly minted teacher. In relating her experiences, Jill calls attention to the kind of social cohesion that results from authentic engagement in an open debate:

There were a couple years that we had done some research [as a school] and we had an incredibly supportive principal . . . And she was always pushing us [the teachers]. I didn't always agree with her, but she was always pushing us and getting us to read and think and discuss and work collaboratively, and we worked on—we spent a couple years researching multi-age classrooms, and then we moved to that model. And . . . I had a first and second grade classroom, and for a couple years before that principal left, everything just gelled

Like Sally, Jill perceived herself as an active player in deliberations that drove the direction and foci of the schooling process, and viewed the principal as intentionally creating and maintaining opportunities for that kind of deliberation and ownership in the change process. It is particularly noteworthy that Jill acknowledges not always agreeing with the principal, but nevertheless describes her as “incredibly supportive” (i.e., this is not an instance where pedagogical or ideological alignment make it easy to agree and work together; rather, the organizational culture appears to be one in which a teacher feels supported even in the context of disagreeing). Moreover, for the teachers this kind of collaborative engagement results over time in the creation of authentic communities. Jill describes this community as being an important part of her development as a teacher as well as a source of support, mentoring, and connection:

I think there's always the place for the small kind of family, grassroots organization that's supportive in mentoring teachers That's the type of the really close knit [group we had], where you have folks who know, who know your kids or know the types of kids that you have, or the type of situations that you're dealing with That's really important.

While the emphasis here is on the collaborative work, Jill also acknowledges the importance of leadership in initiating and sustaining the work. Simultaneously supporting, pushing, and creating space for dialogue and deliberation that is inclusive of alternative perspectives, the decisions and practices of her school principal again offer evidence of the democratic leadership model described by Woods (2005).

Conclusions and Implications

Findings from this study reported here describe a group of teachers who came together, many with an existing democratic leaning, and engaged in the hard work of any democracy: listing, arguing, debating, and reflecting on ideas as they defined and solidified their collective and individual democratic teaching philosophies. As they worked toward solidifying their individual and collective democratic educational philosophies, these teachers encountered varied leadership practices. The professional responses that teachers engaged and deployed in response to the undemocratic practices of administrators and fellow teachers highlight the challenges, just as the kind of synergy that resulted when democratic leadership approaches supported their efforts highlights potential. Attentive to the contemporary education context of high stakes assessment and increasing centralized bureaucracies, here we consider the implications of these teachers' experiences for the practice of leading and planning in schooling institutions.

Inner Distance

The Roundtable teachers in this study developed a democratic educational layer that was not easily penetrated by undemocratic ideas and educational practices. The solidification of democratic values influenced their educational philosophy and served as an internalized core position for many of these teachers as they responded to, reacted against and at times resisted undemocratic practices and policies in their schools. Here, we describe these acts of resistance as instances of what Kohl (1994) terms creative maladjustment as defined earlier in this paper. Adding to the concept of creative maladjustment Kohl notes that,

Creative maladjustment is reflective. It implies adapting your own particular maladjustment to the nature

of the social systems that you find repressive. . . It also means small everyday acts of maladjustment as well as occasional major reconstruction, and it requires will, determination, faith that people can be wonderful, conscious planning, and an unshakable sense of humor. (p130)

The teachers in this study embody the essence of these ideas both in their individual and collective actions of resistance to undemocratic practices.

The undemocratic policies and practices described by the teachers were often the result of policies and practices with origins at the state and national level, including but not limited to the latest assessment pressures stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). And so the un-democratic practices enacted by the principals do not necessarily emanate from the school or even the district level (e.g., standardizing practice among all teachers to align with external recommendations purporting to lead to improved test scores is not an original idea on the part of the principal or even the superintendent). On the contrary, superintendents and principals who enact such un-democratic practices can be viewed, in the contemporary context, are merely “following orders”—indeed, in most instances, following the orders of democratically elected and duly constituted governing bodies (e.g., local boards of education, state board of education, state and federal legislatures).

Given the comprehensive structures that seemingly work against democratic practices, school leaders—like teachers—would seemingly need to practice creative maladjustment (Kohl, 1994) in order to practice the kind of democratic leadership described here. Doing so has differing implications for principals and superintendents than for teachers, however, because administrators are not only workers (i.e., supervised by, respectively, the superintendent and the board of education), but also managers (i.e., with supervisory responsibility over others in the organizational hierarchy). As such, they have responsibility for maintaining and legitimating the organization. In light of this set of dual concerns, educational leaders who would support and facilitate democratic practice within their unit must cultivate what Weber (1956/1978) described as “inner distance,” or the carving out of a personal stance within the dominant ideology, before enacting democratic leadership via creative maladjustments.

Process versus Substance

The literature review highlighted the contrast between procedural democracy (or democracy defined solely in terms of formal policies and practices that, while distributive in terms of decision-making structures, arguably work against inclusive decision-making and shared ownership of institutional mission and purpose) and social democracy (a deeper form of democracy that moves beyond formal interactions to describe ways of thinking and working that value diverse perspectives and engage all in defining, sharing, and working toward a common good). The contrast offers a useful framework for considering the perceptions about school and district leaders shared by the teacher respondents. For those teachers working in schools with leaders that we characterize here as less-than-democratic, whatever elements of procedural democracy that do exist in the schooling institution (e.g., elected boards of education) are inadequate to create and maintain contexts in which teachers can enact democratic educational practices without resorting to subterfuge and resistance. In contrast, teachers working in schools with leaders that we characterize here as democratic operate in contexts and environments where they had an authentic voice and agency in deliberations and decision making about essential questions regarding teaching, learning, and governance.

Importantly, the experiences of some teachers in the second category suggest that their ability to

practice democratic education was impacted substantially by changes in administration. Specifically, following changes in administration, some teachers who been working in schools with a democratic leader suddenly found themselves in less-than-democratic contexts where the leadership sought to own the decision-making process and standardize teaching and learning approaches in response to external forces (e.g., assessment and accountability systems, “best practices” recommendations). The experiences of the teachers thus suggests that procedural and social democracy do not represent a dichotomy in the schooling context; rather, creating and sustaining leadership that supports democratic practice depends to varying degrees upon both the philosophical orientation of the leader (i.e., the extent to which she or he is committed to democratic education) and structural elements that have been developed and implemented to facilitate democratic practice.

Leadership and Policy Implications for Democratic Education

As outlined in the previous section, providing administrative leadership that can support democratic practice by teachers carries with it considerations for both the philosophical approaches taken by leaders (i.e., cultivating a democratic ethos that allows for and models the kind of open, diverse, deliberative effort that embodies democratic schooling) and the creation of structural frameworks that can support such efforts. In the absence of the former, the latter functions as the kind of procedural democracy that some theorists (Green, 1999; Grugel, 2002; Schumpeter, 1976) have argued actually work against democracy. In the absence of the latter, the democratic environment exists solely in conjunction with a supportive individual, and can be altered instantly and dramatically when s/he is replaced.

Given the importance of both democratic leadership practice in situ and formal policy structures that can support and sustain such practice, a close consideration of policy development is warranted. Specifically, democratic leaders who wish to provide support for the continuation of democratic education in the future need concern themselves with developing and implementing the kinds of policies and processes that privilege democratic ways of doing over other more authoritarian ways. In thinking through the development of such a policy structure, a (rather loose) application of affordance theory (Gibson, 1977) is useful. Based upon gestalt theories, affordance theory puts forth the idea that the world is perceived not merely in terms of object shapes and spatial relationships, but also in terms of object possibilities for action (affordances). It is the opposite of form follows function—put simply, if you build something that looks like a doorknob, people will turn it. Thus, planning formal policies and processes within the governance and operating structure that directly reflect democratic concerns and suggest the possibility of democratic practice (e.g., a policy requiring that current teachers be involved in the interviewing process for new teachers; a policy describing curriculum determination that explicitly provides for teacher deliberation and provides for variation among teachers) are crucial if democratic practices are to survive beyond the immediate work of individual teachers and individual leaders.

This last conclusion offers more general implications for how we prepare leaders—implications that go beyond the immediate concerns of democratic education as considered here. Building on this conclusion, a fundamental concern in preparing leaders must be to develop and cultivate within them the capacity to both practice leadership in ways that are beneficial to their organizational unit (e.g., with regard to a broad list of concerns that impact the pursuit of desirable schooling outcomes) and—also important but less recognized—to create and maintain policy structures that support and encourage those same kinds of practices.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

1. What does it mean to you to be a democratic or progressive educator?
2. How did you come to a “democratic” orientation?
3. Who are you as a democratic teacher?
4. What are the core factors that give life to your teaching?
5. Describe a high-point in your career—a time when you were most alive and engaged.
6. In what ways is democratic or progressive teaching different than other types of teaching?
7. How did/do you employ democratic education in your classrooms?
8. How do you approach classroom management?
9. What have been your struggles as a democratic teacher? Triumphs?
10. How have you maintained a democratic/progressive teaching approach?
 - a. During changing political times?
 - b. Under different pressures from districts and administrators to conform to state and national trends (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act).
11. Have you had the opportunity to help new teachers understand democratic teaching? Can you describe this/these experience(s)?
12. How do democratic teachers in Appalachia respond to the Appalachian context?
 1. Without being modest, what is it that you most value about yourself, your work, and your democratic teaching?
 1. What three wishes do you have to enhance the health and vitality of your

democratic educational practice?

1. Can you suggest other democratic or progressive teachers that I should consider

Interviewing?

[This article was modified from a paper \ presentation at the International Society of Educational Planning's annual conference in Savannah, Georgia, October 2009 (<http://www.isep.info/>).]

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]