

The Way in Which Leadership is Conceived

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While I recognize that there are many important priorities for leadership education in a democratic society, I will concentrate on just one—the way in which leadership is conceived. This is an important issue. Indeed, the way in which potential leaders perceive leadership will shape the way in which they eventually practice it. The problem to date has been that the prevalent ways in which leadership has been perceived, conceived, and conveyed have not been consistent with principles of democracy. The dominant view of leadership as a generic, individualistic, and hierarchical practice that strives to “build capacity” or focus on effectiveness or efficiency violates many democratic principles, particularly those associated a view of democracy that values the equitable and meaningful inclusion of everyone in the cultural, institutional, and economic lives of schools and communities. If potential leaders are to be properly equipped to participate in leadership practices appropriate for a truly democratic society then they need to understand the dynamics associated with the various conceptions of leadership. Among other things, the future leaders of our schools will need to understand the genesis of the term, its connection to power, and its moral basis in way that will enable them to work with others as strategic advocates so that they can see to the life chances of all students.

Leadership candidates need to know that leadership is a term invented by scholars and others interested in institutional life to help them understand and prescribe what goes on in organizations and communities. Over the last few decades, however, the term leadership has been increasingly associated with individuals in positions of legal responsibility. Even though leadership continues to be a contested term, it is now more often than not identified with individuals

in authority, like school principals, for example. But investing so much with individual people—as opposed to collectivities—may not be consistent with democratic ideals. Among other things, it leaves those outside this particular leadership perimeter with fewer opportunities to influence the course of events in their institutions. Fortunately, there are other perspectives on leadership that align more closely with democratic principles. Indeed, such views need not be associated with administrative positions or even individuals at all. One such perspective acknowledges that anyone can be a leader—not just those who are appointed to administrative positions. Other outlooks go even further. They see leadership as something that transcends individuals or groups of individuals—as a process or as sets of relationships. By not confining leadership to particular individuals, these latter perspectives honor democratic principles by allowing so-called leadership responsibilities to be shared with a wider community than individualistic perspectives would acknowledge or endorse.

This brings us to another key leadership element: power. Most leadership scholars acknowledge that leadership involves some sort of influence, but few actually come out and call it power. Whether or not it is actually identified as such, power is evident in the relationships among members of organizations; it flows through institutional positions, skill sets, and knowledge, and concerted group efforts. Those who assume administrative positions, possess valued skills, or are members of particular groups can employ this hierarchical power. But using such power in this manner may not always be consistent with democratic principles. Leadership associated with more traditional hierarchies of power will not always mirror democratic principles because it can routinely exclude those in less powerful positions from various institutional exercises, like for example, decision making, or in more extreme scenarios, render already marginalized members powerless. Perhaps the most exclusive or non-democratic potential arises when leadership rests with individuals who have hierarchical power over others. But leadership need not be seen as exclusively operating in a hierarchical manner in a zero-sum power universe. Leadership can also be organized in non-hierarchical manner, along horizontal or “heterarchical” lines that make it possible for all organization or community members to have a meaningful impact on what happens without being subject to the whims of more powerful individuals and groups.

Leadership is also very much a moral undertaking. The moral component of leadership enterprises emerges not just in the process itself, which is in the way in which leadership activities are organized, but also, and just as importantly, in the ends to which leadership activities are directed. Notwithstanding misguided attempts to portray both the study and practice of leadership and administration as a value-free endeavor, students of leadership need to understand that value judgments pervade decisions about what issues are pursued, just as they are part of establishing who will be part of the decision-making process and how they will be involved. The ends for which leadership activities are geared, however,

may not always be consistent with democratic ideals. Take the case of standardized tests. Considerable leadership activity revolves around efforts to increase scores on such tests. Abundant evidence suggests, however, such tests violate democratic principles, given that practices associated with these ends routinely compromise the learning of already-marginalized students. For leadership to work for democracy, it has to be geared to promote democracy, and practices that consistently marginalize particular groups of students will not achieve such an end. If those involved in leadership activities are to promote democratic ideals then they will need to help members of their school communities acknowledge, understand and do something about the inequities—many of which revolve around gender, race, and class relationships—which many students and their parents encounter in school and in their communities.

Understanding the various conceptions of leadership and the ways in which they either promote or inhibit democratic practices is important. But it is also important to take these understandings and put them into practice. Unfortunately, it may not always be easy to put democratic-friendly leadership approaches into practice. This is because members of school communities routinely resist such efforts. And so those involved in leadership activities must approach their tasks strategically. That is, they will need to understand the political environment in which they are working, put these understandings into practice, and routinely monitor their actions. Only in this way will they be able to make headway in promoting meaningful democratic practice in their schools and ensure that all students will have the opportunity to engage in learning that optimizes their life chances.

About the Author

Jim Ryan is currently professor in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies and co-director of the Centre for Leadership and Diversity at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. He came to OISE in 1991 after stints as a teacher and administrator in schools in northern Canada, and as a professor of education at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. His current research and teaching interests revolve around leadership, inclusion, and social justice. His books include *Race and Ethnicity in Multiethnic Schools*, *Leading Diverse Schools*, and *Inclusive Leadership*. He is now working on a book entitled *Struggling for Inclusion: Leadership in Neo-Liberal Times* and conducting research into the political aspects of promoting inclusion and social justice. He may be reached via e-mail at: jim.ryan@utoronto.ca