

The Question in Educational Leadership

For Whom and For What Are We Responsible?

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The number one priority for those committed to the democratic reconstruction of educational leadership must be to see their project as part of a broader project, which is to say we have to begin understanding leadership as a cultural production, and as something that occurs within a cultural space. In our leadership doctoral and masters degree programs at Miami University we talk a lot about culture, and that means first of all understanding how schools operate within a cultural context to construct inequalities of class, race, gender, and sexual identity (along with ability and disability). But schools are also sites of active resistance—most of it self-defeating—against what many young people and their teachers (and principals) feel is an alienating and oppressive schooling process. Democratic leaders must recognize both the impediments to doing democratic education in public schools as they are currently organized, and not see resistance by teachers and students as the problem, but rather as a symptom of alienation and disempowerment. The schools as currently structured by powerful interest groups are not designed to be places of liberation, but rather places where too many young people are being set up, “skilled” as they say, for exploitation in the new globalizing labor market. Furthermore, public schooling as we have come to know it is not just about reproducing class inequalities and what neo-Marxists called the social and technical relations of production. It also has been a primary institution of what Foucault called “normalization,” discourses and practices designed to promote conformity to narrow norms of acceptable self-presentation or performance of self. Schools have played a part in normalizing the student body in ways that treat some bodies as deviant and abnormal. The schools have all too often represented the hegemonic

culture of whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity, as the way things are and should be—the natural order of things. Those youth who have not fit in have faced everything from exclusion to bullying. Democratic leaders must be committed to making the schools safe spaces for difference.

Ironically, the need for democratic education leaders to understand schools in a broad cultural context are related to another priority, to see schools in their specificity and uniqueness, as produced within particular cultures of difference. This requires moving away from all universalistic, abstract typologies of “effective” leadership and understanding leadership within the particular cultures of schools and the communities they serve. A cultural perspective on leadership thus situates schools in both macro and micro cultures, and understands that the two are co-constitutive. It should be obvious by now that educational leadership cannot be reconstructed along these lines without untethering it from business management models and from the language of “administration.” There may be a few good ideas democratic educational leaders can borrow from the latest management theorists of “flow” or the “chaotic” organization, but so long as these ideas are framed by management thinking, they act to depoliticize leadership and fail to question the purposes schools serve. They presume that a more efficient, smooth-running organization is the aim of a good leader and only question the most effective means for achieving that purpose.

A top priority in educational leadership, consequently, must be to critique and deconstruct dominant discourses of leadership grounded in business management theory. Beyond that, we need to engage in re-visioning democratic leadership and the role of the public intellectual as an educational leader. In this project I have found some of the work of Jacques Derrida to be particularly useful in my own scholarship (see Carlson 2009, 2008, 2005). Derrida wrote about democratic leadership in educational institutions throughout his later work, but let me here note the importance of his essays published as *Eyes of the University* (2004). Derrida begins by returning to questions raised by Immanuel Kant two centuries earlier with regard to the founding of the modern public university, questions having to do with the responsibility of the faculty to assume leadership within the university. Faculty are, for Derrida as for Kant, the eyes of the university, engaged in “thinking” and teaching the university into existence, and they assume primary responsibility for its leadership. We still uphold this Kantian notion of faculty leadership at least rhetorically at the university, although leadership in the postmodern university has become more managerial and even entrepreneurial, with only a veneer of faculty leadership. Public schools can begin to be reconstructed democratically by returning to discourses and practices of faculty leaderships. Among other things, this means moving from a notion of the principal as administrator to a notion of the principal as head teacher or teacher leader. This may seem insignificant, but it would signify a fundamental shift in thinking, and in the organization of schools, that is potentially quite radical. Derrida raises a number of questions that confront us when we begin to think of faculty collectively and individually as leaders.

“What do we represent? Whom do we represent? Are we responsible? For what and to whom?” (Derrida, 2004, p. 83). These are not questions that educational leaders can hope to answer by referring to a management textbook or an administrator’s manual, yet they strike to the very heart of what it means to be a democratic leader. Sometimes it is easy to forget these questions, which must foreground democratic educational leaders. They call for a response, Derrida would say, to assume responsibility for a promise—in this case the promise of what a democratic education could be. Democratic educational leadership in this sense is a response to a call to keep alive a promise, one that may be extinguished if the current reform agendas in public education go unchallenged. I’m afraid this means that effective democratic educational leadership at this point in time is working against the grain more often than not, and involves developing a reputation as a troublemaker. To remain effective as a democratic leader consequently requires learning how to negotiate the boundaries of compliance and resistance, and how to cross the borders that separate the school and the community in building alliances and coalitions of support.

References

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