

Preparing Democratic Education Leaders

MICHELLE D. YOUNG

*University Council for Educational Administration
and University of Texas—Austin*

Although it is common to hear people espouse the importance of education to ensuring a strong and vibrant democracy, the assumptions underlying such statements are rarely unpacked. Two of the most widespread, though not necessarily complimentary, assumptions include: (a) to truly participate in a democracy, citizens must be well educated; and (b) a strong democracy is dependent on a strong economy, and thus, schools must ensure a well-educated workforce. Tethered to each assumption are very different ideas about what counts as a quality and appropriate curriculum, how the curriculum should be taught and how classes should look.

Another approach to education for democracy considers democracy as a school or even school system-wide issue. Here the emphasis moves beyond the content being learned to the way the organizational culture operates and the ways that individuals within the culture interact. There are powerful examples of schools that have operated as democratic organizations and provided opportunities for students and staff to engage in the life and leadership of the organization as democratic citizens (Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002). Though examples do exist, creating and sustaining such organizations is rather uncommon. This is due, in part, to the limits of our imagination. That is, it is difficult to imagine how a school might operate democratically if you lack experience working and learning within such an organization. It is also due to the learning experiences and content provided to aspiring and practicing teachers and leaders.

The importance of leadership development cannot be overstated. Leadership is second only to teacher quality in its importance for providing high

quality and relevant learning experiences for all children (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Specifically, research has found that principals indirectly influence student achievement through several key “avenues of influences”: people, purposes, and goals of the school, structure of the school and social networks, and organizational culture (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, p.171; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010).

With growing recognition of the importance of school leadership has come increased concern regarding how leaders are prepared. Until quite recently there has been little common agreement about the appropriate foundation for administrator preparation (Murphy, 1999), and especially for any “holistic, focused, and integrative design,” such as democratic leadership (Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002, p. 285). Historically, the area of educational leadership preparation maintained the belief that there is a single best approach to educating prospective school leaders (Cooper & Boyd, 1987; Murphy, Young, Crow, & Ogawa, 2009). Thoughtful analysts maintain that this perspective has resulted in significant gaps in the knowledge base employed in training programs (Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002; Young & Laible, 2000).

Today, a focus on developing leaders who can work within challenging contexts to promote quality teaching and learning for all students is central to many reform agendas (Bottoms & O’Neill, 2001). Furthermore, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007) found that “how principals are initially prepared and subsequently supported by their districts is significantly associated with how they lead and what kind of school improvement gains they achieve” (p. 62). According to their research having a clearly identified program purpose that is strongly and coherently embedded within every aspect of the program is an essential feature of quality preparation. Thus, everything from the curriculum, experiences, pedagogy, delivery to the internship and post-university experiences would reflect the program’s purpose. Moreover, the theory of action of how all of these aspects together facilitate the development of democratic educational leaders should be clearly articulated.

Closely related is how democracy (and democratic leadership) and its purposes are defined, what process was used to define it, and who was involved in the definition process. It is imperative that representatives of the communities in which program graduates will work are involved in the definition process. In fact, the best case scenario would involve a university–district partnership that resulted in the definition and design of a democratic educational leadership program. Research has shown that such partnerships result in the development of more effective leaders, in part because their preparation is tailored to problems of practice in the partner schools, but also because district involvement brings with it district buy-in, ownership, and support (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007).

A move toward preparing leaders to enact democratic leadership and support a democratic education has implications for a variety of contexts and practices at

the university, district, and school levels, of which I have only mentioned a few. The design and implementation of high-quality preparation (including recruitment) is a complex undertaking. It is complex because to do it well requires institutional communication and collaboration in articulating the kind of leadership the program intends to develop, a theory of action for how that will be accomplished. Moreover, it requires expertise with leadership standards, research, and theory as well as with the principles of adult learning.

Importantly, university faculty and their district partners are engaging in this work, cooperating in the development of purposeful, coherent, and comprehensive leadership development, making certain that candidates have concrete opportunities to connect research and theories concerning concepts like democracy, democratic education, and democratic leadership to their practice. This is essential to candidates' ability to later transfer their learning into practice in other environments. Coupling a commitment to quality preparation with democratic educational leadership holds the potential to focus and strengthen university preparation as well as to enhance educational leadership practice.

References

- Bottoms, G., & O'Neill, K. (2001). *Preparing a new breed of school principals: It's time for action*. Atlanta, GA.: Southern Regional Education Board.
- Cooper, B. S., & Boyd, W. L. (1987). The evolution of training for school administrators. In J. Murphy & P. Hallinger (Eds.), *Approaches to administrative training* (pp. 3–27). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., & Orr, M. T. (2007). *Preparing leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. (1996). Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research, 1980–1995. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32(1), 5–44.
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organizational conditions and student engagement with school. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(2), 112–129.
- Leithwood, K., Seashore, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. Toronto, Canada: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement & Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Murphy, J. (1999). *The quest for a center: Notes on the state of the profession of educational leadership*. Columbia, MO: University Council for Educational Leadership.
- Murphy, J., Young, M. D., Crow, G., & Ogawa, R. (2009). Exploring the broad terrain of leadership preparation in education. In M. Young, G. Crow, J. Murphy, & R. Ogawa (Eds.), *The Handbook of Research on the Education of School Leaders* (pp. 1–22). New York: Routledge.
- Pounder, D., Reitzug, U., & Young, M. D. (2002). Preparing school leaders for school improvement, social justice, and community. In J. Murphy (Ed.), *The educational*

- leadership challenge: Redefining leadership for the 21st century* (pp. 261–288). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Robinson, V. M. J., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5), 635–674.
- Supovitz, J., Sirinides, P., & May, H. (2010). How principals and peers influence teaching and learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(1), 31–56.
- Young, M. D., & Laible, J. (2000). White racism, anti-racism, and school leadership preparation. *Journal of School Leadership*, 10(5), 374–415.

About the Author

Michelle D. Young, Executive Director of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), is an associate professor in educational leadership and policy at the University of Texas—Austin. Her teaching and scholarship focuses on how school leaders and school policies can ensure equitable and quality experiences for all students and educational professionals. She is the recipient of the William J. Davis Award for the most outstanding article published in a volume of the *Educational Administration Quarterly*. Her work has also been published in the *Review of Educational Research*, the *Educational Researcher*, the *American Educational Research Journal*, the *Journal of School Leadership*, and the *Journal of Educational Administration*, among other publications. She recently edited the first *Handbook of Research on the Education of School Leaders*. She may be reached via e-mail at: michelleyoung@austin.utexas.edu