

Democratic Educational Leadership as Decency

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The primary priority for an educational leader in a democracy is decency. I understand decency as showing compassion, respect, love, and caring for one another. That may sound soft and fuzzy, but I believe it is one of the harder things to do as a leader. It is fundamental to everything written about democracy—the need for dialogue; valuing difference; interfacing the civic, social, and political; and participating in order to effect action. Educational leaders must view themselves as part of and not apart from society; as leaders not only of schools, but of the social and civic worlds; as thinkers, and not compliant followers.

Dewey (1927/1984, 1937/1987), Guttman (1987), and others have extolled the importance of dialogue. It is more than simple conversation. It is putting ideas on the table, ideas that may not be conventional, ones that may represent values of other cultures or of differences in thinking, ones that deal with the “elephant in the room”. To do that, educational leaders need to know how to argue, how to disagree and be comfortable with that because they have listened intently to ideas that are not familiar, do not follow their line of thought, or are controversial. As an educator, I have noticed how we tend to not want to “rock the boat,” “to make nice” rather than be involved in disagreement. It is necessary to learn the art of argumentation and not to fear difference in thought. Educational leaders need to learn how to dialogue, including disagreement, with respect and compassion: decency.

Difference includes cultural plurality, understanding that one is because of one’s association with others. An aspect of leadership, therefore, is to engage school leaders in an exploration and examination of self in relation to others. That is, students of leadership participate in activities that provoke reflection on individual thoughts and actions as outcomes of experiences with and relationships

to others on a foundation of equality. Plurality in democracy implies our effect on others, that is, how do our interactions affect the ways in which others understand themselves in the world? School leaders in a democracy will enable students and teachers to not only participate in a world of difference, but to act, to initiate change; they will be action-centered rather than student- or teacher-centered (Biesta, 2007). In educational leadership programs, it is necessary to provide opportunities for leaders to practice saying what they think, hear others' ideas, and work together to act on the plurality of ideas and beliefs.

Educational leaders need to interface with the civic and political communities. Too often, that exchange is viewed primarily from the perspective of negotiations and passing the budget, that is, from a stance of preparing for and engaging in "battle". However, interfacing with entities beyond the school buildings involves understanding the connections between and among civic and political entities. It is living the precepts of democracy, acting so that "*everyone* has the opportunity to *be* a subject, [so that] everyone has the opportunity to act and, through their actions bring their beginnings and initiatives into the world of difference and plurality (see Sfström & Biesta, 2001) (Biesta, 2007, p. 14). To be an educational leader in a democracy means *involving oneself in human interactions*, not simply abiding by a list of characteristics or attributes associated with democracy. Doing that, according to Arendt (1958), requires living and *being* in the social and political world of difference and plurality. It is asking community members what they want and what they need; listening to their values; and, as a consequence, learning to think differently. It is also educating community members by asking the questions to help them think about solutions that will improve their quality of life and encouraging them" to dream about a better world" (Freear in Tippett, 2010). Decency, caring for others, guides this interaction.

Too often, educators of all ranks are compliant. In fact, a colleague with whom I team taught once told a class that education is a compliance profession. With that thinking, how do educational leaders influence change, let alone creativity and democratic principles? How can they encourage action to locate one's place in the world and to change it to accommodate the complexity of difference? Decency in this instance requires risk-taking that advocates for valuing difference and plurality.

Decency in educational leadership assumes commitment to learning. That indicates the dedication to thinking and the time needed to process concepts and ideas. It is not focused on "fast food education" which is intended to obtain a degree in the least amount of time possible. Leaders need knowledge that leads to wisdom, not only information needed for management. They need to know how to provide the opportunities for teachers and students to take initiative, to question why there is poverty in such a rich nation, to realize how their backgrounds and values that make up who they are fit into the world, and how to challenge what is in order to move toward what could/should be a transmittal of a prescribe curriculum takes us back to Freier's (1989) notion of a banking system,

a reproduction in students of what is. Decency is caring enough to become wise in order to teach others to learn.

Lastly, democratic educational leadership as decency commits itself to the world and society. Educators recognize we really do live in a global society, focusing not solely on the economy, but on the needs to achieve peace and a sustainable world. Our educational leaders need to guide us in the knowledge that we do not have the answers and, often, don't know the questions to ask. These leaders are critical in the development of a curriculum that encourages students to explore what it means not to have a blueprint for action, that one makes and remakes the self in relation to one's own and others' actions.

Decency as the foundation of democratic educational leadership is caring, loving, compassionate, respectful—and critical.

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