

Running head: UNCONSCIOUSLY INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

Unconsciously Indigenous Leadership: The Role of  
Cognitive Disequilibrium in Preparing Democratic Educational Leaders

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of cognitive disequilibrium in preparing democratic educational leaders. Followers emerge into leaders with what are many times unconsciously socialized norms and values indigenous to their local culture. One of the roles of a democratic leadership preparation program is to challenge these unconsciously accepted norms through systematically planned activities and experiences. Such activities and experiences, coupled with dialogue specifically designed to create cognitive disequilibrium, facilitate the removal of self-imposed barriers in the learning process and help leadership students exorcise internalized fallacies. The emancipation from such self-imposed barriers facilitated by the cognitive disequilibrium process ameliorates students' global view and enhances their promise as democratic educational leaders.

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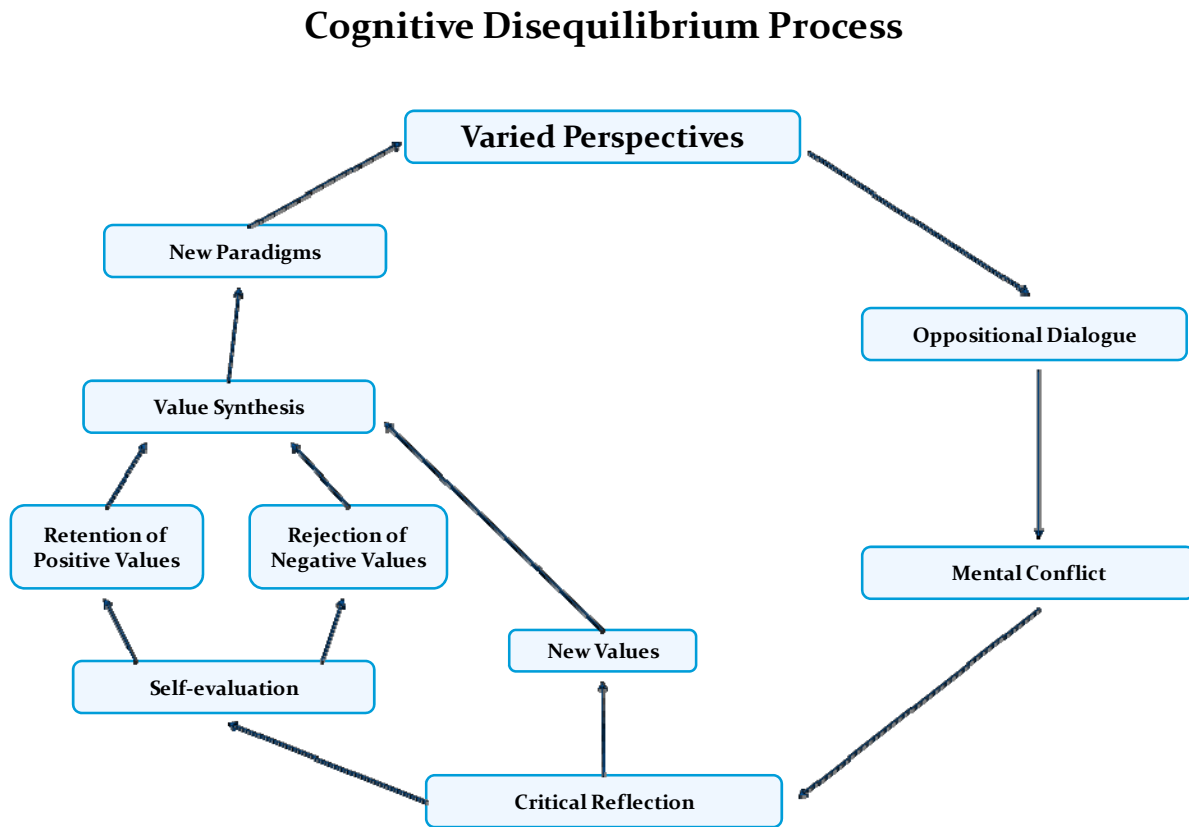
“Values affect all the aspects of our life, consciously or unconsciously. They determine the quality of our responses to challenges, the decisions we make and the directions we follow” (Quisumbing & de Leo, 2005, p. 15). Since values are so important to leaders in the decision making process, how best should they be developed? How are the norms, values and morals of the professors who design and implement leadership preparation programs developed? Hamilton (2006) notes the following:

The reality is that the vast majority of the professoriate receives virtually no formal education on the ethics of the profession. We assume that an osmosis-like diffusion in the apprenticeship model will transmit the principles of the social contract, academic freedom, and faculty professionalism from one generation to the next. (p. 16)

Even if the transmission from one generation to the next occurs successfully, what if the transferred norms and values are inconsistent with progressive organizational objectives? “The transmission approach hedonistically strives to keep tradition and links with the past intact in a self-serving way to perpetuate its own influence” (Herman, 2005, p. 15). A transmission approach, even if successful, is rarely transformational in nature. Rather, the transmission approach frequently results in the preservation of the status quo.

Leadership programs striving to develop democratic educational leaders must challenge indigenous paradigms by implementing exercises, activities and dialogues specifically designed to create cognitive disequilibrium. Cognitive disequilibrium is a state of mind in which preconceived notions are challenged by new ideas with such a cataclysmic collision that the aforementioned preconceived notions can be simultaneously transformed and reframed into new perspectives. It is during this window of cognitive disequilibrium that rays of light can beam

Figure 1. Cognitive disequilibrium process as a function of oppositional dialogue, critical reflection and value synthesis.



through indigenous lenses and thereby facilitate meaningful reflections. The cognitive disequilibrium process not only creates the opportunity for leadership students to inwardly examine their indigenous perceptions of leadership behaviors, it also provides the forum through which democratic dialogues foster relational trust and social capital building skills. Such cognitive disequilibrium can lead to emotionally charged behaviors and dialogue. Johnson, Aiken, and Steggerda (2005) contend, "...emotions most often arise in response to some inner conflict with one's inner values" (p. 242).

Such emotionally charged responses are not only to be expected, they are to be intentionally orchestrated within the framework of a professional learning community as part of the cognitive disequilibrium process. The cognitive disequilibrium process does not purport to

establish the pre-eminence of a particular set of norms and values. The cognitive disequilibrium process rather endeavors to cultivate the respect, trust and value associated with democratic leadership behaviors. Whether bringing international perspectives or perspectives associated with one of the many sub-cultures associated with western civilization, leadership students cannot be expected to totally relinquish their indigenous norms and values. Young, Guenther, and Boyle (2007) note, “The values, norms and structures of relationships within Indigenous [*sic*] cultures cannot just be ‘put aside’ in order to assume the mantle of western values, norms and ways of relating” (p. 29). The strengths of indigenous cultures must be blended with the pluralistic values of a democratic society. Leadership students must be encouraged to open their minds to new perspectives while simultaneously feeling emotionally protected and valued as both human beings and emerging leaders. Through this process, leadership students can then self-select and eradicate indigenous norms and values that are inconsistent with the norms and values of a pluralistic, democratic society.

According to Neil (2000), “All major revision of educational systems depends on our success at diminishing the distance between practical routine and transforming dialogues” (p. 63). Cajete (1994) describes the following:

Indigenous teaching facilitates learning how to see how one really is, rather than an image manufactured through one’s or other’s ego. This real perception of self helps the student realize that they are [*sic*] essentially responsible for the barriers to their own learning. (pp. 223-224)

Once the barriers to learning have been identified, they can be removed. However, the identification of indigenous norms and values does not necessarily equate to elimination or transformation of said values. Rather, these previously unconscious indigenous norms and values can then be self-evaluated through democratic leadership lenses. The strengths of the

indigenous perspectives will become incorporated into the democratic leadership style, while values and norms inconsistent with democratic leadership will be purged. This transformation is facilitated by the cognitive disequilibrium process.

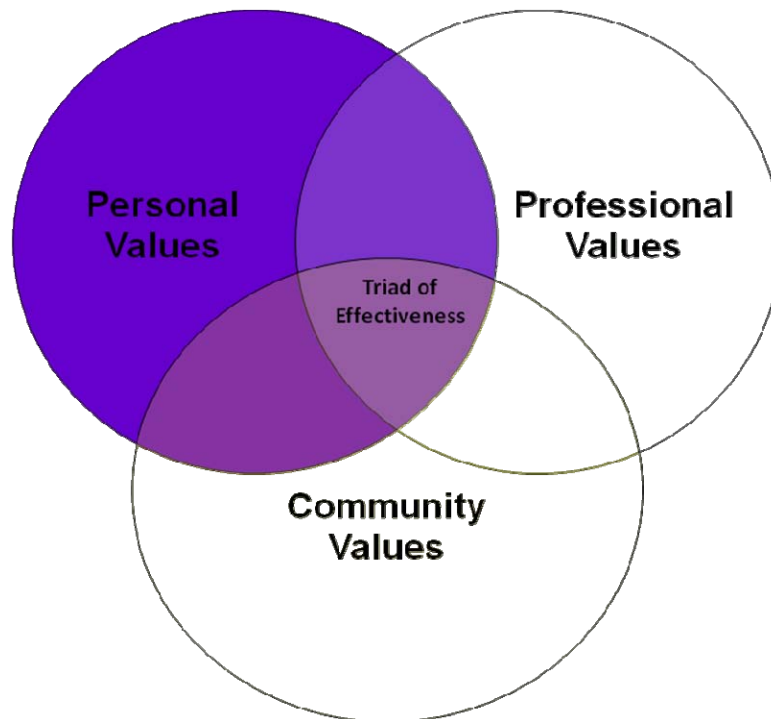
The process begins with professors modeling democratic leadership behaviors to their leadership students. While investigating low student participation, Alford and James (2007) note, “The ‘white middle class’ language of teachers was also identified as a contributing factor” (p. 9). The leadership students of our universities are intelligent enough to discern if professorial actions are consistent with professorial words. There can be no substitute for modeling the leadership behaviors that we desire our democratic leadership students to emulate. We can also model the difficult dialogues designed to create cognitive disequilibrium and facilitate the self-evaluation of indigenous paradigms. Once we have modeled and facilitated these difficult dialogues, we can then engage leadership students in guided practice activities and dialogs that are designed to challenge and grounded in experiential learning theory. According to Garcia (2007), “Modeling constructive difficult dialogues can be difficult, but it is necessary” (p. 25). Professors initially model the difficult dialogues, then facilitate guided practice dialogues and finally frame independent, transformational dialogues within the safety of the professional learning community. It is within this cocoon of the classroom professional learning community that the leadership student is subjected to the cognitive disequilibrium process and thus experiences a metamorphosis of thinking.

In addition to the power that indigenous cultural norms and values have upon the development of leaders, community values can be exceedingly influential upon emerging leaders from outside the dominant local culture. The plethora of value systems associated with the variety of subcultures all contribute to the overarching, pluralistic democratic value system. Indigenous knowledge collectively equates to community values. According to Harmsworth

(1999), “There is enormous potential for the use of indigenous knowledge to enhance our understanding of the environment, underpin culturally appropriate development opportunities, and provide a more holistic and integrated perspective for planning and policy in the twenty-first century” (p. 14). Jenkins (2007) contends that community values play an enormous role in the decision making process of educational leaders. Leadership preparation programs need to incorporate exercises and dialogues designed to help future democratic educational leaders find the overlap between community values, personal values and democratic leadership values. Leaders making decisions within the overlap of personal values, professional values and community values are more likely to make effective decisions. Decisions made within this overlap are also more likely to win the support of various stakeholders in the educational process. In reality, such values are neither uniform nor stationary. Rather, they are in a state of constant flux and shifting interaction.

Halstead (1996) describes how conflicting value sets often play themselves out in the school setting. Armstrong (2006) notes that political values are often in opposition to democratically based purposes of education. A goal of leadership preparation programs should be to develop the professional discernment skills in leadership students necessary to recognize and align stakeholder value systems and thereby operate within the triad of effectiveness. Leadership students who learn how to make value-based decisions within the overlap of community, professional and personal values have an increased likelihood of success. The educational leader who ignores community values in the decision making process will likely experience a brief duration. By initially operating within the triad of effectiveness, educational leaders utilize the common ground to establish and enhance the social capital and trust necessary to lead change. Figure 2 depicts a graphical representation of the target area where such value system overlaps exist. The overlap area is theoretically described as the triad of effectiveness.

*Figure 2.* Triad of effectiveness as a function of the intersection of personal, professional and community values.



Once the political and social capital has been earned, educational leaders can then begin to occasionally operate within the overlap of personal and professional values that lies outside of the local community value circle. It is operation within this intersection that allows educational leaders to exert change pressure at both the organizational and community levels. In some cases, the change pressure that is exerted on both the organization and the community results in greater alignment of the three value circles.

Value overlap and alignment can be facilitated by the cognitive disequilibrium process. The need for such a cognitive disequilibrium process is highlighted by the identification of various problems in the leadership literature. Hoyle (2007) emphasizes the importance of understanding why some of our educational leadership program graduates fail to be successful in the field. Fullan (2001) contends that as society becomes more multifarious, leadership must become more highly developed. Hill-Jackson, Sewell, and Waters (2008) note that invisible



resistance to positive democratic viewpoints among many students is quite real. The cognitive disequilibrium process must unfold in a safe, secure environment. Students must feel that their dialogue will be free from ridicule. Risk-taking must be encouraged. Sergiovanni (2005) describes the importance of relational trust and social capital in the social exchange process. A measured level of mutual respect and relational trust must be established by classroom ground rules if students are to risk candid dialogues centered on emotionally charged indigenous perspectives.

Such varying points of view can be further developed through class discussions, reflective dialogue, problem-based learning projects and a variety of other activities designed to create cognitive disequilibrium. Suda (2001) notes that study circles are effective in promoting democratic educational experiences among adult learners. Assigned readings that challenged indigenous paradigms can be utilized to present varying points of view. Jost, Whitfield, and Jost (2005) recommend a graduate level diversity game activity specifically designed to challenge pre-conceived notions and foster new professional perspectives. Chang (2005) contends that a variety of cultural viewpoints enrich the educational experiences of all students. It is during this state of cognitive disequilibrium that new ways of thinking can be born. Follow up activities can then nurture these newborn democratic value systems to maturity. The transformational approach associated with cognitive disequilibrium equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to employ new forms of leadership behavior. Such program components coupled with program transparency and inclusive evaluative components enhance leadership student commitment levels and ownership in both the process and program at large. Kahlenberg (2007) notes that greater transparency in higher education could bring about increased economic diversity. Schlessman-Frost (1991) emphasizes the importance of including cultural contexts and considerations as part of the evaluation process. Holistically, the democratic leadership

development curriculum can build new leadership paradigms to maturity as students progress from course to course through the program.

If leadership preparation programs do not employ a cognitive disequilibrium process to facilitate the transformation of indigenous leadership perspectives to pluralistic, democratic leadership perspectives, who will? Dilworth (2004) argues for a democratic transformational approach to citizenship education. Herriman (1995) finds education to be an effective vehicle for promoting democratic values. Patrick (1999) emphasizes the importance of a high quality education for the citizens of democratic societies. Current educational leadership preparation programs can be enhanced by a democratic transformational approach in which cognitive disequilibrium activities serve as the agents of cataclysmic ideological collisions. More highly developed democratic leadership preparation programs embed cognitive disequilibrium activities in such a way that they become seamlessly woven into the very fabric of the program curriculum. Students in such programs are involuntarily, yet beneficially, forced into considering varying ideas and points of view. Through a modified marketplace of ideas approach, such leadership preparation programs help students align their personal values with the values of the profession and the pluralistic society at large. In so doing, these highly developed leadership preparation programs increase the likelihood of producing democratic leaders with a broader perspective of both themselves and the societies they serve. They produce democratic educational leaders who are forged on the anvil of mental conflict.

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