

Preparing Educational Leaders to Serve a Democratic Society

DUNCAN WAITE

Texas State University

What qualifies an educational leader to lead a school (or schools) in and for a democratic society is more than simply a set of skills. We must also consider dispositions, attitudes, and traits that, if they cannot be taught, might yet be identified and nurtured in budding and practicing leaders.

One of the most important objectives of an educational leader's education, preparation, or what have you, to my way of thinking—and one which I feel is too often overlooked or neglected in leadership preparation programs—is the leader's ability to undertake a critical social contextual analysis tied to a liberatory, emancipatory, or at minimum a social and personal developmental educational philosophy.

Without a critical social analysis—and let me be clear, by this phrase I *do not* mean some type of Marxian or neo-Marxist political agenda/ideology, I simply mean critical in the more pedestrian sense—without a critical social analysis, students, teachers, administrators, other educational leaders, concerned citizens, and policy makers are likely to simply accept and work to maintain the status quo. Maintenance of the status quo is not inherently bad; but we must recognize the fact that current social structures privilege some at the expense of others. Having the skills that permit a critical social analysis enables the leader—be she/he an administrator, student, teacher, or parent—the capability to lay bare the particulars of a certain situation, context, or milieu, and recognize just who is privileged and who is not. For the democrat, the republican, the one concerned with social justice, this analysis implies the action(s) that would work to rectify imbalances in the social structures and processes. Democracy and democratic action (which, at their heart rest on equality

and egalitarianism—i.e., all men and women, all children regardless of circumstance having the same basic human rights, deserving respect and fundamental life chances) require this, this and movement towards more equitable processes and structures; though perfection is perhaps unattainable. This implies that democracy is a process, not a static thing.

Such skills as would permit the teacher, leader, or student to perform a critical social analysis are built upon a subset of some other, more fundamental skills. (I'll leave it for others to suggest leaders be prepared in the technical aspects of the work—administration, resource management, scheduling, and such.) What concerns me are the macro trends I see that impact education, schooling (and they are different), and, by association, teaching and leadership. Corporatization poses a serious threat to democracy, not only in education, but throughout our entire lifeworld. The values of the marketplace often run counter to those of the polity. Coupled to corporatization (and the ascendancy of *lucre* and its attendant values as a driving societal force) is the likelihood of corruption—in both the venal and the systematic senses. Corruption hinders democracy. (See Waite & Waite [2009] for a fuller discussion of corruption and its effects on democracy.) Leaders ought to be trained in recognizing and disrupting corruption in schools and throughout society, and, additionally, to disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline that transmutes schools into prisons for some (prisoner and guard equally), and places certain children on a life's road guaranteed to lead them into the penal system.

Leaders must be self-reflective—they must know who they are and where they stand on critical issues; otherwise, leaders and others are prone to seduction, to operating compass-less. A sense of self ought to permit leaders, or anyone, to have a sense of what they stand for, what they will tolerate and what they will not. Leaders need to have or develop ontological security (Giddens, 1990)—a deep and abiding faith in the world. This disposition provides the basis for two other essential leadership traits, courage and resilience. Leaders must know other people—those whom they 'lead' and those whom they serve.

A well-developed sense of responsibility ought to be fostered in leadership programs. It is said that a society can be judged by how it treats its weakest members. Today, interconnected globally as we are, that adage holds for everyone on the planet. All of us, especially those aspiring to be leaders, must take responsibility for everyone else. This demands an extremely heightened sense of empathy, extending beyond one's loved ones, to all those in the local community and beyond—to those across the state or province and to those throughout the nation and, ultimately, to those who happen to live in the far-flung reaches of the globe. None of us is free unless everyone is. These are earmarks of democracy—freedom from and freedom for. Of course, this presupposes knowledge of the conditions in which people live (and, this implicates education, for the adults and the children). Knowledge and responsibility ought to result in action; and here's the rub. Knowing and doing what needs to be done can be difficult. Relatively

small initiatives can be a good start. Global initiatives, or having a part in them, are another, later step. Once, when speaking to a group of Turkish educators in Ankara, I asked them to accept responsibility for the education and well-being of my three children, still at home in the U.S.; and I likewise vowed to take responsibility for theirs. These are the bonds that unite us in our common cause as educators—taking responsibility, and a profound and abiding responsibility, for other people’s children.

Self-reflection on the leader’s part ought to include articulation and development of his/her relationships with others and the relationships among others—all others. Freedom, liberty, and equality are key concepts the leader ought to work on. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004) challenged us to think of equality not as an end goal, but as a foundational assumption, the point from which we start. Any mention of “those children,” “special needs students,” Latino children, children of poverty, or children of color and the like ought to raise red flags about the democratic views of the speaker—be it a teacher, principal, curriculum director, superintendent, parent, or legislator. Leaders in and for democratic societies would benefit from having skills and knowledge on how to foster individuals’ fulfillment, creativity, and expression, without having to surrender these for the collective. Standardization and the suppression of individuals’ basic rights, development, and freedom of expression for the sake of the group—family, school, community, nation, or whatever—are antithetical to diversity, a building block of democracy.

Further Reading

- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. (K. Ross, trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Rancière, J. (2004). *The philosopher and his poor*. (J. Drury, C. Oster, & A. Parker, trans.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Waite, D., & Waite, S. F. (2009). On the corruption of democracy and education. In P. Jenlink (Ed.), *Dewey’s democracy and education revisited: Contemporary discourses for democratic education and leadership* (pp. 297–323). Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education.

About the Author

Duncan Waite is a professor in the education and community leadership program at Texas State University. He edits the *International Journal of Leadership in Education* and directs The International Center for Educational Leadership and Social Change. He has published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Education & Society*, *Journal of Leadership*

Studies, Journal of School Leadership, and School Leadership and Management, among others. He has chapters in handbooks and edited volumes, including *The Handbook of Research in School Supervision* and *The International Handbook on Globalization, Education, and Policy Research*. He authored *Rethinking Instructional Supervision: Notes on Its Language and Culture* (Falmer, 1995). His interests lie in corruption in/of education, instructional supervision, organizations and hierarchies, anthropology, language, school improvement, and qualitative research. He may be reached via e-mail at: dw26@txstate.edu