A School Leadership Faculty Struggles for Democracy

Leadership Education Priorities for a Democratic Society

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For the past 3 years, the educational leadership faculty at my university (FAU) has been engaged in program reform and curricular innovation. The reform process was initiated by centralized external authorities—a combination of international rankings (e.g., PISA), national accreditation bodies (e.g., NCATE), national leadership standards (e.g., ISLLC), and state standards (e.g., FLDOE), all culminating in a required state certification examination (e.g., in Florida—FELE). In the academic world, this conflagration adds up to a managerialist reform movement, which more or less describes the current state of school leadership in the U.S. Who finds this state of affairs to be strange?

I do. I mean this is so counter-cultural. We are *not* talking about an authoritarian government, let alone a despotic regime. Rather, we're describing school leadership in the U.S.A., the nation of Madison, Hamilton, Jay (authors of the *Federalist Papers*), and Thomas Jefferson. To our founders, democracy was the best response to tyranny and despotism. So through the lens of history as well as culture, one could hardly have imagined today's school leadership state of affairs. But here we are. Call it a John Dewey and democracy nightmare. However, before we think of declaring democracy to be dead, paraphrasing the April 8, 1996 cover of *Time Magazine*, let's take a closer look, first at what happened at the school leadership program faculty level, and then, afterwards, at the level of my classroom teaching. This essay begins with a straightforward assumption: Unless you yourself are willing to practice democracy, even under difficult

circumstances, you cannot have a legitimate platform for teaching or advocating democratic practices.

The FAU Story

This is a story filled with difficult conversations, on-going tensions and real, not imagined, contradictions. It is a story about how one program faculty continues to wrestle with the onslaught of externally unfunded mandates while struggling to keep its professional responsibilities—democracy and freedom—alive.

As a faculty, we were not interested in making cosmetic changes (e.g., lipstick on a pig) by aligning new standards to old content and courses, but rather we sought to use the state's top down actions to fuel our desires for rethinking and restructuring school leadership preparation. At every step, it was tempting to embrace transactional changes, with minimal costs to ourselves. But we resisted in the face of the *Leviathan*.

We first had to find sources of strength in ourselves, individually and collectively. Our program had recently joined in alliances nationally with the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) and locally with our partnership programs with surrounding school districts. We reminded ourselves of our faculty's reputation, statewide, nationally, and internationally, as bases of negotiated power. While we hadn't been asked to collaborate with state level policy makers, we could still travel north to Tallahassee and showcase our program's innovations. And we did, more than once.

Nevertheless, the state's expectations kept changing creating continued stress and pressures while adding to our workload. The work of developing new courses brought great drama and emotion to our normally routine faculty meetings. In part this happened because we are very passionate about what we do and the state's mandates felt as if our philosophical foundations built on educational leadership were being shaken. We had no choice but to engage in difficult conversations: which courses and content would stay, which would go. The talks threatened how we conducted our daily business. They led to clashes between our professional autonomy as university faculty and now having to deal with external authoritarian forces. Even if you as readers haven't felt such conflicts, I hope you can still understand the situation I am describing.

Basically, we had to learn to live for over a year with cognitive overload. None of our routine conversations could be held in a smooth or easy fashion. We actually turned to scholarly literature and faculty expertise for how to hold ourselves together, to hold onto our interpersonal relations in order to survive and continue to take risks. As a faculty, we had once prided ourselves on the way we had treated one another and on our trust and respect for one another. Now, we were struggling with all this. And, today, we continue to struggle during all of the implementation stages of program reform. We go back and forth inside standards, competencies, and accountability seeking ways to bring democratic

leadership, social justice, internationalism, etc., that stand outside the state's external measures and outside what our students hope to learn from university professors.

The contradictions are untenable. Educational leadership programs are conceived as both the problems and the solutions. We are the bad guys not doing "it"—i.e., leadership development—right; but we are also the ones needed by the state to bring about the mandated reforms. It is a reform dilemma for us as well: Do we buy into these external rules, which are being imposed for the goal of raising student achievement and test scores? If so, we will become a lesser part of the system and lose our faculty identity and autonomy. At the same time, to openly resist would hurt our students (and ourselves) who need to pass the state examination.

Thus, rather than take all the state's competencies and skills and fit them into our existing structure, which is historically the easiest thing to do with any program reform, our faculty said no; we chose to use this challenge as an opportunity to completely revise the program. We put everything, every course, on the table. That was ultimately a very healthy decision—but only if we could survive the disruptions the mandated reforms caused. The reality is that the mandates are ongoing. Some faculty reading this account would say that the author is wearing rose-colored glasses by describing a faculty process more positively than they recall. To these colleagues, we have been good little soldiers in the State's army. We have not gotten to the good stuff, like talking about social justice, diversity, or democracy.

Wherein lies the truth? You as readers now know what we did, but would you call it democracy? Were our faculty's actions praiseworthy and extraordinary, or routine and to be taken for granted? How can we think of it as democracy? For me, the American thesis now applied to educational leadership for learning is, to quote Ellis (2007), "an argument without end" (p. 91). However dissatisfying this conclusion may be to common sense or to practically-minded teachers and administrators, it is quintessentially the one answer that makes historical sense for American educators.

Reference

Ellis, J. (2007). *American creation: Triumphs and tragedies at the founding of the republic.* New
York: Vintage Books

About the Author

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