Deliberative Democracy: A Promise and a Challenge for Preparing Educational Administrators*

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Abstract

This paper describes how administrator preparation programs can help future education leaders to value, understand, and use the democratic strategy of deliberative dialogue and action. The purpose of the strategy is to engage in a new way with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders about problems in their local public schools. Follow-up reflective writings of graduate students who participated in simulated democratic, deliberative dialogues with non-educators predicted immediate and long-term benefits in implementing dialogue events. In addition, their reflections on the simulations revealed challenges likely to confront many educational administration students if they are to shift their perspectives on leadership and jointly participate in defining and acting upon local education problems with parents and other non-educators. Genuine, public interactions that lead to productive action toward school improvement may require administrators to relinquish traditional ways of partnering with their publics.

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1 Sumario en espanol

Este papel describe cómo programas de preparación de administrador pueden ayudar futuros a líderes de educación a valorar, comprender, y para utilizar la estrategia democrática de diálogo y acción deliberativos. El propósito de la estrategia es de entrar en una nueva manera con maestros, con los padres, y con otros tenedores de apuestas acerca de problemas en sus escuelas públicas locales. Las escrituras reflectoras segundas de estudiantes de posgrado que tomaron parte en diálogos simulados, democráticos y deliberativas con no-educadores predijeron los beneficios inmediatos y a largo plazo a aplicar diálogo acontecimientos. Además, sus reflejos en las simulaciones revelaron desafíos probables de confrontar a muchos estudiantes educativos de la administración si son de cambiar sus perspectivas en el liderazgo y tomar parte en colectivamente definir y afectando los problemas locales de la educación con padres y otros no-educadores. Verdaderas y las interacciones públicas que llevan a acción productiva hacia mejora de escuela pueden requerir a administradores a abandonar maneras tradicionales de juntar con sus públicos.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

2 Introduction

This paper begins with the premise that public school administrators must be prepared to exert a new kind of leadership if they are to successfully meet challenges in public education today. To accomplish this, I assert administrator preparation programs should teach and enable graduate students to apply the knowledge and skills essential to facilitating local democratic, deliberative dialogues among their diverse publics.

Traditional administrator preparation programs focus on preparing administrators to be managers of school organizations and leaders of the educators who work within those organizations. This paper asserts that knowledge and skills associated with democratic, deliberative leadership will enable administrators to also engage more broadly and openly with all who have a stake in public education: parents and the general public, including members of the private sector, community organizations, and policymakers.

Democratic, deliberative leadership is being exercised across the country for a variety of purposes by leaders in various arenas. From mayors and city council members to the boards of non-profit organizations, leaders have initiated deliberative dialogue events and comprehensive community-wide programs to bring members of the public together around social issues of shared concern, including racism, immigration, welfare reform, health care, the environment, and education (Everyday Democracy, n.d.; Leighninger, 2006; Pan & Mutchler, 2000). The theory and practice of democratic deliberative dialogue has been directed toward community building for some time (Briand, 1995; Mathews & McAfee, 1997) and, more recently, bringing civic education back into the mission of higher education (Boyte, 2008; Saltmarsh, 2007). The focus of dialogue initiatives on public education run the gamut from problems that may be localized to one or more schools, such as school violence and low parent involvement, to district-wide issues, such as student achievement gaps and school redistricting.

Successful deliberative democracy initiatives are reported by national organizations such as Everyday Democracy, the Kettering Foundation, Public Agenda, and AmericaSpeaks. One of the longest-standing and most successful programs on public education is in the Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland. Since 2003, district-wide dialogues termed "study circles" have taken place to tackle barriers to student achievement and parent involvement. Over 1,300 people in more than 87 study circles have discussed challenges presented by differences in race and ethnicity. The dialogues have produced action plans that have resulted in "more teacher awareness of the impact of race on schools and student achievement; better strategies to engage parents; and a school discipline plan that treats students of color fairly" (Everyday Democracy, n.d.)

Beyond the local community, members of the state legislature, state education agency, and courts hold considerable influence over public school issues. The fact that these individuals most often engage with representatives of the public (interest groups, professional associations) rather than members of the general public make them important potential participants in dialogues about certain issues. The engagement of state

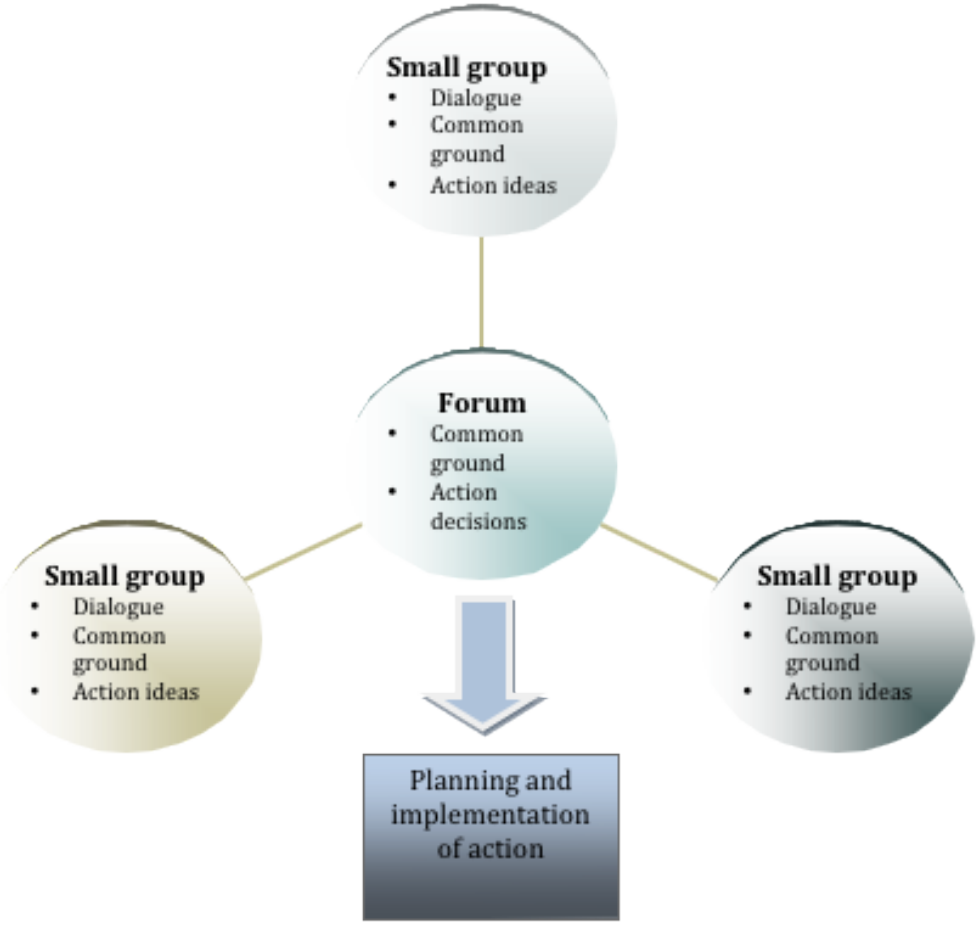
officials has been accomplished in some states. Multiple, community-wide study circle programs on education were implemented in 1998 in Arkansas and Oklahoma (Pan & Mutchler, 2000). Of 21 state legislators and 2 other state-level education policymakers who were invited to participate in programs in communities they represented, 17 attended the programs. One outcome of the program, named *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools*, was the continued sponsorship of community programs by the Arkansas School Board Association (ASBA). Since 1998, ASBA has worked in over 50 school districts in the state on a variety of issues, including student achievement, high school reform, family involvement, diversity, early care and education, and children's health (ASBA, 2010). Beyond the borders of the U.S., the Public School Boards Association of Alberta (Canada) has initiated a program entitled *Straight Talk*, to be implemented by local school boards for the purpose of facilitating "a province wide discussion about education and communities – to provide an opportunity for communities of citizens to work together. It is our hope that through the development of a local public agenda, citizens will re-discover the public and the keys to having a positive influence on the future health and well being of their local and provincial community" (The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta, 2009).

3 The Practice of Deliberative Dialogue

Democratic deliberative dialogue goes by many names—community conversations, issues forums, study circles—but most share the ideals of (a) civil interaction among people ideally representative of the local community; (b) a willingness to engage in controversial issues; (c) the exchange of individual perspectives on and experiences with the issue at hand; (d) consideration of multiple points of view; and (e) a goal of achieving common ground on which to act.

Everyday Democracy, a non-profit group that provides planning and coordination assistance to local communities, describes one approach to the process of deliberative dialogue (2001). The basic structure of the program consists of multiple, facilitated discussions in small groups. Participants are voluntary, ideally representative of the community, and willing to confront a challenging local issue of shared concern. Essential characteristics of the dialogue process include: highly participatory discussion, facilitator guidance of participants to consider multiple points of view, achievement of a shared understanding of the issue (i.e., common ground), and identification of a set of actions that participants agree to support. These dialogue groups meet over time in as many as four or five sessions. Following dialogues, all groups meet together in an action forum to identify a set of goals or outcomes that cut across the small group proposals. The collective determines steps and concrete tasks to achieve the goals, which individuals and groups agree to take responsibility for carrying out. The figure below is one depiction of the strategy's basic components and relationships leading to action.

Figure 1. Deliberative Dialogue and Action



4 Traditional Approaches to Engaging Parents and Community Members

Administrators are action oriented. We prepare educators to become administrators who will identify problems related to student learning and determine the solutions. This means their definition of *engaging the public* often means finding ways for parents and community members to support predetermined solutions – not help identify solutions and then act collaboratively with school or district leaders to implement those remedies.

Since the mid-1980s, education leaders have faced increasing pressures to educate children in the context of competing political, social, and economic demands from local, state, and national government and the public at large. Today, state and federal accountability for student outcomes is the dominant context within which administrators manage and lead local schools and districts. Leithwood & Prestine (2002) identify four approaches administrators can take in this current context, each of which demands a different kind of response from school leaders: the market approach, the decentralization approach, the management approach, and the professional approach. The role of the general public in each of these approaches varies. Parents are perceived as customers to be satisfied in the market approach. In the management and professional approaches, educators alone tend to be involved in assessing and addressing problems related to student and school success; parents and community members play limited roles, if any. The fourth approach, school decentralization, is intended to "increase the voice of those who are not heard, or at least not sufficiently listened to" (Leithwood & Prestine, 2002, p. 45) so as to ensure the school is responding to the community's

unique set of values and goals in making decisions about improving the education of students. In this approach, parents and sometimes other community members participate in addressing student and school needs.

Leithwood and Prestine (2002) assert the most typical structure found in the decentralization approach is the school council—a designated advisory and decision-making body comprised of educators, parents, and on occasion other community members. Whether selected by the school administrator or elected by the parent community, council members serve in the role of representatives of the broader parent and community populations. Although the stated intention of decentralization is to provide for local control of the school, as is suggested in the term "site-based management," administrators often dominate decision making in their councils and invite members to provide advice and counsel rather than engage them in analyzing and solving school-based problems. In this case, "principals often find themselves setting the agenda, providing information to other council members, assisting council decision making, and developing a close working relationship with the council chair" (Leithwood & Prestine, 2002, p. 46). Thus, in the decentralization approach taken by administrators, the role of parents and the general public tends to be limited both by definition and practice.

Such is the case, as well, in the practice of strategic planning, which is a long-standing process administrators use to guide school improvement. Strategic planning is a comprehensive approach to systematically reviewing an organization so as to direct resources toward achieving specified objectives. Guthrie and Schuermann (2010) define strategic planning as:

4.1

A composite of sociopolitical processes and analytic techniques designed to enhance an organization's performance and relationships with the external environment, and to ratchet up the efficiency of its internal resource allocation. (p. 52)

As such, strategic planning in schools and districts might be considered most closely aligned to the management approach discussed by Leithwood and Prestine (2002). These authors explicitly describe strategic planning by school leaders as an example of managing school change by becoming "more strategic in their choices of goals, and more plan-oriented and data-driven about the means used to accomplish those goals" (p. 47). The end goals of strategic planning are not identified by parents and the broader community but rather by the school or district leader in concert, perhaps, with members of an expert strategic planning committee.

Guthrie and Schuermann (2010) define parent participation and citizen satisfaction as instrumental objectives in the strategic planning approach, that is, they are the means toward attaining strategic, or end, goals. The selection of non-educators for a strategic planning committee might thus be based on their "capacity for objective, independent judgment and ... technical expertise" (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010, p. 53). It is unlikely that members of the broader constituency would be selected to serve on strategic planning bodies. As such, it appears the role of parents and the general public is even more removed from identifying and resolving problems than in the decentralization approach.

Traditional approaches to including parents and community members tend not to openly engage them in identifying goals for improving their school or district and determining promising strategies for achieving those goals. Again, school councils and strategic planning bodies are more typically tools for educators, experts, and elected or appointed representatives of the community—not opportunities for the broad engagement of the public in democratic, deliberative processes for the improvement of local schools.

5 The Promise of Deliberative Dialogue for Educational Administrators

If we view administrators as problem-solvers first and implementers of solutions second, there is an inherent logic in making the process of identifying and solving problems more transparent and inclusive. This means the definition of *engaging the public* in the public schools must change.A successful problem-solver must know

what the problem is, what the options are for solving the problem, and the full context for implementing a chosen solution. These are tasks that cannot be done by exclusive means if there is to be sustained success.

First, we know education problems affect people inside and outside the walls of the school or district organization, and these people inevitably have very different perspectives on those problems. Second, we know some of the most promising solutions can only be seen when multiple perspectives converge on a problem. Finally, we know that successful implementation of change is only possible with the commitment of those who are invested in its success. Genuine participation in defining a problem and identifying a solution encourages people to commit to ensuring that success.

The broader population of community members has become increasingly disconnected from educators and the public education enterprise (Mathews, 2006; Rallis, Shibles, & Swanson, 2002). As noted above, school councils and strategic planning committees are likely to reflect the views of administrators or those who selected the members. These bodies "reflect elite and professional values more often than the general public's opinion" (Rallis, Shibles, & Swanson, 2002, p. 249). Such bodies do not reflect the inclusivity and diversity of democratic deliberative interactions.

Democratic engagement seeks the public good *with* the public and not merely *for* the public as a means to facilitate a more active and engaged democracy. (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009, p. 9).

A shift in leadership perspective to *interact with* the members of the broader community, and not just *act for* them, may enable administrators to facilitate genuine, public interactions toward understanding and resolving education problems in their local communities. There is no doubt the idea of engaging in this way with parents, community members, and other non-educators is unfamiliar to most education leaders. The initiation and facilitation of democratic deliberative dialogue in schools and districts requires not only a different set of competencies but a new leadership perspective and motivation for engaging with the public. The potential benefits, however, are significant.

Deliberative dialogue promises to allow school and district leaders to engage in a more genuine way with the general public to identify local problems; understand different perspectives of students, parents, and community members; and commit to resolving those problems via actions that will be taken not only by the school and district but also by members and groups in the community. Further, there is the potential for this kind of dialogue to result in ongoing, collaborative local action toward improving schools and districts. Indeed, dialogue may bring the "public" back to the public schools (Mathews, 2006).

The first purpose of deliberative dialogue is as the name suggests: to discuss an issue of common concern in a civil, thoughtful, inclusive manner. Whether there is an existing conflict to be resolved or a local problem to be solved, participants explore the issue together. The problem at hand may be isolated to a particular school (e.g., student bullying) or to the district at large (e.g., a high dropout rate among ninth graders). Dialogue participants are, in essence, volunteer parents and community members who are engaged in knowledge production (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). The dialogic process is interactive and, as each individual has a unique set of experiences and opinions to offer, the inclusive, collaborative dialogue brings to the table an array of perspectives relevant to the issue. Carcasson (2009) considers this knowledge production to be one aspect of what he terms the first-order goals of deliberation. Participants are developing and using democratic attitudes and skills as they learn about the issue on a deeper level.

One outcome of deliberation is said to be new relationships forged across the community in which the resources each individual has to offer equalizes (i.e., democratizes) participants and can result in an asset-based understanding of community (Carcasson, 2009; Rallis, Shibles, & Swanson, 2002; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). Another is the development of a "better balance between [individuals'] own self-interest and the interests of the community" (Carcasson, 2009, p. 7). In the case of public education, this balance can be the foundation for a different kind of partnership among all in the school community—those traditionally considered responsible for schools (educators) and those traditionally excluded from responsibility (non-educators).

The acquisition of new knowledge, attitudes, and skills provides community members with the ability to go beyond dialogue to action, which some say is the second purpose of deliberative democracy. Carcasson views community action as a key second-order goal (2009). Decisions are collaboratively made and plans constructed for implementation by dialogue participants and/or by other individuals or groups that have

initiated and facilitated the deliberations. Regarding one of the previous examples, a school community might develop a plan for decreasing student bullying by creating a program in which parents and community members, as well as teachers, help the student body become committed to publicly standing up for bullied students. Perhaps the most meaningful outcome for those engaged in deliberation on behalf of the public schools is the development of "a more collaborative and inclusive kind of individual and community action" that can, eventually, renew the public ownership of schools that has been ever more rapidly declining (Mathews, 2006). The second example provided above is an example of a problem that could engage the broader community in identifying a set of strategies various subgroups of parents, employers, social service organizations, and others might take on to motivate and provide opportunities for early high schoolers who are struggling to see the relationship between high school education and their futures as employees, family members, and citizens.

In sum, community-wide deliberative dialogue is an approach educational administrators can take to address the needs of public school students and the system itself by openly engaging with their public to understand different perspectives on local education problems and move toward a collective resolution of those problems.

6 Challenges in Considering Deliberative Dialogue with the Public

Democratic, deliberative dialogue about public education poses fundamental challenges for education administrators due to certain perceptions of and experiences in interacting with members of the public. Although it should be evident educators cannot be solely responsible for the complex enterprise of schooling, students of education administration may tend to expect their interaction outside the profession will be only with members of the school parent-teacher organization, individual disgruntled parents, and occasionally members of the district school board. The prospect of engaging with many and diverse members of the community is a different issue altogether.

One challenge of dialogue to students of educational administration could be in how they view their own expertise in understanding and making decisions relative to education, as compared to how they view the expertise (or lack thereof) of parents and the general public. Educators take pride in their accomplishments as individuals who have earned four-year degrees and as professionals who are responsible for the education of children. It may be difficult for administration students to view parents and community members with other educational and work backgrounds as having valuable perspectives and assets for problem-solving in the schools.

Community members without children or grandchildren in the schools sometimes fail to become informed about school and district needs before deciding to withhold support from improving education (e.g., voting for critical bond issues). Education administration students may find it difficult to believe these community members deserve a voice.

In addition, students of educational administration are aware of the perspective, "Why should I pay taxes if I don't have kids in school?" They know that other members of the public think school problems are not their problems and tend to ignore them – assuming others will resolve them. As teachers, they have experienced the needs for tutors and library assistants that community members could meet if only they perceived a personal investment in the public schools.

Finally, trust might be a barrier. Educational administration students may have concerns about having parents and community members involved in school issues or even in the school itself. They may fear being judged by non-educators, and so lack confidence at the thought of community members coming into their school. Although educators understand themselves to be professionals, unlike lawyers or doctors, their abilities and performance are under scrutiny in this era of public school accountability. This fear may be fed for some students by personal experiences with direct attacks from parents or community members who are dissatisfied with school policy or practice or irate due to their own encounters with the school system. The prospect of inviting such attacks in democratic deliberations can be disconcerting.

7 A Simulation of Deliberative Dialogue

7.1 Purpose of the Simulation

As future educational administrators, graduate students need experiences interacting with parents and the general public in ways that differ from those they have as teachers. If administrator preparation programs are to help future education leaders to value, understand, and be able to genuinely interact with many and diverse members of their public, professors and instructors must find ways to facilitate this learning.

This paper has presented a rationale for educators to interact with the public in a fundamentally different way through democratic, deliberative dialogues. To examine the effects of such interactions on students of educational administration, I designed a simulation of deliberative dialogue in which students in my course, *Foundations of Education and Administrative Implications*, participated in small group dialogues with non-educators. The overarching purpose of the course is to address two state competencies for administrator certification expected to be achieved by students as they progress through the program: (a) how to shape campus culture by facilitating the development, articulation, implementations, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community; and (b) how to communicate and collaborate with all members of the school community, respond to diverse interests and needs, and mobilize resources to promote student success. The concepts and process of deliberative dialogue are appropriate for students who are gaining knowledge and skills related to both building a school vision shared by parents and members of the public and developing enduring, mutually beneficial relationships with the public.

Following the experience with deliberative dialogue, educational administration students wrote reflection papers regarding their experience in the dialogue. The intent of the reflection paper was to solicit participants' perceptions of the usefulness and feasibility of the deliberative dialogue approach as a means for facilitating civil, productive educator and non-educator interactions.

7.2 The Simulation

Over a four-semester period in 2009-2010, students enrolled in the course, *Educational Foundations and Administrative Implications*, participated in a 3-4 hour deliberative dialogue experience with non-educators. I coordinated the event in each Foundations course offered during four regular semesters from Summer 2009 through Fall 2010. In most semesters, two groups of 8-12 individuals participated. No grade was assigned to students for participating.

Student participants were asked to recruit other participants who are not educators to create dialogue groups that more closely approximate community dialogues than educator-only discussions. The groups have included parents, children, siblings, spouses, neighbors, and friends of students in the class. In various dialogues, guests have included students in middle and high school, college students, a sheriff and other public service employees, a minister, a realtor, accountants, employees of technology firms, and retirees. Not all participants had children in the public schools.

I selected a broad issue for the dialogue, so as to enable participants to engage in the discussion on an equal footing. That is, the issue did not require educational knowledge or expertise, which could have caused non-educators to feel less confident of the legitimacy of their comments. In addition, all participants could apply the issue to their own experiences in schools, both as students and as adults. The topic was, simply, "What is the 21st century mission for our public schools?" (adapted from National Issues Forums Institute, n.d.) This topic invited participants to consider, articulate, and listen to others' perspectives on the basic purpose(s) of the public schools in the U.S.

I served as a participant-observer in relation to the simulation. First, I trained two or more students in the class who volunteered to serve as small group facilitators. Training was based on materials provided by the organization, Everyday Democracy. The evening of the dialogues, after I introduced the process and the agenda to the entire group of participants, I formed small dialogue groups and directed each to a separate room in which participants worked with their facilitator and volunteer scribe for approximately two hours. During the dialogues, I visited each group—not as a participant but as an observer. I did not participate in the discussions nor did I take notes or otherwise record group interactions. At the end of the time,

participants formed a large group again, and I facilitated a whole-group "action forum" in which I adhered to the guidelines for dialogue facilitators—listening to the discussion, ensuring participants had opportunities to speak, and otherwise serving as a neutral guide for the discussion that emerged. Individual dialogue groups shared their conclusions and, as a collective, worked through a process of finding "common ground" on which they based specific actions that could be taken by various individuals and groups in a community. The actions centered on addressing the priority goals identified by the entire group. As facilitator, I invited participants to determine how both educators and non-educators might be willing to and could feasibly take responsibility for certain actions toward achieving one or more of their priority goals.

7.3 Student Reflections

Subsequent to the experience of deliberative dialogue, students wrote reflection papers on their impressions of the concept and potential usefulness of the process in engaging with their public when they become school and district administrators. No grades were assigned to the papers. Reflection paper prompts varied slightly between the first data collection (Summer 2009) and the data collections in subsequent semesters (Fall 2009, Spring 2010, and Fall 2010).

In all semesters, the following questions were provided as guiding questions for students' consideration as they developed their reflective essays:

1. What did you gain from participating in the deliberative dialogue?
2. Do you think it would be beneficial for districts to initiate deliberative dialogues among educators, parents, and community members about local education issues? If so, how? What challenges do you see in planning and implementing them?
3. Do you think school principals should consider initiating deliberative dialogues among teachers, staff, parents, and middle/high school students? If so, why and for what purpose? If not, why not?

In Fall 2009, Spring 2010, and Fall 2010, students also were asked the following fourth question:

7.3.1

Think of your present school or district situation (the local context). Is there a specific goal for educational improvement that might provide an opportunity for public engagement? Is there a particular problem or challenge facing your local schools or the district that might provide an opportunity for public engagement?

8 Student Perceptions of the Dialogue Experience

8.1 Definitions of Public Participation

In their written reflections, students discussed public participation as active engagement "within the school building and outside in the community." Some expressed a value for the democratic relationship between schools and the public, that is, the concept of public ownership of the schools. Two students provided greater definition. The first asserted, "It is important that the school system realize it is for the public and it answers to the public. ... It is our responsibility to ensure that it meets the needs of the public it is designed to serve." The second said:

By involving a variety of community members in the education process of our children, it gives ownership to the community in the success of our children and, by doing so, limits finger pointing and expecting the schools to fix everything by themselves.

8.2 Personal Benefits in Experiencing Dialogue

Personal benefits of dialogue clustered into five categories: (a) interacting with non-educators, (b) experiencing a safe environment, (c) hearing the perspectives of others, (d) analyzing one's own perspective, and (e) finding ways to take collective action.

Interacting with non-educators. As educators, students enjoyed having an opportunity to interact with non-educators. One said, "I have never participated in any type of interaction that involved bringing in members of the community who were not in the field of education." The inclusion of youth in the dialogues was noted by more than one student as unique and particularly important to him personally: "It was refreshing to be in a group with a young lady who had just graduated from high school." Another educator said, "In our group we had a high school student and it was really great to get her insight on school violence because she had recently been there and saw it herself."

Experiencing a safe environment. The nature of a deliberative dialogue, when facilitated well, provides a safe environment in which a diverse group of strangers can relax into a civil discussion about an issue they all care about. One student described it as follows: "A non-threatening environment like the deliberative dialogue can provide the proper setting for an exchange of ideas."

A few students noted the importance of the principal's role in protecting the safety required for a genuine dialogue environment: "It showed me the importance of not dominating decisions and discussions as a principal." In projecting into her future, another student stated, "I learned that I will need to hold back many times in order to allow for true collaboration and inclusivity to occur with both parents and staff in my school environment."

Interestingly, one student reflected on the experience as it applied to the educational administration program itself: "Most classes have debates, but this was a great way to discuss an issue without feeling like you have to continuously defend yourself."

Hearing the perspectives of others. It is the responsibility of the facilitator in the deliberative dialogue process to ensure participants have the best possible opportunity to hear and consider the perspectives of others. Her or his listening and neutral questioning throughout the discussion invites participants to share their experiences and opinions with the group. The facilitator also has the responsibility to move the discussion along, ensuring different perspectives are voiced and respected. As a result, students stated they appreciated gaining insight into what other people thought, their motivations, their "short and long-term goals." One said, "This is the first time that I was able to hear different perspectives from a range of age groups, career experience, and different backgrounds." Another student elaborated:

8.2.1

The need for honest dialogue exists. The need for each "side" to see the concerns of the other exists. The need for each to see the other as fully human also exists. If true dialogue could begin, then the people in the discussion would become real to one another. As long as one group is referring to the other group as "them," then there is no sense that the members that make up that group are real people.

Another student commented on key characteristics of dialogue relative to the value of hearing the perspectives of others: "Deliberative dialogue can work as long as those involved respect others' opinions and give honest answers to some of the hard questions. Respecting others does not mean that we agree; it means that we are willing to listen to other opinions besides our own."

Analyzing one's own perspective. Just as outward attention to the perspectives of others is critical to developing a potentially broader and deeper understanding of an issue, inward attention to one's own perspective is critical to assessing the completeness of that understanding. Student comments regarding the opportunity to discuss others' points of view face-to-face included, "[It] helped me to re-examine my own thoughts and clearly define my own attitudes about the subject." One student noted the dialogue prompted the development of "my own reasons for what I believed. I was able to see common ground between some of the participants and also question some of my ideas as well."

Beyond interaction itself, democratic deliberation is intended to lead to action. A student found the self-analysis facilitated by dialogue "opened my mind to other solution options."

Finding ways to take collective action. One student found the "action part" to be perhaps the most vital part of the deliberative dialogue after a community has identified a collective goal. He viewed the development of solutions to educational problems, and action taken to implement those solutions, as critical to better serving the students in a school or district.

Another student wrote in detail about the traditional approach to taking action in schools. In the process, he/she also reflected on how the educational administration program contributes to encouraging this traditional approach:

8.2.2

I have witnessed parent and teacher surveys and small group discussions, but the results and decisions rarely come from those groups. Often, the "officials" thank the parent/teacher for the input and report back their decision. In most of my graduate courses, the focus is on leading and guiding and evaluating the staff of a school. However, we often look at what is considered best practice or research-based and how to impart that knowledge. We have rarely looked at simply gathering input and allowing those participants to come up with possible solutions.

In contrast to the communication approach just described, a student stated that engaging the public in deliberative dialogues is a qualitatively different approach to making decisions and taking action in the public schools. In this student's opinion, engaging the public is:

8.2.3

a perfect example of making everyone a part of public education. ... If we invite the people who are part of our community to help us solve these problems, they will know that we care about their opinions and that we will take their suggestions seriously. I believe that having an open line of communication between all parties involved is crucial to fostering an optimal atmosphere for learning and growth in public education.

8.3 Immediate Benefits for Schools and Districts in Initiating Dialogues

In discussing how deliberative dialogue might be beneficial for schools and districts, two particular benefits were evident in students' reflections: the process (a) provides a voice for non-educators, and (b) allows for the sharing of information.

Providing a voice for non-educators. Although the theory and concept of deliberative dialogue is broadly inclusive, students appeared to consider "non-educators" to be primarily parents and youth. There was an acknowledgment that many parents do not have the opportunity to "speak and voice their concerns." As a result, parents seldom see themselves as part of the solution to school and district problems. One student observed that a genuine dialogue experience would give parents "the chance to see that their opinions not only mattered, but their ideas about possible solutions could actually be tried." This opportunity to be heard could slowly but surely draw more parents into the dialogue. Indeed, another student said that, ultimately, deliberative dialogue might be "a great tool for fostering collaboration and shared responsibility among stakeholders" in schools and districts.

When discussing youth as dialogue participants, one student described them as "major stakeholders" whose perspectives would be valuable toward understanding a local education problem. Further, there was an expectation that middle- and high-school students would want to be part of the solution; that is, they would "rise to the occasion when given responsibilities" and "follow through" with a solution they helped determine.

Finally, one graduate student suggested deliberative dialogue could be empowering for community members. She said the experience could "make the public aware of their power in influencing the educational policies, local or state, regarding schools and districts."

Sharing information. According to students, the predominant benefit of initiating deliberative dialogues for schools and districts was to provide an opportunity to share information with the public, face-to-face. Students' descriptions of this benefit communicated their comfort with traditional, one-way interactions between educators and non-educators. Although some stated they saw the potential for a two-way exchange of information about problems at the campus or community level, most described dialogue as an opportunity for educators to provide information to the public. Statements included the following benefits to schools and districts:

- Communicate problems in schools and specific steps the public can take to alleviate these problems.
- Educate the public about education issues and student needs.
- Educate the public about district problems and persuade them to support a particular solution (e.g., "drum up support" for a tax increase during a budget crisis).
- Educate parents about how to help their children achieve specific learning goals at home.
- Educate parents and the general public on ways to make their concerns known to the district and school board.

It may be that tradition is not the only factor behind student opinions in this area; the complexity of public education has resulted in a tremendous amount of data on students, facilities, finances, and more that educators manage daily. This information provides the sometimes overwhelming context for the problems schools and districts encounter—a context seldom understood by members of the public. Students expressed the expectation that deliberative dialogue would be a way to "get technical information out to parents and the general public." Students also suggested inviting community members to other types of face-to-face meetings to obtain information on district planning and facilities, methods of making enrollment projections, and long-range planning. They also suggested other communication avenues a district might use subsequent to dialogues, including an email list of community members, a message board on the district website, and other tools for providing follow-up information.

8.4 Longer-Term Benefits for Engaging the Public Through Deliberative Dialogue

When student reflections turned to longer-term benefits for initiating dialogue among both educators and community members, benefits straddled the first-order and second-order goals of deliberation outlined by Carcasson (2009). That is, graduate students identified improvements in knowledge, attitudes and skills and also action.

Strengthen the relationship between the public schools and the public. A student reflected on the change in school-community relationships in recent years: "The relationship of the community and the school doesn't seem as strong as it was thirty years ago when I was a student there. ... In the past fifteen to twenty years, the only supporters left are the ones with children and/or grandchildren in the schools." Another commented on specific subgroups in the community who may need particular attention if the overall relationship between the school and the public is to become stronger. Business owners, retirees, and community members who do not have children in the public schools represent a large group in many communities, yet "we do not do an efficient job of reaching out to these groups. As a result, when it comes time to vote on funding proposals, often times these proposals are struck down or met with opposition." One student proposed there would be benefits to inviting policymakers to visit the schools.

Students reiterated the benefit of having a new forum in which the schools and district might provide information to the public. One student suggested holding town meetings followed by strategic planning sessions that provide community members with data on school performance and share district goals and strategies for change. She then saw the opportunity for an open discussion to encourage the public to recognize their stake in the quality of the public school system, thus strengthening the connection between the district and community.

An important aspect of building a new and stronger relationship is the need to build trust between educators and non-educators: "The educational leader must keep in mind that the parents and community need to know that their concerns are going to be listened to and considered. The public must feel validated if the schools are to keep the public involved."

Renew public investment in the success of schools. Some student reflections touched on the deeper aspect of relationship: public investment (or re-investment) in the public schools. This involves attitudes about the fundamental purpose of public schools in a democracy. A student said, "What goes on in the community reflects what goes on in our schools, and what goes on in our schools is a reflection of the community." One student observed she sees a lack of ownership in the public school system itself, when there is today the pressing need for members of the public to acknowledge their reliance on the success of the system beyond their own community schools. Another student wrote extensively about why the local,

state, and national communities should rediscover and renew their investments in the public schools, if only in the cause of self-interest.

Ensuring that every student grows to be a contributing member of society is beneficial to everyone. Today's students are the future leaders, policymakers, and workforce. Additionally the public ... is directly impacted by the issues in local schools. Most notably, this problem has implications for the economic health of the area. High school dropouts have dramatically less earning potential than students who receive a high school diploma or continue their education beyond high school. These uneducated students will most likely struggle financially and could potentially require government assistance, which is funded by the public. High populations of citizens living in poverty have additional implications such as increased crime rates. High dropout rates in local schools also deter families from moving to the area, which impacts the economy. These economic impacts [should] convince the public to be active agents in the local schools.

Increase participation of the public in solving problems. Individual and community action to solve local problems is a goal solidly considered by Carasson (2009) and others to be a second-order goal of deliberation—one that can only follow substantial deliberative dialogue. Assuming the public can indeed be attracted to deliberative dialogue with educators, a student said, "Societal problems must have societal solutions ... As they are experts in their own communities, the public can offer insight and unique solutions to alleviate problems."

Students recognized the natural tension within the idea of public participation in education decision making. One student observed, "While everyone has an opinion and a criticism to make, not everyone is actively participating in the process." On the other hand, another student cautioned, "attempting to listen and address everyone's concerns could prove to be overwhelming, leading to little or no decisions being made." These are clearly conflicting perceptions of the feasibility of community members working with educators to solve local problems.

Nevertheless, among student essays, there was an acknowledgement that educators must realize working together with non-educators to solve problems will be better than trying to solve the problems themselves, "when you know that you're going to need the community's help to solve them."

8.5 Issues Ripe for Dialogue

When students were asked "As an education leader, why and how might you engage members of your 'public' to address a particular education issue of common concern in the school or district you lead?" their reflections ran the gamut of possible issues on which they would want to openly engage members of the public.

Issues of concern included the following: student academic performance; other student outcomes (e.g., providing adult relationships for at-risk children and youth; responding to student needs for food, school supplies, clothing, and afterschool supervision; easing student transition to high school); student behavior; supplementing school and district resources; curriculum and instruction; and managing community-wide change (e.g., school boundary changes, racial and cultural conflict, rapid growth, decline in school populations).

9 Limitation of the Simulation

My role as a participant-observer in the simulation presents some potential limitations to the results of the simulation, as represented in student reflection papers. First, because I visited the dialogue groups, students in the course might have censored their comments to protect themselves from any assumed grading consequences related to my perceptions of their participation. Although their papers did not receive grades, students still may have felt I was assessing their performance as dialogue participants.

Second, my direct participation in the simulation included (a) training the facilitators, (b) introducing the dialogue event, and (c) facilitating the whole-group "action forum." This participation might have biased dialogue participants (both students and non-educator guests) toward the potential benefits of the democratic, deliberative dialogue process. Because I was conscious of these two potential limitations, I took measures to minimize the effects by (a) again, providing no grades for students associated with the event; and

(b) developing a script for myself and student facilitators that adhered to the tenets of dialogue facilitation as set forth by Everyday Democracy (2001) and the National Issues Forums Institute (n.d.). Facilitator behaviors are explicitly defined as neutral. In addition, I removed student names from reflection papers before collapsing and then analyzing responses.

10 Conclusions

Graduate students in the Foundations course whose reflections have been analyzed here appear to share a vision for deliberative dialogue as a new and promising method of engaging parents and the broader community in thoughtful, democratic discussions. They articulated multiple benefits, both short-term and long-term. However, the challenge of overcoming the structures and traditions that have divided those inside the school walls and those outside seems significant. This is particularly so in the case of determining how to take action following dialogue events. The sometimes-difficult relationship with parents and other members of the public that students noted may be responsible for the way in which administrator preparation students responded to the question, "How would you engage members of your 'public' to address that education issue?"

Most respondents revealed a tendency to adhere to traditional ways of interacting and then partnering with members of the public. Overwhelmingly, students presented proposals for action that centered on the familiar roles expected of parents and other non-educators: provision of financial or material resources, contributions of time working with students in the school, attendance at school events, and participation on established committees. In essence, students described their intention to solicit and accept more of the same.

One student described the interrelationship between the public and public schools in terms of a pragmatic trade-off,

10.1

The community not only encourages the school by volunteering items, materials, time, service; they also financially [support] the schools by funding programs, supporting fundraisers, and providing free services that otherwise would have be charged for. If I as an administrator make a decision that the public does not agree with because I did not inform them, my support system will decrease. When my support system decreases, my staff and students suffer.

On the other hand, some students expressed a change in disposition toward the role of non-educators in determining action to address local school problems:

10.2

Being able to hear, understand, and comprehend different perspectives helped me to re-examine my own thoughts and clearly define my own attitudes about the subject. It is clearly through this process that if we are able to develop solutions to educational problems as a community, we will better serve the students.

In sync with this perspective on public involvement, some administrator preparation students described new and different ways to invite communication and collaboration with members of the community. In a few cases, the ideas were unique and promised to attract certain community members who haven't been involved in the schools. Two examples include:

1. Create new school-based programs or groups to target members of the community in addition to parents (e.g., community service clubs, community involvement nights in the schools).
2. Initiate small group discussions for community members to share with educators their experiences related to learning a basic skill (e.g., writing) and help design an action plan toward increasing student skills in that area.

The intent of preparing future education leaders to value, understand, and use democratic deliberative strategies is to enable them to engage with many and diverse publics about education issues and find

solutions for local school and district problems. The perceptions of educational administration students who participated in simulated deliberative dialogues appear to confirm the usefulness of including deliberative dialogue experiences in administrator preparation program curricula. Students' reflections on their personal experience in a dialogue reveal specific benefits as well as challenges of such interactions with fellow educators and non-educators.

There is more work to do in answering the questions of feasibility and educator willingness to consider new ways to engage with the public in action toward school improvement. Nonetheless, graduate students in my Foundations of Education course who participated in dialogues seem to agree that democratic, deliberative dialogue—and action—can bring both short-term and long-term benefits to themselves, as some-day administrators, and to their schools and districts. At the very least, we know that this kind of work with the public must be superior to the model one student reported to be recommended by another instructor. The model was termed, "How to keep parents at bay." The student reporting the story said:

10.3

She basically told us to pick token volunteer opportunities to avoid liability issues but still placate parents who want to help out. She tells us to watch out for parents who seem helpful but really have malicious intent to gossip and interfere with school policy and instruction.

I suggest the following comment by a student represents a most appropriate response to that instructor's advice:

10.4

No matter the problem, the public has an interest in the successful education of all students—administrators are aided in including the public, and solutions can be reached through increased communication between school officials and the public.

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