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COMMENTARY



The school principal as democratic leader: a critique of the Wallace Foundation's vision of the principalship

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ABSTRACT

What is the role of the public school principal in the contemporary era? As conceived by many in educational policy-making and research today, the duty of the US school leader is to ensure that the district is, above all else, improving student achievement, defined by standards measured by high-stakes test results. Here, I examine and critique this contemporary conventional response to this question, as exemplified by the Wallace Foundation's work, and sketch an alternative vision based on the principles and practices of democratic leadership traditions. While rarely writing directly about school leadership or the school administrator's role, John Dewey's linked notions of democracy, community and citizen participation are, with some updating, sorely needed as a counter to the narrowed conception of the principal role today. School leaders are community leaders, with important inward-facing and outward-facing responsibilities for communicating and building visions for good education with their constituencies inside and outside the school building.

“Public education is essentially education of the public.” (Dewey, 2011/1935, p. 133)

In the educational infrastructure of many contemporary nation-states, there are few positions as challenging as that of principal. This has always been the case, though today's principals in USA likely feel uniquely besieged by interventionist, top-down policies which have no equal in the educational history of this country. Rousmaniere, in *The Principal's Office* (2013), says the difficulty of the position today is not unique or new. ‘Located between the school and the district, and serving both, the principal has historically been a middle manager who translates educational policy from the central office to the classroom.’ From ‘large scale initiatives’ to ‘day-to-day problems,’ principals carry a load of diverse responsibilities and roles as they serve local constituencies while translating a myriad of policies and goals invented by those in offices of education and legislative bodies (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 3). As new layers of governance have been added above the district level of governance in the last century, with unprecedented levels of state and national authority being asserted on public schools, the principal is more than ever a middle manager, juggling various and sometimes conflicting policies made above the level of the school building. In addition, the contemporary principal

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must also now juggle multiple demands from their community, as school choice rhetoric and policies have positioned citizens as educational consumers, whose role is often seen as that of trying to maximize the value of education for their own individual child or family.

What should school leadership look like for the principal, in the midst of such structural role restrictions? As conceived by many in educational policy-making and research today, the duty of the US school leader is to ensure that the district is, above all else, improving student achievement, defined by standards measured by high-stakes test results. Here, I examine and critique this contemporary conventional response to this question, and will present an alternative vision based on the principles and practices of democratic leadership traditions. To illustrate the dominant vision about the ‘ideal’ public school principal, I will draw from the Wallace Foundation’s research and publications on this topic (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

To critique and sketch an alternative to this dominant contemporary vision, I will examine the historical and philosophical treatments of the role of the principal in USA, and in particular the role envisioned by pragmatist scholars. While rarely writing directly about school leadership or the school administrator’s role, John Dewey’s linked notions of democracy, community and citizen participation are, with some updating, sorely needed as a counter to the narrowed conception of the role today. School leaders are community leaders, with important inward-facing and outward-facing responsibilities for communicating and building visions for good education with their constituencies inside and outside the school building. The ‘ideal’ of school leader touted today has all but abandoned the outward-facing aspects of this role, and to the detriment of public education as system responsive to and in service of its citizens. Dewey argued, in his 1935 article ‘The Educational Statesman,’ that public education is education *of* the public (Dewey, 2011/1935). This was not rhetorical flight but a conception of how the school principal’s role requires practices of outward-facing, community leadership. Yet beyond the function of public relations, a weak and poor substitute for democratic leadership, this conception of the role is poorly understood and only weakly cultivated, at best, by researchers and licensure groups who set standards for the field.

The Wallace Foundation perspective on the school principal

The Wallace Foundation is a powerful philanthropic organization with a cultivated reputation as a national leader in educational leadership research, funding projects in 28 states and issuing over 70 research reports related to school leadership. A recent focus is their work on principal preparation pipelines; the University Principal Preparation Initiative, launched in 2016, is a \$48.5 million, four-year project (De Voto, 2019). Wallace has, through these efforts, helped to make school leadership a key focus of education policy-makers.

Wallace’s focus is on instructional leadership for improved school achievement. A 2013 report states that ‘A particularly noteworthy finding, reinforced in a major study by researchers at the universities of Minnesota and Toronto, is the empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement’ (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 5). Seeing that school leaders have the potential to unleash the full capacities of schools as learning organizations, Wallace outlines five key responsibilities of the school principal: 1) shaping a vision of academic success for all students, 2) creating a climate

hospitable to education, 3) cultivating leadership in others, 4) improving instruction and 5) managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement (Ibid., p. 6). In order to prepare competitive workers for the new global economy, and to close the achievement gaps among racial-ethnic groups in USA, Wallace's research underscores the importance of a relentless focus on 'high standards' and 'rigorous learning goals' (Ibid., p. 7; emphasis in original). Building a strong, positive school community focused on learning outcomes to motivate teachers and staff, while using school data to improve student achievement, is the role of the principal.

What about connections between the school and community, a traditional role for the public school principal in USA? The 2013 Wallace Report states that there is no evidence that this work has any impact on student achievement and therefore cannot endorse or recommend its practice.

Many principals work to engage parents and others outside the immediate school community, such as local business people. But what does it take to make sure these efforts are worth the time and toil required? While there is considerable interest in this question, the evidence on how to answer it is relatively weak. (Ibid., p. 9).

Because no scientific study can be found producing proof positive of a correlation between principal engagement with the broader community of the school, and the student learning outcomes as measured by state assessments and other forms of measurement, Wallace takes no official position on this element of school leadership in the report, awaiting further study on whether this work can be judged to be a valid contributor to student achievement. As such, the ideal school principal, from the Wallace Foundation point of view, is an inward-focused organizational leader, focused on ensuring that everyone in the building has their eyes on the prize: maximizing learner outputs as measured by tests and assessments.

Yet a problem here is Wallace's positivistic research methodology, setting out to measure something objective like 'school leadership,' yet all the while ignoring the obvious circularity of how 'student achievement' is defined by the growth markers achieved on standardized measurement instruments selected by distant educational bureaucrats and legislative bodies. That is, 'student achievement' is a social construct, a way of framing the school's mission based in an individualist, test-based accountability measure. By ignoring this circularity, and treating 'student achievement' as an unquestionable construct and singularly good outcome of public education, the Wallace Foundation helps reinforce and strengthen a model of school leader fully aligned with a measurement-obsessed, state- and federal-governmentally-controlled era of public education.

It is now critical that we re-construct a much broader view of the role, as the limitations and negative consequences of this era of public education 'reform' are now coming into clearer view. An examination of Deweyan notions of democratic school leadership is useful for this reconstructive aim.

Challenging scientism: democratic leadership for school principals

In a measurement-obsessed era of education, thought-leaders like the Wallace Foundation are pressed to understand why a school principal might find it necessary to engage with the communities which are home to their students. Their scientism – excessive belief in only

those things which can be scientifically measured – leads them to ignore democratic values and purposes of education. This positivist mindset is a symptom of a key problem in and for public education: the very large disconnect between public schools and the communities they are supposed to serve. Revisiting Dewey's ideas about democracy and democratic schooling enables a critique of that mindset.

'The historic tie between the public and its schools seems to be weakening' (Mathews, 2016, p. 3) This is the view of David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation. Kettering is among a number of researchers and civic groups interested in diagnosing and repairing this weakening tie. Mathews points out that the current educational reform discourse (exemplified by Wallace) seems to believe this weakening tie will be repaired by raising test scores. But Mathews, in 1995, argued that this problem of the declining legitimacy of public schools is less a performance problem than a relational problem. 'It's the relationship between the schools and the community that needs repair. We won't begin to get at what has gone wrong in that relationship until we think the unthinkable – that the public for public schools is slipping away' (Ibid.).

Revisiting the ties between schools and their publics a decade later, Mathews argues that intervening years of high-stakes accountability have made matters much worse on this front. There is a sense that accountability policies have disconnected voters from the schools, and substituted *accountability*, as defined by government, for schools' *responsibility* to their communities. While educators have been pushing data at the public about their performance, in the name of accountability, most parents know that some aspects of a good education cannot be measured by a state report card. Mathews states, in 2015, 'When accountability is institutionally defined, it tends to disenfranchise citizens. If people don't have responsibility, they are reduced to consumers, and all accountability falls on the schools' (Ibid., p. 11). In this vein, in 1937 John Dewey wrote:

absence of participation tends to produce lack of interest and concern on the part of those shut out. The result is a corresponding lack of effective responsibility. Automatically and unconsciously, if not consciously, the feeling develops, 'this is none of our affair; it is the business of those at the top.' (Dewey, 2011/1937, 128).

Yet warnings about the health and well-being of our democracy do not seem to make it to the ears of educational policy-makers, who are far more worried about how USA will fare in the global economic competitive race. This race is seen only through the lens of national economic well-being, as advocated through corporate interests.

Increasingly, researchers are pointing out the faulty logic behind measuring US schools by the narrow metrics of 'student outcomes' as measured by standardized metrics (Lynch, 2016). Yong Zhao (2009), for example, argues that the US education reform era of the early 21st century has used ideas of standardized learning and homogenized notions of achievement in ways that have squelched and repressed the classic strengths of US public education. These strengths have traditionally included: an attention to individual expressions and creativity, broader definitions of success for a diverse population, a broad curriculum that goes well beyond a narrow focus on math, reading and science, experientially based projects, the arts and the accommodation of diverse learning needs of individual students.

US schools have plenty of room to improve, and the gaps in opportunities and achievement between subgroups fully warrant the attention and focus it has received within the 21th century educational reform era. Wallace's contributions to this focus are

commendable. Yet homogenizing education into the tested STEM subjects and cutting schools off from their communities in the name of maximizing scores are moves which ignore the cultural uniqueness of the US decentralized model of education. The US public school model nurtures pluralism, diversity of thinking, communal connections for expanding student well-being and educational opportunities, and tapping communal assets and strengths that lie in each and every individual school and district. The Wallace Foundation has built a model of school leadership that may be disregarding many of these classical cultural strengths in the US public school.

In the long run, an exclusively inward focus for school leadership practice will harm their public education's legitimacy and well-being. US schools serve both the universal *public* of USA, as well as the local *publics* that constitute schools and districts (Knight Abowitz, 2014). Local publics are vital to the legitimacy and democratic purposes of schools. Publics are associations or groups formed out of problems and challenges faced by youth or schools in a particular locality, community or region. Educational publics are mobilizations of citizens who address shared educational problem through inquiry and advocacy, generating potential solutions with educational leaders in schools (including teachers, board members and parent leaders). School leaders work to facilitate educational publics – working to foster inclusive leadership, communication practices, shared purposes, and collaboration across citizen groups and between citizens and school leaders. Weber defines democratic leadership as 'respectful experimental inquiry for the common good' (Weber, 2013, p. 61). It is with the publics they serve that school leaders lead, engaging in inquiry and shared work to solve problems and challenges faced in educating young people.

Conclusion

When we create an ideal school principal model which idealizes an inward-facing leadership, at the expense of the rich democratic traditions of school-community relationships, we put further distance between citizens and their public schools, and weaken the institution. Public schools do not belong to the government or even to the legislatures who pass laws without input from citizens, teachers, or school leaders. They belong to citizens and the communities they serve; this is the decentralized model that our federalist system created. Like any other national model, it comes with its own challenges, limitations, and strengths. School leaders educate the diverse publics of their schools; they facilitate meaningful connections which create resources for solving shared problems faced by youth and families in a district. They pivot from an inward focus on students, teachers and curriculum, to outwardly-facing leadership practices to help shape state policy-making bodies, and build relationships with parents, businesses and nonprofits in their districts. As Wraga notes of Dewey's vision of school leadership:

The educational leader bears the responsibility to educate the public about the effective education of children and youth. Educational leadership thus does not stop at the schoolhouse door, it extends to the whole community. Additionally, however, for Dewey educational leadership was educational because the leader remained open to informing his or her decision making with input from the school community. (Wraga, 2004, p. 11)

Notions of school leadership are enriched by good research and nuanced empirical study, without a doubt. Yet it is also a value-laden practice that happens within

a context of democracy. Too much educational research is guilty of ignoring the domains of democratic values in our measurement-obsessed contexts. ‘We have become objective spectators and, through that, acquired one kind of knowledge but lost touch with another. We are no longer aware of things in terms of their multifarious meanings and interconnections, but isolate them in order to study their “reality” and then worry about how they are linked and connected to each other’ (Smeyers & Smith, 2014, p. 16).

Dewey’s philosophy contains wisdom of democratic value and culture that need to be revisited to help strengthen the legitimacy of the public school, and the public school principalship. Dewey, among other thinkers, can help us sketch models of this role that are more compatible with the decentralized, pluralist and creative vision of democratic education structured by the US public education structure. Such role reconstructions can potentially enable U.S. schools to recover from the negative consequences of top-down, test-driven standards and accountability-reforms of the past 30 years. The public grows weary of this model of schooling and all its negative impacts on youth, the teaching profession, and the ability of the US citizenry to critically think, discover, inquire and engage with a meaningful education. New models, drawing upon Dewey’s notions of the school as a social and civic center of its community (Dewey, 1902), and accompanying notions of school leadership, can enable that recovery.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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