Democratic Community as a Bridge between Social Justice Theory and School Improvement Practice

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Introduction

Educational leadership is under scrutiny and reform at all levels. District leadership is becoming more “secularized,” with business models and practitioners driving new reform approaches (Usdan, 2002). School leadership faces new accountability pressures across the country that imply, either subtly or not so subtly, the failure of the principalship to usher in needed school reform. And now, in ways newly public with the exposure that Levine’s (2005) Educating School Leaders has received, administrative preparation programs have landed squarely in the mix of the culprits blamed for schools’ seemingly intractable woes.

In a special issue of Educational Administration Quarterly that examined the last of these arenas—the university pipeline for leadership preparation—Young, Petersen, and Short (2002) argue for an interdependent approach to addressing reform needs. They note, “the success of any effort to positively and substantively change the preparation of school and school-system leaders is a commitment among stakeholders to finding common ground and working interdependently toward the realization of mutually agreed-on goals” (140). This paper chronicles aspects of what began as a formal attempt to create such an interdependent partnership between the Educational Leadership Program at the University of New Mexico, a formal network of schools in the northern rural area of the state, and the University’s distance education arm. Over the course of three years through the LeadNM grant, principals in the network schools developed democratic communities, a process that mirrored developments within the university’s program. Efforts of the two groups were occasionally convergent, often distinct; partly coincidental, partly intentional; sometimes interdependent, sometimes parallel. In each case, though, democratic community building grounded the changes. For practicing principals, this community building developed through professional learning community commitments. For the university program,
principles of democratic community increasingly drove pedagogy, course content, and faculty interactions. Although many of the formal interdependencies the grant hoped for were unrealized because of fiscal and logistical constraints, the deeper goal of both the field and the university sharing learning goals occurred.

Murphy’s (2002) “blueprint” for reculturing educational leadership highlights democratic community as one of three key concepts in leadership development. The community building both the principals and faculty engaged in embodied central tenets of Murphy’s description: working as “heterarchical” organizations; working “with people rather than through them”; employing “self-critical” reflection on practice (p.188). As the two case studies that follow attest, the community building accomplishments were clearly positive for principals and the university program; the democratic orientation of the communities promoted important personal growth and fostered more respectful interactions in schools and the program. Participants in both arenas—the university and LeadNM—experienced increased optimism and efficacy as a result of this work. However, to date these developments have been insufficient to promote deeper changes in the schools and have only recently heralded significant changes at the university. For instance, principals report more supportive interactions with staff and have developed new critical capacities to assess their own roles in perpetuating cultures and activities that do not necessarily support school improvement; still, they are less than able to usher in drastic changes that could turn their schools around. Individual faculty have developed new pedagogic approaches that promote more democratic processes in their classes and are more able to hear colleagues’ differing opinions; still, significant structural changes to the principal preparation pipeline have been difficult to envision and, though envisioned, are yet to be
realized. Change has occurred, but not the full range of changes that participants themselves anticipate.

This paper argues that the democratic community building is a necessary foundation for, but not sufficient goal of, deep reform. Absent Murphy’s two other principles—school improvement and social justice—building community, even democratic communities, may leave open to chance the accomplishment of significant reculturing of our schools and our leadership preparation pipelines. To explore this premise, this paper presents the two cases: the northern network principals’ democratic community development and the Educational Leadership Program’s similar development. Each of these accounts provides the context of the change efforts, processes used to promote change, and evidence of change. However, in the case of the Educational Leadership Program, democratic community has recently been yoked to school improvement and social justice principles, paving the way for significant changes to develop at the programmatic, not only the individual, level.

**LeadNM: Developing Democratic Communities in Isolated Areas**

Supporting strong principal development can prove demanding in any circumstances, but some contexts heighten the challenges. Principals with limited educational or management experience, leaders credentialed with minimal requirements, work environments where it is difficult to retain high quality leaders—all these can make the goal of supporting principal professional development for learner-centered schools more difficult. Such is the case in northern New Mexico, where 80% of districts report having insufficient numbers of candidates for their principal positions, candidates who do apply are often underqualified, and turnover rates reached nearly 300% in the past decade (DeMoss et al., 2005; Winograd et al., 2004). Compounding these realities is geography. In planning the LeadNM grant, principals and
superintendents in the north had made it clear that the isolation they faced was a critical barrier to addressing leadership issues: formal professional development opportunities were rare; support systems for principals were nonexistent; basic information of all sorts was lacking. Moving forward on leadership development would require addressing the key issue of isolation. What literature existed on the effects of isolation supported these tenets. Authors approach the issue of principal isolation from multiple perspectives (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Hancock & Lamendola, 2005; Holloway, 2004; Lashway, 2003, *Networks and clusters*, 2000; Rogers & Babinski, 1999; Wagner, 2001), but all support a movement toward the creation of collaborative environments in which principals are provided opportunities to “share experiences with colleagues as a preferred activity” (Holloway, 2004).

Accordingly, the grant was structured to address isolation. Among other elements, the grant sought to develop professional learning communities among network principals. Project personnel facilitated monthly cohort meetings focused on the connections between leadership and learning for 5 different groups comprised of 15-20 principals each. A total of eighty principals traveled from remote contexts to sites within their regions once a month for day-long cohort meetings. This component of the grant was designed to reduce isolation by bringing together practicing principals around issues of leadership and learning. The intent was to support a shift in principals’ attitudes through the development of a professional learning community. The learning community would address isolation as a primary impediment and hopefully model developing democratic communities as a way to meet the needs and goals at their sites.

*Isolation: More than a Physical Reality*

During the course of the grant, researchers identified four distinct types of principal isolation, each of which represented a deep lack of community. The first was akin to the
isolation found in the literature about teachers, focusing on the simple aloneness of the work (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Hancock & Lamendola, 2005; Holloway, 2004; Lashway, 2003; Rogers & Babinski, 1999; Wagner, 2001). This facet of isolation develops from the very structure of schooling in the United States: Classrooms generally house only one teacher, and schedules provide little time for interactions with other adults. Principals face this same endemic feeling, perhaps even surpassing teachers’ isolation, according to Lashway (2003): “Unlike new teachers who can usually find an empathetic colleague just down the hall, principals literally have no peers in their building. The isolation can be magnified when they receive little feedback from supervisors.” In geographically remote northern New Mexico, many principals found feedback to be rare, and few even had assistant principals with whom to talk. As one participant in the study put it simply, “The principalship can be lonely.”

The second type of isolation grew out of both the singularity of the role of principal and the realities of rural areas. Because of the geographic isolation of these small rural communities, schools and districts not only found themselves “out of the loop”; sometimes there was no “loop” at all. Limited funds generated from small student bodies dictated that one person wear several hats: the principal was often also the district technology coordinator, the curriculum specialist, even, in a few instances, the sole teacher in a school. These realities translated to a limited range of expertise from which to draw, as one administrator noted: “We can't make the changes we need just locally because we only have three principals, and they are all pretty much new. We needed others’ help, others’ experience to guide us.” Sometimes the need for other colleagues to support change went beyond sheer numbers. Depending on the philosophical orientations of school or district staffs, participants found that the new ideas they were exploring through the grant were not always welcomed, a reality expressed by one participant this way: “There was no
one in the district to talk with.” This particular type of isolation ultimately related to principals’ role definition. Principals agreed that the role of school leaders needed to be reconceptualized as educational contexts changed, but to do so alone was an almost insurmountable prospect. They had, as had their predecessors, instead focused almost exclusively on traditional role definitions of principal as building manager and discipline arbitrator. To facilitate new conceptions of the role of principals required addressing this role isolation, engendered by both the rural context and the nature of the position of principal as the only designated head in a school.

The third type of isolation was informational. Grant planners had understood Network principals to feel that often they were the last to know about federal and state initiatives and mandates; indeed, “circuit riders”—educators with deep roots in the north who traveled to sites to mentor principals—were built into the grant in part to address information gaps. Still, despite expecting rural leaders to be relatively uninformed, project staff found the degree of unawareness striking. Educators were not acquainted with some of the most basic policies affecting schools. District staff did not understand Adequate Yearly Progress as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act and defined by the state. Principals did not understand their roles in teacher professional development and evaluation as mandated by the State’s new licensure system. Teachers did not understand what the new, mandated criterion-referenced tests were all about. As one participant noted, “Without this kind of help [the assistance of the circuit riders], we'd be in the caves; we'd be in the boonies. We're geographically out there, and they [the State Public Education Department staff] don't give us a lot of information.” Circuit riders found the bulk of work requested of them focused on bridging this informational isolation.

The fourth type of isolation, psychological, was far more critical from principals’ perspectives. The work that occurred to address psychological isolation through the interactions
within cohort learning communities proved the most powerful change mechanism for principals. Participant reflections were nearly universal in noting that assuaging their sense of isolation was a major benefit of the cohort. In some ways, what we are calling “psychological isolation” may be a result of the combined effects of the other three realities of isolation, where work isolation, role definition, and informational isolation combine to create a sense of being completely alone. Early data even indicated that principals had come to believe that no one else faced the kinds of issues they did. Despite widespread media attention regarding the challenges schools across the nation have, they found it “surprising” that others faced what they did; they had felt “alone,” “unique,” and “hopeless” until their LeadNM cohort experiences. One of the participants expressed how this sense of aloneness can negatively affect a principal’s ability to move forward productively: “It's so nice to have meetings with other principals because it's nice to find out you're not by yourself. You feel isolated. Sometimes, then, for me, the next step is to feel overwhelmed.”

These facets of isolation were the primary target of the grant’s professional community building. Without a shift in principals’ sense they were not, in any meaningful way, a part of a larger community, moving forward on shared goals and democratic community principles would be impossible.

**Creating Community through Sustained, Focused Conversation**

Discussion was the primary means of the cohort groups to build community. The content and delivery of the LeadNM activities was designed to provide a safe, relevant, and participatory environment in which principals’ work became the focus around which at least half of all discussions revolved. (The other half revolved around readings, described in the following section.) To ensure that the discussions were targeted, the staff drew on a combination of work
from the Critical Friends Groups (CFG’s) from the Coalition of Essential Schools and work by the National School Reform Faculty, to which the key facilitator belonged.

The processes used in Critical Friends Groups tend to focus on developing collegial relationships, promoting meaningful dialogue, encouraging reflective practice, and helping participants to rethink their practices. Rather than assign blame for problems occurring within the school or with a particular teacher or student, CFG’s encourage participants to present a problem to a group of trusted peers who, in turn, examine the issue from a number of perspectives while providing support, honest critical feedback, and new insights to the person who has requested their assistance. According to Evans and Mohr (1999), the work in CFG’s is based on seven complex beliefs that mirror the dilemmas faced daily by principals:

1. Principals’ learning is personal and yet takes place most effectively while working in groups.
2. Principals foster more powerful faculty and student learning by focusing on their own learning.
3. While we honor principals’ thinking and voices, we want to push principals to move beyond their assumptions.
4. Focused reflection takes time away from “doing the work,” and yet it is essential.
5. It takes strong leadership in order to have truly democratic learning.
6. Rigorous planning is necessary for flexible and responsive implementation.
7. New learning depends on protected dissonance.

To address these dilemmas, CFG members use agreed upon guidelines called protocols to help each other “tune” their practices. They analyze issues associated with student work, as well
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as with school, classroom, district, and community interactions. The protocols exhibit a range of goals, from building trust to helping people make difficult decisions. For example, a protocol called “Peeling the Onion” helps participants appreciate the complexity of problems by probing to peel away layers of a problem in order to better understand and deal with the deeper issues beneath the surface. Another example is the “Consultancy” protocol in which the presenter first provides a detailed description of a current dilemma, then group participants talk among themselves as if the presenter were not there, analyzing the dilemma and proposing new ideas, perspectives and approaches. By helping participants focus on the question raised by the presenter rather than on the presenter as a person, the protocol assists everyone to assume a non-defensive and non-judgmental stance in dealing with dilemmas they face in their professional lives. They help participants practice habits of more democratic communication.

The cohort groups were not made up of leaders who all knew one another, yet almost immediately participants were willing to share their stories, offer advice, and work together using the protocols. The tenor of the interactions closely reflected this example of a new principal, whom we’ll call Joe. Joe volunteered to share his issue using a variation of a consultancy protocol. The facilitator began the session asking whether Joe was honestly open to new thinking about the issue, and when he replied that he was, he shared his problem. Moving from descriptions of teachers being late for meetings to laments about parents not bathing and feeding children to problems with faculty not fulfilling their duties, Joe spoke for several minutes, clearly frustrated with his situation. Several minutes into his presentation, the facilitator requested that he focus on a specific element, group, or instance with which he would like help; after a few more false starts, he decided he was most frustrated by teachers not acting professionally in the course of their jobs, from missing meetings to not following rules.
The next portion of the protocol gave guidance to cohort members about what to do. First, there were three minutes for clarifying questions—who, what, when, where, how. Cohort members asked how many of the teachers were irresponsible, whether there was a split in experience that identified them, how often such behaviors occurred, whether there was a handbook that explained their responsibilities, whether the concerns were related to instructional quality, and if concerns included non-certified staff or just teachers. Next, the protocol asked listeners to say something they had heard Joe say. The group exhibited openness and honesty during this process, as each of these statements from different cohort members demonstrates:

I heard you say you want to know how to teach or allow them to be responsible. I heard you say that this is something you are trying to implement that the past administration didn’t implement. I heard you say you have problems with 1/3 of your staff. I heard you say your staff is dumb and not doing what they should do. I heard you say you haven’t identified the needs. I heard you say you are frustrated that staff can’t even do minimal requirements. I heard you say this was a goal established by staff, but they are not taking part in it. I heard you say the expectations you want from your staff were what you required from your students when you were a teacher. I heard you say you are tired of excuses. I heard you say you are disappointed in 1/3 of your staff because they are not living up to either their or your expectations. I heard you say the problem falls into mostly clerical issues since the majority are good teachers. I heard you say that this is the way you live your life yourself; it matters to you personally. I heard you say you assumed these teachers knew how to handle these duties.
Then Joe had a chance to clarify any misunderstandings. He found none, though, on hearing a recap of what he had said, he was a bit surprised at how harsh he had sounded.

The next portion of the protocol allowed the cohort to reflect on what the situation might mean at a deeper level for Joe’s larger goals. Respondents believed that Joe was letting a small group destroy what he was trying to do; that he was bringing a personally-held value into his interactions in ways that created mental roadblocks for himself but didn’t change anything; that his way of “managing the problem” was getting in the way of true leadership; that the accountability pressures he felt might be heightening the situation; that if he really was convinced this was a big problem, he needed to be willing to act on it, not just get upset about it.

Joe again had an opportunity to reflect on the comments, agreeing that folks had assessed the situation “pretty straight.” The facilitator moved to the next portion of the protocol, which suggested that listeners come up with probing questions. The group offered such questions as the following for Joe’s contemplation: “Are there any personality issues between you and the people you’re frustrated with?” “Is there a reason you wouldn’t opt to restructure the clerical issues so that they didn’t loom so large?” “Are these issues really impacting children, or are they just bothersome to you?”

Joe’s time with those questions and similar follow-ups in the protocol brought him some newfound space to think differently about the issues that he had so passionately presented as problematic. In the end, he confessed that he didn’t want to be seen as “a bad guy,” so he had let things slide—things that then put him in tough spots, like either overlooking teachers’ tardiness, which could lead to inequity and hard feelings among those who were on time, or being “the heavy” about rules with those who were lax. He
didn’t like it and didn’t know how much to “bend” his personal preferences for the good of the whole. Also, the things he valued, like punctuality and organization, were clearly more important to him than to most of the staff, so he didn’t always act on what he wanted, and he got frustrated as a result. In the end, his comment was, “I didn’t think it was that much of a dilemma until I thought about it.” He left with a plan to approach the situation in a low-key way, working from the clear sense of professional responsibility the majority of the staff exhibited.

Throughout the cohorts’ experiences, protocols such as this were the mediating mechanism to help link the realities of principals’ school sites with the development of more democratic approaches to developing community. The protocols assisted participants in discussing a variety of goals, in depersonalizing situations, and in exploring difficult areas. Aside from the necessary condition of actually convening these geographically dispersed cohort groups over a sustained timeframe, the protocol conversations were the key component for developing professional community, as one principal captured:

I feel better knowing that we all share the same issues and the need to resolve the problems through collaboration with each other.

It was clear from the data that having colleagues to talk with opened possible avenues for thinking about how to improve their schools. Time and again, participants spoke of “sharing ideas” to “solve problems.” Cohort protocol discussions provided “solutions and a plan to move forward”; “ideas about how to go about accomplishing things you have had a hard time accomplishing”; “proven strategies to help me guide my staff and school through day-to-day challenges.” Principals not only felt better about their newfound hope
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from these conversations, but many noted early on that these discussions had improved their skills, as this participant shared: “Being part of this group and sharing ideas, methods, strategies for dealing with issues has helped me become a better leader.”

**Learning about Self and Leadership by Questioning Assumptions**

Breaking down the barriers of isolation using participants’ personal dilemmas within a professional learning community and following the guidelines provided through the protocols clearly offered principals much-needed support for coping with pressures they faced in their schools. However, many of the early self-reports of changes they implemented at their school sites were still removed from actions that might reflect significant changes in their leadership styles. Early on, participants reported handling district demands differently, using new techniques to manage priorities within the principal role, passing information to staff that would clarify points of uncertainty, and establishing norms for their meetings with staff. While each of these managerial shifts could improve working environments, none necessarily accomplished moving schools towards a primary focus on building a democratic community dedicated to fostering learning at all levels: student, teacher, and principal.

Creating a safe space for participants to experience the potential power of moving a school towards leadership focused on learning required opportunities for principals to become the learners rather than the “knowers.” To accomplish this goal, project personnel wanted to incorporate exploration of some of the knowledge base on leadership into the cohort experiences. However, based on early feedback, presentations to the group had been consciously limited to occasional informational sessions on new policy mandates. Instead of “sit and git” experiences about leadership research, facilitators provided a range

Challenged in particular by Kegan and Lahey, cohort participants explored how values, and often conflicting values they held personally, undergirded problems that they identified. A premise in the discussions was that, without understanding these underlying value issues, in the end efforts to change would fail. The facilitator explained it this way:

> We don’t need to be ‘fix it’ people, or people who are going to confession. I can tell you exactly what I said in confession for at least 12 years: ‘I was mean to my brothers and disrespectful to my parents.’ The priest would give me a rosary to say, to ‘fix’ my sins. But I never changed my behavior; it was always the same.

Trying to get at why they did or did not behave differently led participants to rethink the values behind some of the assumptions they had held. For example, in working through exercises that required participants to note their beliefs about and challenges in their jobs, principals frequently recorded two common phrases. First, they believed that “Children have the right to a good education”; second, their common work challenge was that “There is not enough time to do what I need to do.” During one session, principals discussed these statements for over
an hour, finally agreeing that a sense of hurriedness can easily become an excuse for why children are not receiving a good education. To make such an excuse, however, would be to deny the value of providing quality education for all children. The group reworked these two statements into the following claim: “Children in my building have the right to most of my time.” This revised statement carried heavy implications for how principals structured their days and focused their efforts.

The process of working with reading selections was often fluid, though facilitators generally began the discussions using a CFG protocol. Quickly, however, principals would move the discussion to personal situations, at which point the facilitator would seek to refocus the discussion within the context of the readings, helping principals make a clearer connection between the readings and their daily lives. In ways, just as the protocols were the structural mediator between principals’ practice and developing a learning community, the facilitator was the conceptual mediator between research and practice.

The kind of learning evidenced during these sessions shared similarities with discussions using the protocols to address specific situations. However, in the conversations about readings, much of the discussion was less bounded by protocols, such that many voices found their way into the kinds of insights that “Joe” typified in the protocol experiences. Additionally, conclusions about any particular issue brought to a protocol learning experience were most powerful for the individual who presented an issue, while other cohort members noted the power of the particular process in which they had participated. During reading discussions, principals equally shared in the learning from discussions and in the insights gleaned about the processes they used in dealing with the content.
Over the course of two years of data collection, it was apparent that principals’ development occurred through a complex combination of engagement with readings, applying different protocols in focused ways to pressing issues, and continually building a professional learning community in which colleagues and facilitators were trusted and all shared equal voice. Throughout the cohort meetings, principals struggled with a range of topics, from staff morale about test scores to budget cuts, from teacher turnover to gang violence. Threaded through these discussions, three recurring themes were apparent within the data, generalized concepts that had far-reaching impact on principals’ learning.

1. Leaders can hinder learning by judging others. Among the most common dynamic in the groups was an exploration of principals’ own preconceived notions of their staff. For example, one principal believed that a particular teacher encouraged students to be irresponsible because the teacher did not hold students accountable for bringing their own paper and pencils to class. Although, as was often the case, the principal cited the teacher’s actions not because the issue was critical but only to illustrate a point brought out in a reading, the facilitator pressed the example as a broader learning opportunity. The summary of the conversation below captures the tenor of such cohort interchanges, with the italicized words representing the kinds of questions facilitators used to guide the conversations, and the regular font capturing the place to which the group members progressed after an extended discussion:

*Would there be any reason at all to believe the teacher acts purposefully to develop irresponsible students?* No, there was not. *Does anyone enter teaching hoping to be an instructional failure?* (Laughter.) *If we assume the teacher wants to do a good job and just doesn’t understand his habit is counterproductive, what would it
take to help him change? Without a conversation to find out why he doesn’t hold them accountable, there’s no way to help him change. *Is it possible, too, that from that conversation you might find out the teacher encourages responsibility in other ways?* Yes, it’s possible.

Over time, cohort members developed the capacity to question themselves and each other about the ways they viewed their own staff. One important lesson that participants regularly highlighted reflected such interchanges: They found that withholding judgment about fellow adults in the building could open doors for communication and problem solving.

2. **Leaders have primary responsibility for facilitating and modeling changes of behavior in a school.** A second type of learning suggested what a leader’s responsibilities might be in schools that are trying to transform. Principals frequently voiced frustration that teachers didn’t use their shared planning time well; they often “just chatted” or “complained.” Facilitators quickly moved such comments to a new place by drawing on participants’ own appreciation for the experiences they were having:

*Is it fair to ask teachers, who don’t have something like this cohort, to suddenly know how to have productive discussions instead of complaining?* (Contemplative silence.) *If it’s not fair, how can we help them have similar experiences like ours so that their shared time has discussions like we have here?*

This particular type of interchange occurred regularly. Gradually, principals themselves began to express that they needed and wanted to help the school staff develop professional learning communities.
However, there was a chasm between the profound learning the participants experienced and the equally profound sense that they were not ready to lead their schools in these new ways. In fact, district personnel noted a lag between participants’ professed learning and changes at school sites; project staff had heard superintendents voice questions about the ultimate impact of the cohort sessions. Facilitators handled such comments in the following way:

> You tell us every month that this is the most important thing you do for your own professional development, but your district supervisors are not sure what this ‘professional learning community’ is doing to help schools. What are you bringing back to your schools from these meetings that will help people understand why the time you spend here each month is a justifiable use of school resources?

This area of questioning proved difficult, since it required self-reflection to be translated into dramatically new actions, actions principals continued to feel they were not fully prepared to undertake, at least through the second year of the project.

3. Leaders may inadvertently perpetuate hierarchical values that could be counterproductive to collegiality. This third type of learning experience focused directly on the hierarchical nature of the traditional role of the principal. Often, principals voiced frustrations that teachers were not doing things they were asked to do. An implicit assumption within such comments is, of course, that teachers should do what they are asked to do, no matter what. In the principals’ defense, many of the requests to teachers were in effect mandates, imposed by the district onto principals. However, such a “do as you are told” condition left little room for adults to interact in ways that demonstrated mutual professional respect or opened the door for communication and learning.
For example, one principal considered teachers who resisted filling out paperwork in a timely manner to be unprofessional. Facilitators pressed the issue:

*It sounds like you would never turn in paperwork late. Does your frustration with people not turning in paperwork stem from your personal values system—how you would do your job—or is it about really moving the school forward? Probably it’s my own value system, but we also have to do it, and it could help us to move forward. To the extent that it is about moving the school forward, do teachers see the paperwork in that light? Probably not. How could you help them understand that the paperwork could help support learning in the school? I’ll have to think about that.*

As was regularly the case, when principals became more conscious of how their personal biases—including their implicit acceptance of a hierarchical organization—influenced their interactions, they recognized the need to take the time to explore the relationship between those biases and their goals for school change.

Each of these learning areas reflects dispositions that Murphy (2002) highlights as important for building democratic learning communities. Rather than judging teachers, principals saw they needed to understand and work from teachers’ belief systems and strengths. Rather than complaining about problems, they saw the need to assess their roles in promoting structures and activities that would move them towards their goals. Rather than holding hierarchical attitudes, they saw the need to move towards heterarchy. At a personal level, principals’ development of an understanding of such democratic community elements was clear. Also, within the cohort groups themselves, a growing
sense of trust and shared professional community was evident. The translations of these changes into their school sites is explored in the next section.

*Cultivating New School Cultures*

The LeadNM discussions were highly effective in helping principals examine their assumptions within the context of the cohort. Evidence of drastically changed leadership practices within schools, however, was less pronounced: Principals spoke in ways that indicated a gradual cultivation of and movement toward new school cultures. Key to the shifts they sought was jettisoning the idea that the principal is the “head,” the one who does and knows it all. The cohort helped principals realize that being the person responsible for “everything in the building” prevented them from attending “to the business of making a school community.” The sense of being alone on an “island” changed to “seeing others on the island” who could share the work of changing the school. Several participants noted how they had come to appreciate that, rather than seeing their responsibility as doing things alone for the school, nothing meaningful would happen in a school “without collaboration and cooperation.” One long-time principal captured both the historical sense of the principalship and the changing vision he was developing:

I used to think that I had to make change, but now I realize that it is not ‘I’ but ‘we.’ I realize that I am not the Lone Ranger, but part of the cavalry coming in to make positive change. I realize that without the support of peers, parents, teachers, etc. no matter how great my ideas may be, change won't occur in isolation.

The primary approach principals were taking to build collaboration was based on increased and effective communication. One participant captured this change as, “I’m going to listen to other people, instead of ‘bam, bam, bam.’” Frequently, principals made multiple
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references to listening in the same sentence, for example, “listen and hear” or “listen with my ears to hear,” as if to emphasize the importance of using listening to lead. Participants agreed that listening to teachers was not “typical” of past principal behaviors. One new principal noted that on her arrival, “Teachers were afraid to express themselves. It was difficult.” She continued by identifying another common theme among participants’ efforts to change their schools: “If we as principals ‘tell’ what to do and don’t ‘work with’ teachers to do it, change will not be sustainable. Nothing will change until it becomes a ‘we.’”

Several principals shared stories of trying to enact this concept of “we.” For example, one principal decided to become part of the “we” of instruction by asking students in the hallways what they had learned that day. In another school that had only one teacher per subject matter, the language arts teacher was implicitly held responsible for the whole school’s scores in reading and writing. The principal shared her efforts to assist other teachers to realize that this was also their responsibility:

In the area of reading and language arts, I really focused on building consensus and consciousness about shared responsibility. I said, ‘We're all going to work on this together; we're not going to leave one person out there on a tree limb by herself thinking, ‘Gosh the state is going to kill me.’

Building that “we” was an express target of the cohort experiences, with the goal of achieving what one leader stated as the ideal: “We're no longer I-You. It's Us.” Another principal summed up the conceptual focus on collaboration this way:

Aside from LeadNM, you don't have anyone helping you understand that it's all about the professional relationships. They don't teach you that when you're
going through school, about the relationships. But if the relationship part of your work is lousy, it doesn't work.

In some cases, becoming part of the “we” of the school required principals to take personal responsibility for their own interaction styles. Principals sometimes shared very personal stories about how they were beginning to question themselves first, before blaming others. Said one, “I had a meeting with a teacher and the superintendent. The teacher had some negative comments about how I speak to her. I had to look at myself and thought, ‘Maybe I do need to change that.’ It was really hard because I think this teacher is pretty much off the wall, but on that point, maybe she was right.” Another principal noted that a teacher had issues with his communication style. “I asked if she could tell me something to point out what she was talking about. She came in, and she did. I listened and then sent her a thank you note.”

In some cases, the changes principals were able to realize through improved communications were significant enough that state and district personnel noticed. A superintendent of a district with several participants had this to say:

LeadNM changed the way they approached their staff, how they organized staff meetings, their work in general. The teachers are more positive now. They are getting involved more; it’s more of a collaboration, with the principal saying, ‘I'm the leader within your building, but all of us are working together as a team.’ Before LeadNM, it was more, ‘I'm it, and I'll tell you what to do.’ The change in attitude showed in the memos they write, and I think it’s because of LeadNM.

One principal, located at a school that receives state department oversight because of its poor performance, shared that over the course of the year, state reviewers saw positive changes.
principals’ and their supervisors’ perspectives, in many cases the increasing goal of collaboration fostered important new cultures for schools to venture towards the road to learning for both staff and students.

**UNM’s Educational Leadership Program: Unlocking More Democratic Dreams**

The Educational Leadership Program (EdLead) at UNM was, at the time of application for the Lead NM grant, in some ways unremarkable in its principal licensure approach. Students selected from a solid, but not particularly interconnected, range of courses from content domains, participated in a year-long internship and seminar, and presented a collection of their work for their exit assessments. Dozens, if not hundreds, of programs across the country follow models not dissimilar. Two aspects of the grant supported movement away from that model. First, the grant included a significant component of distance education to serve practitioners in the northern portion of the state. Though the program occasionally offered one-way instructional television classes, a systematic distance concept was new. Second, as the grant director and field facilitator sought to make the cohort work more meaningful for principals, they challenged program faculty to practice more of the principles of democratic community building within their coursework so that pre-service principals could have an idea what such communities could look like. These two levers from the grant combined with other facilitating factors—program curricular revisions, faculty composition, policy contexts of the state—to usher in significant groundwork for program revisions.

**Money Matters: Developing a Distance Leadership Preparation Program**

The primary and most obvious lever of the grant to change leadership preparation in the state was the support for development of distance education through the EdLead program.
Faculty were decidedly mixed when the grant proposal chose to focus on the north and distance coursework—to the extent that students outside the metropolitan area were served through the institution, they took a cobbled-together program of Saturday and instructional television offerings. No one had any web-based coursework developed, and the widespread initial antipathy to the perceptions of anonymity of web-based instruction were no less present at UNM than in other places. Faculty technically signed on, but initially no one drove a plan to support the culture for or the enactment of such work.

Then the market happened. In two ways, money nudged faculty forward in the development of their web-based courses. First, enrollment had taken a dip in recent years, and the program was aware that other institutions were making it easier to get licensure for the principalship. Faculty were cold to the idea that we should model ourselves after some of the other available programs, but the fact that students already holding masters’ degrees could, by state law, take 18 hours of educational leadership coursework and an internship and receive a license was taking a toll on enrollment. The EdLead program required, at minimum, 30 hours for those with a master’s degree. Almost no students enrolled as non-degree students, as they could—and were encouraged to and did—at other institutions.

That reality pressed the program into curricular revisions to establish a core of licensure coursework that would be aligned with state competencies and national standards. The work resulted in more than we bargained for. First, faculty committed to expressly framing the core courses in the conceptual framework for the program: transformational leadership. What transformational leadership might look like across courses led to important conversations that facilitated later work on the program’s overall emphasis. But those first meetings began conversations that have continued, with more or less regularity, over three years about the core
purpose of the principal preparation program. Second, the work resulted in 5 required courses plus an elective for a non-degree licensure strand that we could advertise. These 5 courses quickly solved the enrollment problem: Classes bulged at over 60 students. Indeed, our lack of a targeted post-masters for licensure had caused us to miss a huge “market” that other institutions had tapped into. Our enrollment woes were more than solved—to the point, in fact, that some of us questioned whether a core of courses was a good idea if we did not have faculty to teach all the students we admitted.

What was important about that facilitating factor is that those licensure courses became immediate likely candidates for web delivery development for the distance students. If these courses were required for licensure—whether students were M.A., Ed.S., or non-degree candidates—then these courses would need to be offered to the host of students who had been funded through the grant to enter the program. Only four solutions presented themselves: 1) drive to the north to provide classes; 2) hire adjuncts to teach the distance group; 3) provide the program entirely over instructional television, 4) develop a web-based strand for the program. The first was impossible. We neither had the faculty nor the time to offer regular seminars hundreds of miles away. Already our teaching schedules were on overload. The second did not fit the Program’s commitment to full-time faculty providing the vast proportion of coursework for students—most years, 100% of the courses students took were taught by regular faculty of the University. The third option was unattractive to many of us, for the technology available on the campuses was one-way, where students are in far-flung rooms watching over a television, faculty cannot see students, and telephone lines to call in often fail. Pedagogically, especially with large courses, ITV was not ideal.
That left web-based coursework. Still, given the overwhelming course loads, no one stepped up to the plate to develop the courses. Faculty attended some sessions on how to use WebCT, our online platform, and talked about whether they might ever offer their courses over the internet. But until the distance education representatives came to discuss how to support our efforts—fiscally and with technical assistance—nothing happened. Although the additional fiscal incentives in the end did not materialize, their offer did create a motivation for faculty to take on the hefty work of course development during a time of understaffing. One newer faculty member had both a comfort level with technology and an aversion to ITV and placed the first course online. Others soon followed, with almost every core course and many electives now being offered occasionally online. Through a circuitous route, the grant supported a structural overhaul in the program that enables students from less advantaged, geographically isolated areas to pursue administrative licensure.

**Why Don’t You Practice What You Preach?: The Power of Relationships**

One of the tri-PIs for the grant was the Program Coordinator at the LeadNM inception and later became the Department Chair. Her role in the grant was significant, for she had conceptualized much of the learning community focus for the cohorts and had been instrumental in seeking EdLead faculty involvement in summer summits and through course offerings. Her years of leadership in the state and deep relationships with a generation of graduates from the EdLead Program brought a significant measure of clout to the partnership. At one point in the first summer, some of her former students, who were now accomplished leaders themselves, were secure enough in their relationship with her to provide frank with feedback about the grant activities. Their comments brought significant transformations in her own teaching and built
upon positive shifts that had been occurring because of changes in faculty ranks within the general program.

During the grant’s initial year, principal participants had attended a three-day Summer Institute that included modules that paralleled key content in the university’s pre-service and doctoral coursework. The content explored cutting edge research on effective school leadership, and the workshops provided break-out sessions and small group discussions, a good beginning for breaking down isolation in the developers’ minds. The planning had specifically sought to engage principals in content related to current school issues, to offer opportunity for discussion, and to ensure that new learning opportunities were provided to participants.

However, despite the intentional planning involved in the Institute, feedback from participants was clear: School leaders did not want opportunities to learn new information, information they summarily, even derogatorily, termed “theoretical.” Rather, they said they needed and wanted time to talk with others about their day-to-day issues. They most appreciated their informal time together and the breakout sessions, where observers noted that conversations often were not specifically oriented toward the task at hand. In summing up the event, one veteran principal said, “After you’ve been out in the real world slugging it out and you’ve been sued by the ACLU and you’ve had to restrain parents and you’re restraining children and you’re facing all these other things, I don’t want somebody telling me how it should be.”

Since the particulars of the LeadNM grant included deep involvement with EdLead faculty, the suggestion that research-based learning was inapplicable, or superfluous, proved troublesome. Faculty members did not want to accept such positions; nor did they want to be excluded or, perhaps worse, quietly tolerated when offering professional development
opportunities for practicing principals. In addition, the project’s cohort facilitator was also a former student of the PI. She asked challenging questions of why aspiring principals generally only read about and seldom practiced community building in their coursework. Despite some deep commitment among faculty in the EdLead Program to democratic principles and learning community development, several faculty began to see ample room for growth in practicing what we preached.

The work in this arena most often focused on our individual courses, though three significant program-wide shifts also occurred during this time frame that supported democratic community building. First, for the first time in history, the entire program attended a conference together, sharing discussion after a keynote session, rooming together or close by, eating meals together. (Twenty years earlier, when a similar proposal had been suggested, the new faculty member whose idea it was had been told she should go to another university if she thought that was what faculty were supposed to do.) Here, faculty discovered that several individuals used principles from Meg Wheatley’s (2002) *Turning to One Another*. So many faculty sought to use her conversational norms in their coursework that the program decided to use these norms to guide program meetings also. In a program that had had a history of one or two particularly strong voices, this change in meeting norms was significant. Though practice still sometimes lags behind our intent, with some voices being more prominent than others, the symbolic commitment and the physical posted reminders of the norms have supported more democratic conversations. Second, faculty also began sporadic internal learning community opportunities, sharing research and pedagogic approaches in informal but planned seminars. Importantly, the first was on conceptions of leadership, a conversation that continues to inform understandings of how coursework dovetails. Third, faculty committed to framing the job search for the two
upcoming tenure-line positions in a way that would attract individuals with a range of interests and talents not necessarily directly linked to specific courses but clearly committed to diversity and transformational leadership. Framing the job descriptions in this way necessitated extended conversations with administration in the university, since most posts were advertised to favor candidates who could teach specific courses. Each of these, and a range of more subtle changes, were concrete representations of community building in the program.

_Yoking School Improvement and Social Justice Leadership with Democratic Community_

Before the beginning of this month, faculty in the program would likely have included the planning of a faculty retreat as yet another community building facet of our program development. However, partly by serendipity, partly because of new additions to the group, and partly because of a sense of safety among faculty to discuss deeply held hopes and beliefs, the full faculty retreat took on a different dimension that has helped spur significant new action in the program. Existing faculty had committed individual overhead funds to planning a November 2005 fall retreat once the new faculty had arrived—specifically to “build community” and “get to know one another.” By the time the retreat was approaching, changes in administrative procedures had threatened the fiscal sources to support the retreat. Because faculty had so come to value the community development that had occurred, we creatively constructed alternative possibilities for funding if the original sources were unavailable. All shared a sense that to keep our sense of community, this retreat was necessary, particularly in light of the two four new faculty in the program—two new hires and two transfers from other units.

Of particular importance during the retreat was the strategic planning session. The previous plan had been a collection, as one faculty member said, of “activities we do.” Little in the plan would have helped guide program decisions or inform outsiders what program faculty
saw as the overall import of their work. Reshaping the plan included much conversation inspired by George Theoharis’ (2004) UCEA paper, Toward a Theory of Social Justice Leadership, which faculty had read in preparation for the retreat, and input from the new members of the program. As subgroups worked on different aspects of the plan, it became evident that questions related to social justice leadership were only minimally, if at all, reflected in the strategic plan. Also missing were questions of broader leadership development goals that the program had recently committed to through comprehensive program revisions that supported non-licensure students in addition to the licensure students served through the first round of program revisions. Subgroups addressed those ideas within their proposed revisions.

When the three strategic directions—vital academic climate, public responsibility, and diversity—that framed the University’s strategic plan were completely revised, faculty set about prioritizing our program work using the new plan. Interestingly, despite the absence of previous language supportive of social justice leadership as a driving force for the program, faculty almost universally prioritized a focus on community and school leadership in low-performing schools in diverse communities as the most important focus for our work. It was, interestingly, the item that most clearly reflected Murphy’s (2002) three principles for leadership development: community building, by virtue of calling for work that crossed school, university, and community boundaries; social justice, by virtue of committing our efforts to those least served historically within the system; and school improvement by virtue of a focus on those schools most in need of assistance to improve. Never before had such an explicit commitment to that work surfaced, though individually nearly every faculty member felt this was the most important work to be done through principal and leadership development.
Conversations since that work continue to marvel at the at once surprising and natural developments from the retreat. On the one hand, the results are surprising. We are seeking funding for a new structure for principal and community development in low-performing communities, a structure that has no similarities with our current programming. The Dean and several external partners have expressed interest in our new directions. Emails sharing ideas and readings continue to pass between us all. It is all a lovely surprise. On the other hand, though, the two years of movement towards democratic community building in some ways made this development quite natural. Faculty were secure enough in both their own importance to the program and in others’ importance to our work that to question our emphases was not threatening. To say “we” did not serve certain groups as well as we might clearly meant “we”—all of us. Faculty also were more skilled at creating spaces for new voices, at validating the different ideas these new colleagues brought to the table—and they wanted to do so. As one veteran said, “our new faculty pushed us to a different dimension. We want them to stay and see they have a real place here.” The sense of community within the program made possible the drastic movement towards what Gross and Shapiro (2005) note as a national realization: “there is no democracy without social justice, no social justice without democracy and that these mutually inclusive concepts are indispensable ingredients to school improvement worthy of the name” (p. 1, italics in original).

Discussion

The educational leadership program in this doctoral intensive southwestern institution offers useful insights for the field of educational administration. UNM is located in a state whose majority population is non-Anglo, or, as expressed on the campus, we live and work in a state that is comprised largely of the “emerging majority.” Students served in the school
systems, of course, reflect this reality, creating a state-wide need for leadership that is culturally responsive. Yet, as in many institutions, students in our programs often come from more privileged backgrounds, and their internship experiences often are in schools with which the university has long relationships—again, often schools that do not reflect the diversity of the system.

In ways that are not new to the literature or to conventional metaphors of the “ivory tower,” faculty have come to appreciate that the issues the LeadNM grant sought to address— is isolation, building of professional community, and rethinking teaching and leadership practices—were also issues for the university. For the most part, faculty across any university work alone in roles as isolated as those of principals and teachers; and while individual faculty constantly retool their teaching and leadership practices, the bureaucracies in which they work are much slower to do so. Thus, in similar ways that the grant supported principals to listen more deeply and rethink assumptions, faculty determined the Educational Leadership Program should also explore incorporating these practices. We have come to believe that, to the extent that universities, colleges of education in particular, continue to be less than ideal models for reforming educational practices, conversations questioning the role of the university in educational preparation deserve serious consideration, regardless of the incompleteness of the arguments or the apparent partisan nature of the discussions (Levine, 2005; Orr, 2005; Young et al., 2005). Said another way, it is likely that we have much to learn from what we ourselves are trying to teach.

Though the new commitments of this program remain nascent in terms of enactment, at this point we have more hope than skepticism that what we have learned through our democratic community development will help both ground our work and serve as a mechanism for
challenging ourselves to continue striving to meet the goals we have selected for ourselves. It is our hope that other programs will earnestly embark on the democratic conversations related to such issues and, subsequently, to use the strength inherent within faculty communities to bring social justice leadership and school improvement to a central focal point within the context of those democratic communities.
References


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