

Reflections on the Role of School Leadership: Principal as Gatekeeper

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Abstract: The focal point of school leadership and administration has been largely on the singular person – the school principal. This discussion paper reconsiders and troubles the gatekeeping role of the school principal in the context of popular media representations of school administration, and it presents alternative leadership structures found in local and global sources. It intends to encourage conversation about the role of democratic leadership in public schooling. The question, “What if we considered school leadership as a representative of democratic function rather than a person?” is the foundation for discussion in this paper. While this paper suggests alternative leadership paradigms exist, it concludes that the first step to democratizing the principal role is to develop the enlightened gatekeeper within current systems.

Keywords: Democratic Leadership, Principal, Media Portrayals, Gatekeeper

Introduction

Visualize the school principal. Popular media gives us several images: the hard-nosed Joe Clark from *Lean on Me*, who single-handedly turned around a rough high school; the bumbling Edward Rooney from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, who stalked a delinquent (yet loveable) student who effectively subverted his authority; or the caring and accessible Mr. Feeney from *Boy Meets World*, who effectively guided his wards through the difficult days of pre-pubescence. The collective perception of the principal's role often reflects the single individual (often male) who single-handedly manages and controls the work that happens in public schools. Although a mainstay of educational administration, the job description and expectations of the school principal have expanded beyond the ability of one person to complete (Hallinger, 2005). This intensification of the job description generates the question, “Can school leadership be reconceptualized as a function of a democratic system rather than a characteristic of an individual person?” As a pinch point of educational system decision-making, this powerful gatekeeping role (Kowch, 2013) could be described as a barrier in the democratization of schools and sharing of administrative power.

Twenty-first century schools (Alberta Education, 2010) in developed countries are expected to teach the virtues of democracy and collective leadership (Fusarelli, Kowalski, & Pedersen, 2011). However, school leadership remains locked in a single individual, thereby limiting the experience of democracy by students and teachers (November, Alexander, & van Wyk, 2010) making it a gatekeeper for the flow of decision-making and information through the wider system (Kowch, 2013). In this discussion paper, I aim to unpack the historical emergence of the principal and suggest reasons for the intensification of its job description and the centralization of its authority. I then explore a different direction for this bureaucratic position through the lens of democratic leadership (Beerbohm, 2015) by discussing the function of leadership in teacher and student councils, and I highlighting three case studies of international attempts to democratize the principalship. My purpose for this inquiry is to discover if the cultural ideation of the principal's role, as portrayed in popular media, could evolve from a singular gatekeeper to an intermediary manager that uses democratic leadership (Beerbohm, 2015) to share authority amongst educational actors in complex school systems.

Literature Review: Framing the Discussion

Historical Perceptions: The Educational Bureaucracy

From its inception, the role of principal could be described as a political appointment. This managerial role was developed to control schooling institutions as they transformed from single, unconnected classrooms to multiple schools in larger districts (Rousmaniere, 2008). Early educational administration theorists relied heavily on classical management theory (Samier, 2013) to define the role and function of principals. Classical management theory,

which borrowed heavily from Frederick Taylor's highly regimented scientific management theory (Nguyen & Crow, 2013), established the foundational principles for efficient factory organization.

To organize mass production in factories, the art of creation from raw materials to fully formed product was broken down into a series of repetitive tasks that an unskilled, minimally trained worker could complete. This industrial model transferred the production of goods or services from highly skilled, interdisciplinary master crafters to untrained workers (Morgan, 2007). These workers did not make any decisions about the nature or product of their work; they simply did as they were told. All decision-making was deferred to the factory manager, who oversaw the menial work of others and ensured that maximum efficiency of production was achieved (Brown & Papa, 2013; Nguyen & Crow, 2013; Samier, 2013).

Designing school systems to mirror factory organization involved centralizing decision-making into the hands of a single manager—the principal. Influence was removed from teachers and other school-based personnel. In the one-roomed schoolhouse, teachers worked independently with oversight from the community, and had considerable creative and decision-making authority over schooling. However, under the new classical management system, they were more tightly controlled by the principal (Rousmaniere, 2008).

Applying this classical approach to organizational management has been referred to as the Standard Moment of Education. Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2014) suggested that the Standard Moment included the recognizable features of modern schooling: teachers were trained to teach a specialized subject, students' progress through mandated curricula was assessed through standardized tests, and principals were held responsible for all major school decisions. School administrators were expected to be efficient managers of schools to ensure that the daily operations were like well run machines (Morgan, 2007), producing consistent and measurable learning results in students. The factory model of education, generally regarded as unsuitable for social system organization (Davis et al., 2014; Morgan, 2007), continues unabated into schooling today (Heck & Hallinger, 2005), although its expression has been ameliorated through increased emphasis on humanistic approaches to organization (Brooks & Miles, 2006).

The humanistic side of worker production was highlighted in the Hawthorne studies of the 1920s and 1930s. Morgan (2007) suggested that these studies, that highlighted the human needs of the worker, changed the view of organizations from easily managed machines to human-controlled institutions. Rather than expecting workers to complete simple tasks under external control, the Hawthorne study researchers suggested that improved production was tied to the experiences of workers within the organization (Morgan, 2007). Humanizing school organizations necessitated the inclusion of teacher and student voices during policy and curriculum development and the monitoring of conditions surrounding teaching and learning (Davis et al., 2014).

Instead of responding to the root concern of classroom conditions and organizational structure, the job description of principal was expanded to include caring for the needs of teachers and students (Brooks & Miles, 2006). The principal's hierarchical position was considered essential to ensure stability and rationality in decision-making, so the personality of the principal became a spotlighted area of research (Heck & Hallinger, 2005). Trait theories (Brown, 2013) that had long been used to isolate the specific personality traits that defined excellence in leadership were given new life in educational administration. Defining effective leadership traits for principals led to "leadership by adjective" (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006, p. 202), as theorists discussed the features of a great principal that could lead to increased student achievement. Current theories of educational leadership, such as instructional leadership (Robinson, 2006), transformational leadership (Leithwood & Janzi, 2006), or strategic leadership (Lynch, 2012), could be characterized as continuing to accept the managerial position of principal, even as these theories suggested sharing the power base amongst educational actors (Hatcher, 2005). Refuting trait and classical management theory, Greenfield (1979) suggested that

the psychological reductionists would offer a set of elemental personal characteristics that our genes or Fortune herself distributes to us through some inscrutable design. From these elements, one might then extrapolate the individual personality and ultimately the quality of social institutions. (p. 102)

This description of organizations as a dynamic, human constructs (Greenfield, 1979) had a disruptive impact on the conceptualization of educational systems. Rather than viewing organizations as simple brick buildings with people working inside, Greenfield (1979, 1980) proposed that the behaviors, assumptions, and history of the people

within an organization created and maintained the organization. Unlike previous theorists, Greenfield questioned the very nature of leadership and organization, spawning a different direction for organizational theory.

The supposition that human systems were social constructs resulted in the application of systems theory (Vorneberg, 2013), constructivist leadership theory (Lynch, 2012) and complexity theory (Jones, 2013) to educational administration. In these theories, the role of leadership became much larger than the activity of a single person— leadership became a function of aligning human and organizational interests that could be performed by multiple people. This much wider conception of leadership, as more than management (Heck & Hallinger, 2005), impacted researchers who questioned the role of principals and educational institutions in advancing democracy (Hatcher, 2005; Mulford, 2004; November et al., 2010). The acknowledgement that educational settings were foundational to building a strong democracy (Davis et al., 2014) opened space for critical theorists to inquire about inequities present within organizational power structures (Young & Marshall, 2013). Critical theorists drew attention to the hierarchical structure of schools, troubling the very nature of schools themselves.

Despite the increasing critique of the division of labor that systemically reinforced the hierarchical structure of schools (Hallinger & Heck, 2005), the role of the principal has remained largely unchanged and continues to stay in the hands of a single, system-appointed individual in many school systems (Rousmaniere, 2008). A vestige of the mechanistic bureaucracy (Morgan, 2007) and firmly entrenched in the social psyche as the school leader, the role of principal has a job description that includes powerful gatekeeping functions that can determine which policies and reforms are enacted at the school level.

In the newly released *Leadership Quality Standard* by Alberta Education (2018), leadership continues to be defined by the principal role with some space opened for it to be also held by jurisdiction leaders (p. 3). The individual holding the title of principal continues to be designated legislative authority by the provincial government to allocate resources, hire and relocate teaching staff, guide school culture, and implement system policies – decisions that impact school community members (Alberta Education, 2018). While completing these managerial tasks, the principal is also expected to generate trust with their professional staff to establish a common school vision and encourage student achievement. These conflicting tasks create an inherent paradox of trust and dominance in the role of the principal (Hallinger, 2005; November et al., 2010).

Democracy and The Paradox of Trust and Dominance

The principal-as-gatekeeper position is a paradox of trust and dominance. Although schools are viewed as democratic institutions, educational actors (students, teachers, principals, and system leaders) must agree to give up their autonomy while in schools and follow the directions from the wider system as interpreted by the school principal. In exchange for organizational membership, they can advance the cause for greater social good (Hatcher, 2005) or promote their own interests (Morgan, 2007). Several theorists have discussed the benefits of democratic leadership (Beerbohm, 2015; Mulford, 2004) and the pitfalls of ignoring the self-interest of organizational members (Morgan, 2007). This paper relies heavily on Beerbohm's (2015) Commitment Theory of democracy in political organizations to frame this discussion.

Democratic Leadership. Deep democracy, a social justice goal based on troubling power structures through improving equity in schools (Shields, 2010), could emerge when independent individuals share a willingness to design an organization built upon a vision of the common good. Beerbohm (2015) described this push and pull between leaders and citizens as contingent on two conditions: commitment-settling and commitment-mobilizing. The commitment-settling condition required citizens and leaders to agree on a jointly accepted activity, and the commitment-mobilizing condition required the citizens to implement this activity under the direction of the leader. His theory's core requirement for democratic leadership hinged on the creation and sustenance of intentional activities that citizens and leaders agreed to pursue through equitable and trusted means. Beerbohm suggested that democratic leadership was possible, but it was constrained by inequitable power relations that coerced citizens into deciding on a joint activity or the use of deception or manipulative means by leaders when enacting the activity. Professional learning communities are a promising aspect of school organizations that have the potential to practice democratic leadership.

Mulford (2004) proposed that professional learning communities (PLC), composed of school-based personnel with a shared vision and a commitment to improving education, were crucial for societies to build into strong democracies. The collective authority of these communities could enable educational actors to practice democracy based on individual rights, responsibilities, and progress rather than simply espouse a commitment to these principles. Mulford concluded that incongruence to stated values and mistrust could occur if educational actors were motivated by personal self-interest. Beerbohm (2015) described this self-interest as “issue framing” (p. 247) – the setting of an agenda by a manager or citizen by presenting only the positive aspects of an issue and ignoring or avoiding the negative outcomes and circumventing the commitment-settling condition. The democratic functions of PLCs can be undermined by issue-framing or by circumventing consensus-building in school settings by authority figures (Servage, 2007).

Morgan (2007) described personal self-interest as having three domains: task (inherent interest in the work), career (relation of work to future plans), and extramural (relation of work to non-work goals). He noted that the closer the alignment of the three interests in an individual, the greater their sense of work satisfaction, but that the pitfall of self-interest could be issue framing and agenda setting. These interests could be applied to schools: students agree to be ruled by teachers to earn the credentials required for personal advancement. Teachers agree to be ruled by principals in exchange for promotions, resources, or desirable teaching assignments. Principals are ruled by system leaders who can promote them to less-demanding schools or enable them to choose their own staff members. This linear hierarchy could create a highly political organization (Morgan, 2007) in which the actors advance their own interests at the expense of the common good. Any trust created by this structure would be dependent on continued alignment of goals and school targets with individual interests. As long as individuals felt that their interests were effectively served, they would maintain trust with the administration of their schools.

Trust and Democratic Leadership in Schools. Democratic administration theory (Kensler & Brooks, 2013) and other rational choice theories (Brown & Papa, 2013) assumed that school principals would use their advanced knowledge to set organizational goals and targets that improved the efficiency of the school. In these theories, a single individual with the final authority over all decision-making is the most efficient form of decision-making. Within an effective school, trust is placed in the principal to act according to policies and rules that served individual interests. As long as people felt that the rules of the organization were aligned with their interests, they would accept decisions without question. If the rules did not suit their individual interests, they could “game” the system (Morgan, 2007, p.164) by manipulating the ability of the principal to make decisions, making the system undemocratic and distrustful (Shapiro & Permut, 2013).

The basis for humanistic theories of leadership revolves around organizational trust. This virtue is viewed as essential for effective school functioning in a democracy (November et al., 2010). Between educational actors, “trust has been shown to predict how educators interpret their superiors’ ability to carry out more technical and transformative leadership functions” (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011, p. 31) and “leaders might understand the theory of student-centred leadership, but if they cannot develop trust among leaders, teachers, parents and students they will have great difficulty practising it” (Robinson, 2011, p. 17). Educational actors need to trust that the principal will not use her¹ gatekeeper status to advance her own interests (Morgan, 2007) or to restrict teacher or student autonomy (Trujillo, 2012). The hope is that she will choose to meaningfully distribute her authority amongst respected professionals (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012) to ensure the improvement of the school. Although principals are compelled by teacher organizations, system priorities, and their own ethical standards to act for the common good (Alberta Education, 2018), the gatekeeper status of this role creates tensions amongst educational actors.

The Relationship Between Trust, Dominance, and Organizational Anxiety

The tension between dominance and trust can become a paradox that could potentially create anxiety in school settings. The principal’s power over educational actors, authorized by an external system (Hatcher, 2005), exists regardless of whether or not they trust her. Over-reliance on dominance could generate anxiety within the organization as followers develop a sense of helplessness or inability to focus on the work of the group. Morgan (2007) suggested that anxiety, a prolonged response to stress, could create disruption in organizations by triggering defense mechanisms. Anxiety can be expressed by paranoid or overly aggressive policies with external parties,

¹ Using “her” and “she” as the default to describe a principal is my way of subtly questioning patriarchal constructions of the role. I do this for the remainder of the paper.

learned helplessness, and dependency on a hero leader, or paralysis in decision-making by fearful and anxious organizational members. Collective anxiety could promote dysfunction in schools (Morgan, 2007).

Compounding the organizational anxiety, the principal may find herself experiencing personal anxiety as she navigates her gatekeeper role. In individuals, stress and anxiety are manifested in behaviors such as open defiance (fight), work avoidance (flight), or preservation of the status quo (freeze [Canadian Mental Health Association, 2016]). The transformational leader (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011) may find herself blamed by the system for teacher unwillingness to act on complex student issues. The emotional leader (Lynch, 2012) may find herself overwhelmed in trying to deal with the tensions which abound in her school. The instructional leader (Robinson, 2006) may find herself unable to manage all the curriculum expectations on a wide variety of subject areas and could become the object of consternation for attempting to be an expert on all topics.

Beerbohm (2015) suggested that reliance on trusting a person in leadership was contrary to developing democratic leadership. Trust, he contended, was contrary to the condition of commitment-settling because the leader was choosing an activity for the citizen based on his own understanding of the issues. An over-reliance on trust could lead to uncritically following or cue-taking by citizens (p. 649) who shifted their intentions to align with the preferred activities of the leader, thereby turning democracy into a policy popularity contest. Democratic leadership was contingent on maintaining a push-pull balance between the leader and citizens as they established their commitment to a joint activity, not simply the citizens trusting the leader to know what is best.

To democratize the role of the principal, its gatekeeping function should be challenged. Rather than the principal controlling the flow of information, resources, and policies moving in and out of the school community, the community's citizens should be responsible for identifying emergent issues needing resolution. The principal would then mobilize the resources, information, and policies so that the school staff could implement the resolution. Rather than seeing the job of principal as the keeper of authority and decision-making, viewing the educational system through the lens of complex adaptive systems theory can shift the field of vision to include democratic leadership.

Re-envisioning the Role: Complexity and Challenge

Complex adaptive systems theory (Kowch, 2013) can offer an alternative perspective to the principal-as-gatekeeper role through envisioning leadership as a function rather than a person (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2011). In this theory, leadership becomes as the aligned actions of the collective roles, people, and behaviors engaged in school settings through the relationships that they have with one another (Jones, 2013). Schools are complex organizations of professional, highly educated people aligned around the purpose of education (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012) that have the capacity to self-organize and self-govern (Vorneberg, 2013). These professionals have the capacity to generate, gather, and use information with the common goal of student learning (Jones, 2013) which can enable them to be involved in deliberative democracy (November et al., 2012). Deliberative democracy involves using dialogue, critical inquiry, reciprocity, and collective decision-making to improve the common good (Fusarelli et al., 2011; November et al., 2010).

In their case study of three innovative and exemplary school leaders in Haiti, Sider and Jean-Marie (2014) reflected on the need for social and professional relationships for leaders to enact change. The three leaders were successful in creating better schooling conditions within Haiti, but their reach was limited without assistance from community partnerships. Rather than being singular heroes, they understood that sustaining true change needed buy-in from the local citizenry. Sider and Jean-Marie noted that

they [the study participants] honed their leadership skills as they considered the obstacles, challenges, and opportunities that were presented in their immediate context... These three leaders were able to develop innovative solutions to the problems of their communities precisely because they had a long-term understanding of the community... With Joseph, Darline, and Marcus we frequently saw evidence of the relationship between social and professional networking and the innovative leadership practices they were involved in. (p. 276)

This study suggested that the success of these leaders could be attributed, in part, to their strong communication with their partners and school communities to find a common vision and then mobilize the Haitian citizens to follow through with educational change. Working with a community, rather than instructing a community, is a feature of democratic leadership (Beerbohm, 2015) and is necessary for sharing authority because the duality of hierarchy and democracy can create tension in organizations (Hatcher, 2005).

Moving school authority away from the gatekeeping individual to the staff collective would require questioning the current bureaucratic system. Simply removing an individual from a role and replacing them with a group of individuals could create an oligarchy (Morgan, 2007). Without troubling the foundations of the educational system, replacing the one with the many could simply create “groupthink” (Morgan, 2007, p.198) in which a collective of similarly-inclined people rules without dissent and little critical dialogue. This type of management could be found in some school administration teams (Hatcher, 2005). These teams can assist with lessening the workload of the principal but may not result in the transfer of ultimate decision-making power from the principal (Fusarelli et al., 2011). Within these teams, the principal still holds legislative authority over the types of decisions made and manages the people who participate on this team. Teachers, students, and other community stakeholders can provide input into decision-making, but their actual authority over issues and topics for discussion is restricted by the school administrative team.

Challenging Perception: Popular Media and School Leadership Norms

Schooling norms that equate the principal role with leadership hinder democratizing this role. Entrenched cultural norms of the lone principal would need to be reformed to distribute power effectively in school settings. As mentioned earlier, popular media has perpetuated traditional constructs that entrain the principal-as-gatekeeper status, and it creates a sense of *how things are* in schools that can limit citizens’ ability to consider how *things could be*. Troubling the assumptions presented by popular media can bring to light some of the traditions (Gadamer, 1975) associated with the principal role. Gadamer (1975) suggested that “word and image are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is” (p. 143). Therefore, a close look at the popular stereotypes of principals is a necessary step in re-envisioning the role of school leadership.

Mulryan and Mackler (2015) found that the representation of principals in popular media fell into the categories of the autocrat, villain, bureaucrat, numbskull/buffoon, social/emotional isolate, or (least commonly) caring pragmatist/hero. Most commonly, they found that principals were portrayed as bland, policy-driven character foils to a more interesting teacher or student character hero. They suggested that these shallow representations served to limit the audience’s ability to critique or envision a transformed role for the principal because “the subversion of the conceptualization of the educational administrator poses a challenge to the very institutions that educational administrator’s lead” (p. 13). Hence, to challenge the common assumptions about what principals do and who they are might lead to contesting the fundamentals of school institutions.

But, movies and television seek to entertain audiences with hero or villain principals, not to challenge the dominant norms of educational administration. Portrayals of deep dialogue and knowledge-building (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006) might not be similarly enthralling as the mean, old Mr. Krupp transforming into Captain Underpants due to the shenanigans of George and Harold. Joe Clark, in *Lean on Me*, courageously turning around the crumbling school with his baseball bat as an enforcement tool is more interesting than if the movie featured a team of twenty teachers discussing the best strategies for reaching students through informed dialogue. Mr. Feeney being the source of all wisdom for the characters on *Boy Meets World* requires less effort than having the characters reading the works of a variety of philosophers and co-constructing with Mr. Feeney their shared understanding of reality and the consequences of their actions. And, the movie would probably not have been a classic had Edward Rooney, instead of charging around town seeking to capture and punish his truant student, accepted that Ferris Bueller just needed a day off.

The construction of principal as gatekeeper appears entrenched in the Western culture narrative about schooling because many other social institutions are set up similarly to schools. When citizens of schools become employees in other institutions, the organizational routines and institutional structures are familiar to them because of their similarity to the hierarchical set up of schools. As discussed by Greenfield (1979), teachers and principals have a job to do: they are expected to be the upstanding representatives of what is expected from adults in society.

Their role is to reinforce the standards that have been set for generations because “teachers and principals stand for an organization, for society – social forms that require order and regularity. They represent patterns of thinking and values that have spanned many centuries. They are symbols of knowledge and rationality” (Greenfield, 1979, p. 108).

The principal-as-gatekeeper role tends to reinforce the idea of rationality and singular authority, so that when students enter the workforce they recognize and comply with the institutional leadership structures. So, not only would the idea of shared leadership have to be accepted within schools, democratic leadership would need to be accepted by the whole community. Parents would not be able to march into a principal’s office and expect that he or she could singularly solve the problems they perceive as plaguing the school. Teachers and other educational staff would have to be assigned time in schools to problem solve emergent concerns. Students would need to recognize their own responsibilities as learners and complete their tasks without the threat of censure. The enormity of these organizational changes invites two questions: “Is collective authority a utopian ideal, or even possible in school leadership? Can leadership be envisioned as a collective construct and a function of group dynamics, or are educational actors simply meant to labour under classical management bureaucracies indefinitely?”

Democratic Leadership: Moving Past the Principal

Since its inception, the job description of the principal has expanded in scope and responsibilities, creating the current situation in which a single individual is charged with doing more than a single individual could possibly hope to accomplish (Rousmaniere, 2008). The acknowledged barrier that the unchanged role has created is a heavy workload for an aging profession of administrators that appears unappealing to younger educational professionals (Lynch, 2012). The job is ripe for a real transformation to a shared, democratic leadership in which leadership becomes a function of multiple actors who work for the good of the organization in response to internal and external stimuli.

Short Term Leadership, Long Term Organizations: Student and Teacher Councils

Working examples of collective leadership exist within educational organizations, and these organizations could be studied as models for democratizing the principal role. Student and teacher councils have short-term leadership terms (often two years or less), but many of these types of organizations have had a long-term existence. For example, the Students’ Union of the University of Calgary has been in existence since 1945 (Students’ Union, 2016) and the Health and Physical Education Council (a specialist council of the Alberta Teachers Association) has been running since 1962 (Young, 2010). These organizations could provide an area for further research to assist with the re-conception of the principal role. Their existence depends on diverse citizens settling on a commitment and an agreed upon leader mobilizing this commitment into action. Both actions require an understanding of democratic leadership (to define the commitment), and distributed leadership (to act on the commitment).

Student Councils. Models for the study of democratic leadership can be found in Alberta at a provincial level in student and teacher organizations. For this paper, democratic leadership is defined as relational structure of agreed upon intentions between leaders and followers and among followers to conduct shared political activity (Beerbohm, 2015). The definition of distributed leadership refers to the sharing of authority amongst a wide number of organizational actors (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011).

At a local level, student associations in post-secondary institution represent a governance model with turnover on a yearly basis that relies on distributed leadership (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Both the leaders and citizens of these groups need to be flexible and adaptable when responding to current organizational needs. Leaders are normally selected through yearly elections, and policy developments are fluid and determined by the electorate. These limited terms of office could result in willful purging (Lynch, 2012) of no longer relevant organizational knowledge and much quicker ratcheting (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2011) of organizational practices, behaviors, or assumptions.

Student associations could be described as constructivist (Lynch, 2012) in nature, as those people assuming leadership roles are required to understand their citizens. Lynch (2012) suggested that an important tenet of constructivist leadership in schools included “reciprocity...characterized by the ability to move outside oneself,

differentiate one's perceptions from those of others, and practice empathy" (p. 172). Student leaders and student followers are always short term, therefore understanding and responding to issues requires incessant communication to ensure that needs are met. Unlike schools with institutional leadership having longer term appointments and responsibilities to stakeholders, student associations need to be immediately relevant to ensure their survival. While guided by future trends, their primary concerns are activating current student interest to ensure financial stability, requiring student leadership to be closely connected to their followers.

Research on the internal leadership organization of student associations is sparse and represents an opportunity for further research. Questions about the identification of shared commitments between student leaders and citizens and the sharing of intention to perform activities could provide some insight into the practice of democratic leadership.

Teacher Specialist Councils. Another example of democratic leadership (Beerbohm, 2015) could be found in Alberta's teacher specialist councils. As with student organizations, specialist councils tend to have short term governance resulting from an election, requiring a commitment to sustainable (Lynch, 2012) and democratic leadership (Beerbohm, 2015). These councils are headed by elected leaders whose role is to provide professional development to member teachers through conferences, publications, and websites (Alberta Teachers Association, 2018). They depend on reliable structures for leadership succession as well as a strong commitment by volunteers to take on the work of the council. As with student councils, the leadership of teacher specialist councils is not well-studied, although research in this area could provide useful insights about succession and authority while developing democratic leadership.

Succession is a concern of school systems when principals change (Lynch, 2012), and the practice of quick succession of principals can create school chaos as new principals try to find their footing (Sackney & Walker, 2006). The effectiveness of student associations and teacher councils is tied to their immediate responsibility to their citizens, not the wider system or current government, as is the current structure of educational administration. If democratic leadership in schools is desirable, then a dramatic change to the foundation of authority held by the principal as gatekeeper needs consideration. Student and teacher councils might be used as a positive example of democratic leadership in educational organizations to re-imagine the principal role.

Electing School Leadership: Principal as Politician?

As the information about the need for distributed leadership grows, so does the tension between the principal as gatekeeper and school as democracy. If the system is structured so that the principal is the keeper of democracy, but principals are appointed to their role by a disconnected system, some researchers question if principals can envision their own role democratically (November et al., 2010). Most Canadian, American, and English school systems were structured according to the scientific management system established by Frederick Taylor (Brooks & Miles, 2006), as discussed earlier. Despite some more recent efforts to democratize these systems, most of them follow a hierarchical authority structure (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2015; Bush & Glover, 2014; Hallinger, 2006). Democratic school leadership has been tested on a smaller scale in South Africa, Brazil, and Taiwan in areas that associated creating an egalitarian society with teaching democratic norms in schools (Hsaio, Lee, & Tu, 2012; Myers, 2008; November et al., 2010).

In their study of the democratization of the South African school system in the post-apartheid period, November et al. (2008) discussed the efforts to reform schools. They suggested that problems in transforming the system were complex, and that the tensions in the principal-educator role were counter-productive to building deliberative democracy. Prior to 1994, the role of school principal was highly authoritarian, and reflected the nature of a highly segregated society (November et al., 2010). The job title was changed to principal-educator with the intent of sharing managerial control and to introduce the norms of democracy into schooling. Much of the work of reform fell on the shoulders of the principal-educators who were expected to generate, lead, and evaluate the evolution to democratic leadership.

November et al. (2010) determined that principal-educators experienced difficulties with transforming to democratic leadership because of their compliant nature and lack of experience with sharing authority. The principal-educators had been hired for their roles because of their willingness to implement rules, not due to their

ability to act as change agents. Their study suggested that principal-educators, trained by the system and needing professional development to visualize their role in promoting democracy, were unprepared to assist with the transition of the educational system away from autocracy, but that the aim of democratizing the principal role was a necessary step to democratizing the whole educational system.

Similar to the democratic vacuum created by the fall of apartheid in South Africa, the end of military rule motivated the Brazilian people to democratize their educational system (Myers, 2008). One reform was new governmental legislation that allowed schools to elect their principals. Although the vast majority of schools continued with the patronage appointment of principals by the state, a small minority took advantage of this change in the hopes of building more equitable systems. In his small case study of seven teachers in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Myers (2008) found that the election of principals did positively impact and empower the teachers that he interviewed. They were more likely to seek out and use innovative teaching practices in their schools, and they felt that decision-making was distributed throughout the staff group. Although this study was small, he suggested that the election of principals led to a more democratic organization of the school.

In Taiwan, certain schools such as vocational schools, were given the authority to use selection committees to choose an appropriate principal for a four-year term. Upon the end of the term, the school could elect to keep or terminate the principal's employment. Hsaio et al. (2012) found that decentralization reforms to the system of appointing principals had an impact on the nature of leadership they utilized. Their study found that principals who were selected by the school were more likely to be judged as transformational leaders, and principals who were appointed to the school were more likely to be characterized as transactional leaders. The implications of this study suggested that the selected principals, having authority granted to them by their staff, were more motivated to use shared decision-making and care for staff. The researchers concluded that this democratic reform was a positive step for the advancement of education and democracy in Taiwan.

These three case studies in South Africa, Brazil, and Taiwan suggested that democratizing the selection of school principals could change the authority structure in schools. They illustrated how changing the authoritative status of the school principal is possible with the aim to democratize schooling. The teachers and staff in these studies felt empowered with their larger role in school decision-making despite the bureaucratic foundation of the overall system.

Emerging democracies might have the most to gain by reforming their educational systems to teach their citizens about their rights and responsibilities in an egalitarian society. These innovative studies that challenged the principal-as-gatekeeper status provided some evidence that an alternative to the current hierarchical structure of schools is possible.

Discussion and Conclusion

Keeping the principal-as-gatekeeper role is no longer relevant in Western 21st century schools. Enacting distributed (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011) and democratic leadership (Beerbohm, 2015) requires individual authority figures to move beyond simple task re-allocation to shared authority for decision-making. To re-design the role would require acknowledging that professional educators can collectively identify critical issues facing schools, and that school leadership can mobilize educational actors to solve those issues. Educational actors would need to be trained in productive problem-solving and shared leadership, and they would have to be willing to work for the common good rather than self-interest. Parents, students, and other community partners would have to be willing to re-think the nature of schooling organizations and accept collective authority. Despite some positive, yet fragmented, examples of democratic leadership as discussed, this utopian vision needs louder dialogue from everyone, citizens to political leaders, for it to be implemented.

Until that time, the mainstay of school leadership– the principal-as-gatekeeper role– could be re-imagined as an enlightened gatekeeper. Principals could learn to spot the emergence of innovation (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2011), and allocate resources in a thoughtful manner to ensure its successful implementation. They could work to discover genuine commitments with their teams and then mobilize them to act together. Rather than striving to be the heroes of the school, principals could use their access to resources, personnel, and policy to steer the collective to a more equitable future. The accepted media archetypes of the villain/rules-stickler/buffoon principal could be challenged

by educator organizations to open a dialogue about how leadership in schools is and how it could be. The principal, teachers, students, parents, and system leaders could act as shared partners in sustainable leadership that promotes a more just and democratic society.

The enlightened gatekeeper would be open to critical dialogue that might call her own job into question, and she accept dissent as a pathway to find areas of agreement on school issues. She would not *establish* a guiding vision or *direct* a three-year plan, she would recognize the emergence of a productive vision that could be enacted over the next three years. Her network of district partners could provide creative suggestions for school improvement, and she could educate her staff about innovative solutions used in other schools. She would use her assigned leadership role to ensure that the team continued to move in the direction they have set for each other.

The enlightened gatekeeper would not be anxious about external pressures because she and her professional staff would design workable solutions. She could communicate the emergent vision of her school to system leaders to promote policy change while learning about new practices that are successfully enacted elsewhere. These possible problem-solving ideas could be thoughtfully and contextually communicated to her school staff without personal agenda regarding which ideas were enacted. The experience of living democracy within schools could be the enlightened gatekeeper's gift to the next generation of educators.

Re-conceptualizing the role of school leadership requires a different view of leadership. Can school leadership be a democratic, collective endeavor or will it continue as the job of a singular, busy manager? Continuing this discussion is a first step to relieving the pressure on the gatekeeper and opening up possibilities for shared authority in public schools.

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