# Educational Administrators' Perspectives of Democracy and Citizenship Education: Interviews with Educational Leaders

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## Abstract

Little is known about public school educational administrators' perspectives of democracy and citizenship education and how those perspectives shape the learning that occurs in the schools they lead. This paper presents findings of a qualitative study that used semi-structured interviews of public school educational administrators' perspectives of democracy and citizenship education in the province of Alberta, Canada. Four participants' detailed responses were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological methodology and coded into four themes. While all four participants felt that democratic and citizenship education were important, their conceptualizations varied widely and only one participant was found to lead in a way that encouraged democratically desirable education. Findings suggest that some educational administrators do not necessarily understand their role or responsibility in the education of democracy and citizenship within the schools they lead. Moreover, this study suggests that factors that hinder democratic and citizenship education are: school administrators' preference to remain obedient to a top-down approach of school management; resource taxing administrative obligations; and a misunderstanding of 'thick' democracy. Factors that were found to facilitate democratic and citizenship education include: physical school and learning program design; and democratic school leadership.

## Introduction

Insofar as a society truly values democracy as a form of government and its principles as a way of life, the importance of preparing a citizenry with the capabilities to participate in a politically powerful way cannot be understated. Specific to the Canadian context, many provincial curricula stress the importance of teaching and learning about democracy and citizenship. Within the province of British Columbia (BC), for example, the importance of democracy and citizenship education is lawfully mandated. The preamble of the current BC School Act states that the purpose of education is to develop learners' potential to "acquire the knowledge, skills, and attributes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society" (Government of British Columbia, 1996). In BC's neighboring province, Alberta, the latest iteration of the Social Studies curriculum calls for schools to "develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will enable [students] to become engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens" as a way to encourage students to "affirm their place as citizens in an inclusive and democratic society" (Government of Alberta, 2005). It is clear that the Albertan Social Studies curriculum attempts to inculcate students with the principles of democracy and citizenship demanded of them in a Canadian society. Democratic discourse of this kind is not exclusive to the provinces of Alberta and BC. In fact, educational goals of this kind can be found across the provinces and territories in Canada.

It seems somewhat obvious to think that the vast majority of the responsibility of the learning of the principles of democracy and citizenship fall on the shoulders of the teachers in Canadian schools. Some may point to Social Studies and/or History teachers as best suited for this role. Others may rightly designate the homeroom teacher who acts as a prudent caregiver to raise Canadian students with the desired mannerisms that support a plural and cohesive society. This paper, however, considers the role of the educational administrator as having a significant influence on the education of democracy and citizenship within the schools they lead. As individuals whom are afforded great power in a school by providing leadership and direction over the school, the educational leader's role in achieving these goals is particularly important. It is relevant, therefore, that the perspectives of democratic and citizenship education held by school administrators be investigated to better understand how their roles can affect the teaching and learning of the same topics in the schools they lead.

This paper is a report of a qualitative study on the perspectives of democracy and citizenship education held by educational administrators in the province of Alberta, Canada. Dominant patterns and relationships in the detailed responses given by the participants were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological methodology in order to tease out themes from face-to-face interview data. The findings reveal that while all four participants felt that democratic and citizenship education were important, their conceptualizations varied widely and only one participant was found to lead in a way that encouraged democratically desirable education. Findings in this study suggests that some educational administrators do not necessarily understand their role or responsibility in the education of democracy and citizenship within the schools they lead. This study concludes that factors that hinder democratic and citizenship education are: school administrators' preference to remain obedient to a top-down approach of school management; resource taxing administrative obligations and; sporadic, tokenized, and weak forms of staff and student engagement in the school. One factor that facilitated democratic and citizenship education was the practice of democratic school leadership.

## Literature Review

*Undemocratic Trends in Public Education*
Much has been written about the steady deterioration or lack of democratic and citizenship education in schools (Apple, 1982, 2007; Giroux, 2005; Hyslop-Morginson, 2000; Portelli & Solomon, 2001; Simons & Masschelein, 2010) which has contributed to a mass culture that exhibits many antidemocratic tendencies and political apathy (Gutmann, 1987). As such, the contradiction evident in today's schools is that they operate authoritatively within supposedly proud democratic societies (Apple & Beane, 2007). Though some argue that the purpose of public schooling has always been to serve a capitalist need for an educated workforce (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), Wallace (2004) has argued that education is increasingly being transformed into the training of students for economic purposes, or as she puts it, "the reshaping of educational purpose by the perceived demands of a competitive global economy" (p. 99). This has resulted in a corrosion of public belief in a public school system with the purpose of serving the public good shifting its purpose to serving private interests. A contemporary example of this shift is currently being witnessed in the United States where Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, continues to lobby for increased public funding for private school education. Another example more pertinent

to the context of this study, Alberta, is the school-based management system currently being used throughout the province of Alberta where educational administrators are encouraged to create a product – students – that satisfy the needs of their clients – parents – through the effective use of business-model managerial techniques such as site-based budgeting, private sector fundraising, and enticing parents and students to choose their school using the very popular annual 'open house'; a competition among local schools for prospective students. As provincially governed education in Canada continues to mirror neoliberal market practices south of the border (Ball, 2009; Wallace, 2004), support for public organizations in Canada historically managed in democratic ways, like schools, may also continue to decline.

*Educational Leadership as the Key to a Resurgence of Democracy in Schools*
Literature on the study and practice of educational administration suggests a strong pervasiveness of a business-model organizational structure in public schools (Brooks & Miles, 2008) as "the major emphasis in educational leadership is its continuing reliance on rationality and efficiency in its models, standards, and approach to preparation" (English, 2008, p. 145). This practice of leadership operates linearly where decisions made from the top are directed towards the subordinates below. In a system dominated by bureaucratic forms of control, it seems highly unlikely that the school be able to bestow any meaningful lessons of democracy and citizenship to the students in its care. In response to these concerning issues, great strides have been made in the new millennium to counteract these undemocratic trends through a redesign of the bureaucratic management of educational establishments.

Some authors have theorized that school leadership may be the key to the encouragement, maintenance, and enforcement of democratic and citizenship education in today's schools (Johansson, 2004; Starratt, 2004; Woods, 2005; Woods & Gronn, 2009). As individuals that hold great power and influence within a school, the educational leader has a significant impact on school culture, school transformation, and student achievement (Leithwood, 1986; Mulford, Silins, & Leithwood, 2004). Accordingly, the educational leader has an important role to play in students being able to achieve democratic educational goals (Carr, 2009; Starratt, 2004; Woods, 2005). While much of the literature is theoretically heavy and empirically sparse, there is evidence to suggest that change is possible via a strong commitment by educational leaders to incorporate democratic trends in the schools they lead (Apple & Beane, 2007; Begley & Zaretsky, 2004; Doyle, 2003; Gardiner, Howard, Tenuto, & Muzaliwa, 2014; Gwirtz & Minuelle, 2009; Karagiorgi, 2011; Mncube, Davies, & Naidoo, 2015; Price, 2008; San Antonio, 2008; Shields, 2010, 2014).

Where empirical research lacks significant data is the examination of the perceptions held by educational administrators of democracy and citizenship education. Not enough is known about how these perspectives guide their leadership practice and their perceived effects on the staff and students they lead. This is especially the case within Canada. This study aimed to fill that gap.

**Theoretical Framework**

The history of the concepts of democracy and citizenship is long and contested. A discussion of their depth is far beyond the scope of this paper. Before moving forward, however, there are

some theoretical specifics that require clarification, especially in regard to the teaching and learning about democracy and citizenship.

*Deweyan Traditions of Democratic Educational Theory*
Social pragmatist and democratic educational philosopher John Dewey (1916, 1927), often regarded as the father of democratic educational theory (Jenlink, 2009; Westbrook, 1991), explained that democracy was simply a mode of associated living; a means to engage with others for a desired change as a way of life. Dewey assumed that the collective, as a group of individuals, is far more powerful than any individual on his/her own. In this sense, democracy is a dialogical process that demands individuals to possess the capabilities to deliberate needs and ambitions with each other. For a group to gain and maintain such power, essential skills of civic participation need to be learned and practiced.

Dewey (1916) argued that the public school was the ideal place for this learning to occur. He saw that far beyond the technical training of children, the school offered future actively capable citizens the means to live a democratic way of life. He argued that this possibility would require a drastic change to the current policies and procedures of the educational institution. Dewey theorized:

> [a] change in educational methods would release new potentialities, capable of all kinds of permutations and combinations, which would then modify social phenomena, while this medication would in its turn affect human nature and its educative transformation in a continuous and endless procession. (Dewey, as cited in Gripsrud et. al., 2010, p. 46)

This way, the education system would avoid a stagnant reproduction of one dominant ideology over another, i.e. hegemony – the antithesis of democracy.

The simplicity of Dewey's interpretation of democracy was especially useful for this study as it operates from a basic foundation of essential democratic principles to which the participants' broad understanding of democracy and the education of those two concepts could be compared and contrasted.

*Democratic Participation*
Like Dewey's democratic theory, a simple and focused theory of democratic participation was chosen to guide this study. For the purpose of this study, civic participation is understood as "a process by which the people are able to organize themselves, and through their own organization are able to identify their own needs, and share in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the participatory action" (Saxena, 2011, p. 31). Political participation must occur as a part of a wider project to serve a broad citizenry toward a social transformation by "exercising voice and choice and developing the human organizational and management capacity to solve problems as they arise" (p. 31). Therefore, in every step of the process, from beginning to end – from enlightened thoughts on an issue, debating what is to be done, making a decision, implementing the decision, maintain the decision, and finally evaluating the decision – the public citizenry should be intimately involved. Leal (2011) argues that participatory action of this kind is a radical idea of change because it offers great potential for a dramatic shift in power from those that currently and historically possess it to those that hold very little and desire more. Learning

what is required to do so demands an education system steeped in democracy that provides students with the means to learn about and live a participatory-rich lifestyle.

The way forward was, and continues to be, encouraging those in powerful positions within an education system to adopt a more egalitarian practice of leadership – a democratic leadership practice.

*Democratic School Leadership*
With an educational administrator equipped with democratic leadership techniques, it should be possible for a public school to nurture the skills and behaviors necessary for a strong and legitimate public sphere comprised of competent and confident individuals.

Using Gastil's (1994) theoretical framework, democratic leadership is conceptually defined as the performance of three functions: distributing responsibility, empowering group members, and aiding the group's decision-making process. These three functions ought to be regularly exchanged between the role of the leader and follower. In this way, leadership is a behavior, not a position; a process of influencing people in a manner consistent with basic democratic principles, not an authoritative and coercive exercise of power over the group. Starratt (2010) echoes this point by arguing that a leader within a democracy facilitates and encourages her group to identify democratic values that the group can rally around, not choosing it for them, but guiding them carefully. After such values have been identified, the leader's role is to aid the group's capabilities to meet and maintain those values. Woods (2005) also speaks to the procedural aspects of democratic leadership arguing that the aim is to share power by dispersing or distributing leadership responsibilities. Motivated by democratic ideals, a democratic leader acts within a framework of *primus inter pares* (first among equals), by redistributing power to teachers and students that typically resides in the school administrator's hands.

Far more complex and intricate theories of democracy, democratic participation, and democratic leadership exist in the literature but would not have served this study well. Appropriate to the goals of this study, the simplicity of the three theories explained in this section of the paper offered a more appropriate lens to view these matters as a means to provide the essential theoretical framework for the study.

**Research Methods**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of democracy and citizenship education by administrators in the Albertan public school context. A goal was to learn more about how educational administrators, as leaders of public educational institutions, made sense of democracy and citizenship in general, and how they felt about the education of both of these topics in their schools. Two broad questions guided this study: what perspectives of democratic and citizenship education do school administrators hold and; how do school administrators foster the education of democracy and citizenship within their schools?

Qualitative methods were used to provide an in-depth description of the participants' perspectives within a specific context in order to gain an understanding of the constructions of democratic and citizenship education held by the participants; as Sarantakos (2013) puts it, to

"reveal interpretive repertoires used by people to make sense of their lives" (p. 310). Personal interviews provided a careful look into the complexities of the administrators' perceptions of democracy and citizenship education generally and practically in their respective roles. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they help focus the dialogue on the topic of study yet allow for some flexibility for participants to delve into aspects not specifically asked about and/or anticipated (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were asked to respond to specific open-ended questions which were then probed for further detail. Each administrator was offered a one hour face-to-face oral interview session. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed manually. Following the transcription of the interviews, the data was coded into four broad themes through the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Recruiting school administrators to participate in this study was a challenge. Initial invitations were sent to 17 randomly selected school districts in the province of Alberta. Although there were zero replies from school boards to fully participate in the study, it is interesting to note that two superintendents, one principal, and one vice-principal agreed to participate only if the conversations were off-the-record. Furthermore, one potential participant would only meet in a public space away from the school to speak as if it were a normal friendly encounter. It became acutely clear that asking school administrators to talk about democracy at their workplace was a sensitive matter. Thus, different sampling techniques were adopted to find school administrators willing to participate in this study. George (pseudonym), a current administrator in Plainsview School District (pseudonym) volunteered to be part of the study after hearing about the difficulties recruiting participants in a graduate class he shared with the principal investigator. He then asked two willing colleagues to participate as well. Therefore, George, Leah, and Morgan (see below) were all recruited from the same school district. The final participant, Mervin, was recommended to participate by the principal investigator's graduate supervisor. Thus, Mervin was purposefully chosen to be recruited to take part in the study.

Table 1. Profile of participants

| Pseudonym | Gender | Administrative Position | Pseudo School District |
|-----------|--------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Leah | Female | Principal | Plainsview |
| George | Male | Vice-Principal | Plainsview |
| Morgan | Male | Head of Curriculum and Instruction | Plainsview |
| Mervin | Male | Principal | Riverview |

**Findings**

As the participants shared their understanding of democratic and citizenship education, four broad themes were revealed through the discussions: *obedience within the school administrative chain, administrative obligations, democratic participation,* and *democratic leadership.* The participants' opinions, anecdotes, and insights presented two very different pictures of what democratic and citizenship education in schools is and ought to be. Conscientious efforts to include democratic citizenship learning in schools requires dedicated work by educational leaders. The participants in this study proved that those efforts can occur in different ways; as a planned and purposeful intention to a daily practice of leadership capable of encouraging a deep

and authentic learning and living for democracy, or an inconsistent and disorganized addition to an already democratically challenged school environment.

*Obedience within the school administrative chain*
The responses from participants in the Plainsview school district revealed a preference to remain obedient to an educational climate organized and maintained in a bureaucratic way. During the interviews with George, Leah, and Morgan, it became clear that they each serve their schools in specific ways which are defined by their professional titles and roles. This is indicative of the bureaucratic chain of management typical of public school districts. Early in the interviews and without direction, all three of these participants made it clear to me where their responsibilities lie in respect to others' roles. George, as a vice-principal, described his leadership role as "serving under the role of the principal". He described this best with the following statement:

> When I make a decision sometimes it's a quick decision. I try not to make a quick decision but at the same time, when I have that opportunity to go into the principal's office and say, 'this is what I did, I hope I didn't overstep my bounds'. And then a lot of times, I can make another decision based on what I got from the higher level. So, it just gives you that chain of command that you can go through and look for answers. [The school board] keep us in tune…because that is the chain of command. So, I do think they keep us focused. We are kept to task that way so no one can stray.

Leah described her role as the school principal as the buffer between upper-management and the teaching staff. Reiterating directives from the school board to her staff in an effective way was a defining feature of her role. She mentioned that one of her main objectives was to "assure that [the] staff is abiding by our district policy". She used three examples of times she struggled to lead her staff through policy issues: the initiation of a Gay-Straight Alliance, removing the Lord's Prayer as a daily routine, and removing a religious connotation to the annual Christmas concert. Contradictions were abundant in her description of her position on these examples. She stated that the norm of the community needed to be considered and that it "really depends on the community". Immediately after, however, she stated that "we have to follow policy". Despite hearing from members of the school community to change certain procedures in the school (the three examples above), Leah mentioned the inability to do so because she prefers to adhere to policy without challenging it. With a feeling of finality to the discussion, Leah said, "in the end, we support the board's policy".

Morgan also defined his role by explaining where he was located in reference to his superior's roles. He described his position as "middle to upper-management" and referred to himself as a "puppet regime". When asked to describe the influence of his superiors on his day-to-day activities, Morgan's responses differed slightly from George's and Leah's:

> I have quite a bit of autonomy. There is certainly flexibility. My superiors – there is a high level of trust between us. They trust me to move forward in directions that are in the best interest of all of our stakeholders. I'm also given very clear boundaries and guidelines around my portfolio. We all work well with structure, but I feel we perform best when we're trusted, and those responsibilities are clear.

Mervin's case presented an entirely different perspective of obedience or lack thereof. From Mervin's perspective, decisions are not passed down to him from above. Conversely, Mervin felt it was his role to encourage his staff and students to make decisions for themselves and the school, within the boundaries of an overriding provincial or federal policy (e.g. School Act), and to take those decisions with him as a representative of his school to the school board. Mervin felt comfortable that his superiors supported this practice. He described his superiors as taking "a hands-off approach" in order to support Mervin and the things he felt were important in the school. He said he "never felt like [he] was having to be compliant". He felt he had great support from the superintendent of the school board. This quote describes his feelings well:

> Our superintendent is smart enough to know – let the school come up with stuff within certain parameters, and good things will happen. I have never worried about initiatives that we might be thinking about. I think he would feel very comfortable with what's going on here.

Overall, it is clear Morgan, Leah, and George are obedient to the policy that their Board creates and are hesitant to resist or reform them. It is also clear that all three of these participants trust and are obedient to the system that has put them in varying degrees of positions of power. Moreover, when tension between school policy and school stakeholder needs are presented, as was the case with Leah struggling with the inclusion of a Gay-Straight Alliance and the expulsion of the Lord's Prayer, the hierarchical management practices in Plainsview were a limiting factor to the democratic expression of all school stakeholders involved. Thus, hierarchical forms of management, and a strong adherence to policy, are effectively shutting down the democratic functions possible in Leah's school.

In contrast, Mervin's case presents an example of how democracy can function in a school when policy and hierarchical forms of management are resisted. His superiors do not create policies for his school and have given Mervin the autonomy to do so on his own. Starting from the ground up, Mervin is able to make needed changes within the school rather than appealing to policy and hierarchical procedure to allow or support those reforms.

*Administrative obligations as a barrier to democratic and citizenship education*
Educational administrators are inundated with a plethora of tasks to complete throughout the day. These tasks can range from sending emails to staff and parents, meeting with students, or observing teaching to school budgeting, student discipline, and board meetings. In the case of Plainsview school district, ensuring students were given a deep and critical understanding of democracy and citizenship did not fall under their professional obligations. Consistently throughout the interviews, Plainsvew school district participants referenced administrative obligations as being a barrier to encouraging democracy and citizenship education in their schools. This was most clear in the discussions with Leah and George. These two participants describe the complexity of a multitude of roles they play within the school. Not surprisingly, Leah and George find themselves overwhelmed with administrative tasks placed on them as leaders of a school.

Leah mentioned a lot of her time was spent in the office away from student contact because of paperwork or communication with various people using email and the telephone. She expressed

that the amount of emails she sends and receives is a distressing part of her job. "The minute I get an email in the evenings and weekends, I just deal with it then. I know it annoys my husband, but I feel a lot less overwhelmed at work. I get more anxious". When asked why she wasn't more involved with students on a daily basis, Leah responded with, "I think once you get that management piece under control…just the little things – field trip forms, budget – that was crazy at first. It was overwhelming. But once you get that under control – 'this is the way it has to be done, people', then you can move on." George also mentioned something similar saying, "Get that stuff into place, now we have an effectively running school. Now I can deal with the leadership side of stuff. I can deal with students. I can deal with teachers going through a rough period. Those kinds of leadership things."

It became clear through Leah and George's description of their daily obligations as educational administrators, that very little time was dedicated towards ensuring democracy and citizenship education was taking place in their schools. In fact, only *after* dealing with 'stuff' did these two administrators feel they had a leadership role. As was mentioned above, Leah felt under some stress because of her administrative obligations, so much so that her personal life suffered somewhat. It is of little surprise that Leah and George struggle to find the time to lead rather than manage their schools.

Mervin's responses revealed a very different approach to staff and student participation in school management. Mervin found that once he relinquished his power to both staff and students, much of the daily managerial issues that plagued his position earlier in his career seemed to disappear. He felt that when given the opportunity of choice, students and staff felt empowered to take responsibility and ownership over the school and thus relieved him of duties typical of most educational administrators, including discipline. Mervin felt that this allowed him more time to lead his staff and students by having far less to manage on a daily basis.

*(Pseudo)Democratic and citizenship learning*
In order to glean some insights into how school administrators promote the education of democracy and citizenship, a number of questions to probe into how the participants encouraged democracy and citizenship in the students and staff were asked. Leah and George provided procedures mirroring the findings of Saxena (2011), White (2011), and Leal (2011) of where participation in governance were non-evident, pseudo-democratic, or limited to few unmeaningful areas. Morgan, Leah, and George described a school environment that lacked a deep and authentic learning of and practice for democratic citizenship as put forth in the literature. In contrast, Mervin's responses proved to be aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of democracy and citizenship education in the literature.

After mentioning that her school had recently moved away from a more focused program on democratic and citizenship education, Leah explained that citizenship was emphasized in her school as "not something official" but through "teachers and their relationship with students" and that those relationships "would be one of [the school's] top priorities". When asked to provide specific things happening in the school that related to democracy and citizenship education, Leah and George responded with the following examples: house leagues, picking up garbage, giving students points for picking up chairs, speakers coming in to the school to discuss values and motivation, a survey to parents after parent teacher interviews, meet the teacher night, a spring

BBQ, a student vote (in reference to the federal election), and "a leadership class that goes and sings to the old folks homes" that also "do sidewalks and stuff like that". Another way that Leah felt she was promoting democracy and citizenship learning in her school was to ask students at informal meetings to provide input on what they wanted the Remembrance Day ceremony to look like. To her surprise, the students were not capable of answering her. Probing deeper into that matter, Leah was asked to give her opinion how she felt the students would describe the democratic environment of the school. She responded, "I don't know right now that they would feel necessarily that it is democratic." When asked the same question, George replied, "I think things have been put into place all the time. But I will also say, do we meet the needs of students? I had a student come and ask for a chess club and created a chess club. I think that they realize their needs are being met. But if you stopped a kid in the hall, I don't think that they would say 'very'…that it is always the teacher's way."

Apple and Beane (2007) express that long lasting and meaningful democratic processes are created from bottom-up collaboration. Although the above examples expressed by Leah and George are essentially 'good' practices, they lack democratically definitive characteristics. As Woods (2005), Woods and Gronn (2009), and Starratt (2004, 2010) have all argued, encouraging the opportunities necessary for staff members to have direct input into policy creation and reform is where group members can truly feel empowered. Morgan, George, and Leah made it clear that bottom-up collaboration was not currently practiced. Information (concerns/ideas/voice) from the bottom (students, staff, parents) had to be filtered through the administrator first before being brought to the school district meetings. This is a process reflective of a representative system of governance. This gives the administrator a great deal of power. They can choose to voice that information or not. As the administrator continues to have the power to make the decisions at the top, nothing in terms of creating a more democratic school environment is likely to occur. In this way, the administrator is a barrier to democratic control. Direct communication links between parents, students, and staff to those in the school district office and school board are lacking. Without this kind of process, bottom-up collaboration is nonexistent. In George, Leah, and Morgan's cases, no administrator risked adopting procedures that challenged this process.

Mervin, on the other hand, provided responses that learning about democracy and citizenship was a central focus in his school and that "we've really tried to make it a core of what we do here. I really want them to feel that they're part of that greater community". Mervin described his school as "very decentralized" with "five schools within a school and five semi-autonomous groups of teachers." He explained that upon entering the school, students have the opportunity to choose one of five different educational paths. He felt that this taught his students a central lesson in democracy, that with freedom comes responsibility. He felt that having students choose their learning path was a great way for them to take ownership over their learning. He demonstrated how he felt about this best with the statement:

> There is more responsibility that comes with being a member with the student body here. They share a space with the public. I think that they would say they have been given more freedom to learn how to use that, which is a key part of democracy. You can't be democratic and not be given a freedom of choice. I think that unanimously the students would say they have that. It's a different culture. Everyone that comes says that. To go to

that democratic idea, they know that they have been given freedoms. They know that with that comes responsibility on their part.

Democracy was a central function of the school for Mervin as was interpreted in this response:

[Students] know that when they are making a decision that I am going to abide by that decision. We are not – with our students – we're not, 'I'm voted as president, I'm voted as this'. It is more of a committee shared responsibility. That's just not how we do it. It's more democratic than that I think. It's more of a direct democracy.

Morgan's responses to similar questions were greatly contrasted from Mervin's. Because Morgan has direct contact with the school board as an administrator in the central office of the district, his responses were more directed to how the school board encourages community involvement in the schools. He said,

Well it's not a free-for-all, you can imagine what that looks like. There are already established communication lines. If we talk more about the positive piece around democracy, we have policies and practices that encourage volunteerism for parents to get involved in the school. Parents attending field trips, working with kids in the school, supporting the front office, helping out with attendance and phoning home and such. At the school division level, we are always stressing the importance of our parent councils. That's a real opportunity for parent voice. It's not a free-for-all. I'll listen to a parent that is ranting, but that is probably as far as it's going to go. I think there are a ton of opportunities for students to be involved in clubs, options, and intramural programs. They are the center of the community.

Encouraging staff, students, and the community to participate in the decisions made within the school is the duty of the educational leader. Morgan presents an interesting contradiction where he seems to place importance on stakeholder involvement, but only up to a point. As he says, "it's not a free-for-all". For Morgan, those limits are club activities and option classes for students and formally established meetings for parents. Some would rightly argue, as Morgan does, that these areas of participative involvement in the school are a crucial part of the democratic process. Saxena (2011), White (2011), and Leal (2011) are a few authors that would support Morgan's desire to include participation of this kind. However, these authors would argue that these opportunities are not only incredibly limiting but offer the stakeholders of the school nothing more than a façade of democratic good intentions by sharing in participation which does not necessarily equate to sharing in power. This 'I manage, you participate' approach tacitly reproduces the dominant hierarchical social order of the educational institution.

The four participants experience different means of promoting democracy and citizenship in their schools. As can be seen above, educational leaders can have widely varying perceptions on what democratic learning and participative citizenship entails. For Mervin, it was a central guiding philosophy of the school. The inclusion of voice and involvement of parents in school function was important for Morgan. For Leah and George, however, it was auxiliary to other functions of the school.

*Leadership for democracy*

The participants revealed that leading for democracy is a matter of interpretation. Some participants felt that aiding others' growth within the school was central to democratic leadership. Others felt that being open and approachable to school community stakeholders were important factors in democratic leadership. One participant in particular, Mervin, revealed a leadership process more aligned with Gastil's (1994) conception of democratic leadership. It is crucial to note that all four participants responses pointed to a focus on democratic procedures and structures, tangible techniques, processes, and behaviors used by a leader, rather than discussing personality traits or inherent characteristics of a leader.

Morgan argued that school principals can best facilitate democracy and citizenship in schools by aiding others in their growth. He explained, "I think the biggest thing that school principals can do in our schools – whatever the important piece of culture would be – you've got to build the capacity in that building. If you're truly building capacity, you're building leadership. I think so much of it depends on your top leadership because things do run downhill."

Building leadership skills among subordinates as a leader was central to many of Morgan's answers. The same was reflected in Mervin's interview, although his response was entirely different than Morgan's:

> If school policy doesn't come from a ground-swell it is not going to last. So, the trick as a leader is – let's say you have a direction that you are hoping the school to come to – you have to be patient enough to wait for that to come from your teaching staff. And same at the district level. Any policy or procedure that is meaningful comes from a ground-swell of staff that express concerns and then it goes. It never works very well when it comes the other way – someone sitting in an office saying, 'I think we need this policy and this is what I want to do'.

Mervin modeled Starratt's (1994) 'first among equals' approach to leadership. Morgan did not. On two instances, Morgan spoke to his capabilities to lead others by proposing changes that he alone decided while being careful to do it in a way that would not overwhelm principals, vice principals, and teaching staff. Adversely, Mervin felt that it was the principal's job to resist the typical top-down approach. He explained this with the quote:

> I am the principal, but I am also part of a group of democratic teachers that are working with a group of students. It all comes back to the thing of teaching. I am a colleague first. I think that one of the things that has allowed that is a trust between colleagues and me and colleagues and each other and that doesn't happen if you become too top-down.

Unlike Morgan and Mervin, Leah and George, argued that leading in a democratic way involves personality traits as being key to facilitating democracy and citizenship in their schools. They each spoke about being "approachable" and "open" to others and being "present" in their schools. Other than taking active steps to listen to others' views on a school matter, which is an important part of leading for democracy, Leah and George were incapable of providing democratic leadership procedures.

Perhaps the best example of Mervin's perspectives on his role as a leader of a group of staff is best explained through this extensive quote:

> The power and leverage of decision making can stop with [the principal] or they can open it up to everybody. That makes their role important from that angle. You have to let people fly with their passions. As a principal, that is my main job – finding out what the passion of each of the staff members are – finding out what matters to them. Micro-managing each of their initiatives – forget it. I just think in a mind of a principal – this was a real realization for me when I was doing some tours around – I was hearing, 'in my school I do this, I do that'. It dawned on me that this school is a community, teachers, students, me (physically motioning concentric circles moving inward). As I was saying 'my', that is really wrong. I focused on that whole phraseology of 'our'. When I talk I am very mindful of when I talk with parents and community members, I talk about 'our' school because we share this facility with the community.

Mervin's statement on how a principal can encourage and facilitate democracy in school is indicative of democratic leadership. He describes himself as but one individual of a teaching staff working with a group of students. Acting and behaving in a democratic way has allowed Mervin to participate in changes within the school as a colleague and not direct it as a principal. By focusing on this leadership style, Mervin is able to open school governance for all to participate in.

**Discussion**

After listening to the participants share their perspectives and experiences, it became clear that all four participants viewed democracy and citizenship education as significant matters in their schools but applied that understanding to their professional practice in different ways with different results. The interpretations of democracy and citizenship education presented by these participants can teach us three valuable lessons.

First, it can be very difficult for educational administrators to cut a democratic path through the complexities of the current undemocratic structural realities of the profession of educational administration in Alberta. In particular, George and Leah shared their experience of struggling to find ways to avoid or hurdle obstacles of democratic processes in the school they led, specifically with the restrictive nature of educational policies and the hierarchical management of school operations. For these two participants, this resulted in a preference to remain obedient to bureaucratic forms of school management. George and Leah provided democratic opportunities for staff and students that were sporadic, weak, and tokenized. Morgan provided similar examples in his responses. These participants described policy and procedure that either completely lacked student, staff, and/or parent participation or, at the very most, was disconnected from any meaningful opportunity to participate powerfully in school procedures. When students, staff, and parents were given opportunities to participate in school decisions, they occurred haphazardly, inconsistently, and in limited locations. Any authentic and substantial change in democratic function, and therefore learning about democracy, is very unlikely to occur this way.

Second, and in contrast to the first, a valuable lesson gained as a result of this study is that it is possible to encourage an authentic and deep learning of and practice for democracy and citizenship in a public school. Mervin's responses present a learning environment more aligned with the theories and arguments made for a powerfully engaging democratic school that encourages meaningful participation amongst the school stakeholders. Mervin provided examples of democratic and citizenship learning opportunities that were authentic, strong, and sustained. He felt that this resulted in a school environment that offered the school stakeholders greater freedom and greater responsibility.
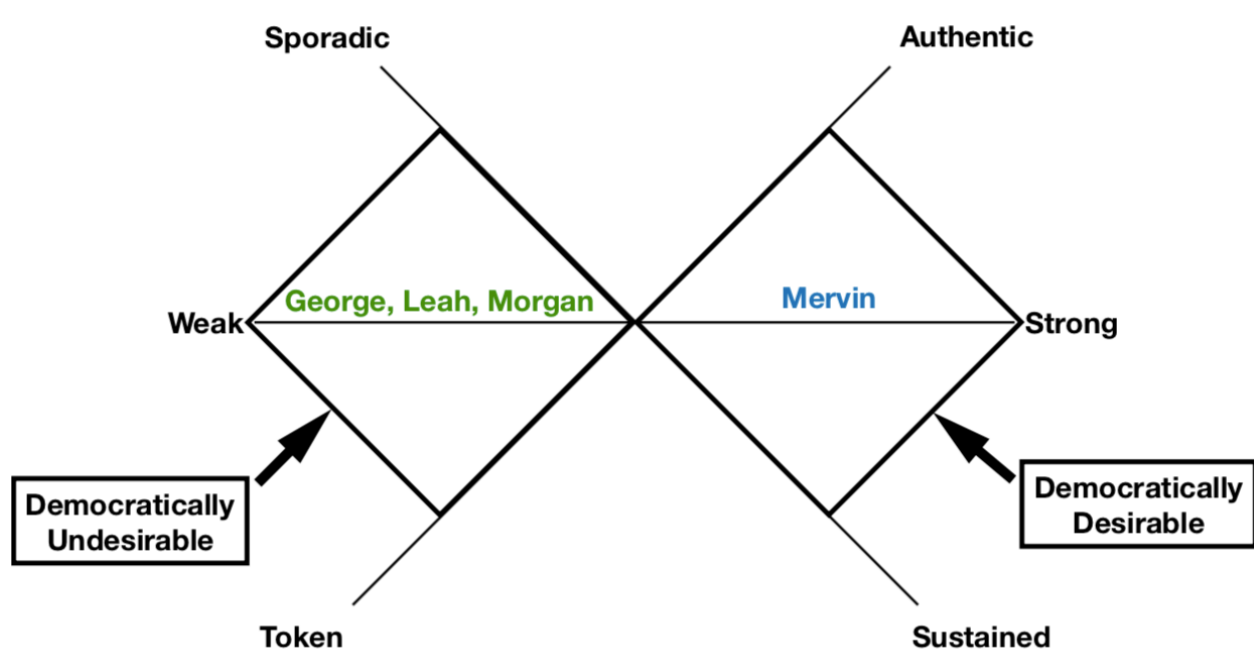


For Mervin, democracy and citizenship education is the first task in his occupation. He takes deliberate action to encourage his staff and students to be a part of the decision-making in the school. He aids the group in making decisions by helping his teaching staff realize transformative goals for the school. He acts as *primus inter pares* (Woods, 2005) – a first among equals – by accepting the views of the staff and students. The democratic school environment that Mervin leads is reflective of his desire to include deeper and meaningful participation on the part of his staff and students in the building. He is capable of doing so because he leads by democratic example. He attends to democracy and citizenship as a first task. He distributes his power to the staff and supports procedures that begin from a ground-swell of teacher ideas and dedicated work. He encourages his staff and students to have freedom and take ownership over their decisions and actions while maintaining a common principle of remaining accountable to the group. By encouraging a high level of participation in policies and procedures that are sustainable and persistent, students and staff are learning the skills demanded of a strong and legitimate public sphere.

The third lesson this study can offer is somewhat presumptuous. Mervin felt that his ability to lead in a democratic way was aided by his superiors trusting and supporting his leadership capabilities. Without this kind of "hands-off approach" taken by his superiors, it is difficult to assume that educational administrators, even those who adopt similar democratic school leadership procedures and behaviors as Mervin, would be able to experience the same kind of results as Mervin in their schools. George, Leah, and Morgan spoke a great deal about the limitations placed on them by the hierarchical order. Mervin presented the opposite case. This suggests that when educational administrators from the upper-most powerful positions within the bureaucratic chain of school command relieve themselves of managerial obligations typical of their role, only then is democratic school leadership by a principal or vice-principal possible. More realistically, it is safe to assume that individuals in School Board Trustee, Superintendent, and/or Director roles have an impact on a principal or vice-principal's ability to lead in a democratic way, but to what extent is difficult to know. Therefore, there are limits to the model that Mervin presents in this paper. It may not be the perfect prototypical model of democratic school leadership to which other educational administrators in Alberta can aspire, but it does provide some significant direction for others to consider.

## Conclusion

The goal of this study was to understand educational administrators' perspectives of and experience with democracy and citizenship education relative to their specific educational contexts. Achieving a better understanding of this topic is important if we are to aid educational leaders in their capacity to encourage a learning environment that will cultivate the necessary skills and knowledge of a democratic life. This study provides some robust empirical evidence of educational administrators' perceptions of democracy and citizenship education.

Each participant was able to tell me a tremendous amount about how an educational leader deals with democracy and citizenship education. Through their responses, it became evident that three of them (George, Leah, and Morgan) shared similar conceptions of how democracy and citizenship is to exist in the public education system while another (Mervin) shared a completely different understanding and experience of the same topics. George, Leah, and Morgan paint a picture of an education system incapable of helping students learn about and live a democratic lifestyle. If there are more school environments that share similar patterns and themes of school functions as these, it is reasonable to conclude that democracy in Canada will continue to remain in a 'thin' state. Mervin, however, paints the opposite picture; his school is the manifestation of a democratic learning environment. Mervin is an example of an educational leader that places democracy as a guiding framework for himself, the staff, and the students of the school. He attends to democracy and citizenship first. He distributes his power to the staff and supports procedures that begin from the ground-up. He encourages his students to take responsibility over their learning and their actions by taking risks and experiencing failure and success. By encouraging a high level of participation in policies and procedures that are sustainable and persistent, students and staff in Mervin's school are leaning the skills demanded of a democratic citizen.

There are a number of emerging questions that come to the fore as a result of this study. Three questions will be offered here as possible direction for future studies of this kind. The first

question is about the effect of a graduate school education on a democratic educational leadership practice. All four of the participants in this study had completed a master's degree in educational leadership before this study took place. The drastic difference of perceptions of democracy and citizenship education among these participants may suggest that they successfully completed those programs having learned completely different things about these two topics. What then can we make of graduate level educational administration programs that teach about social justice, democracy, and citizenship if these theories are not able to be effectively applied to an educational administrator's leadership practice? The second emerging question focuses on the potential effect that democratic school leadership could have on relieving educational administrators of their managerial obligations. Research has shown that principals in Canada are experiencing an increase in work intensification (Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2014, 2015, 2017) which has led to more physical and emotional stress (Chaplain, 2001; Darmody & Smyth, 2016). As can be seen in Mervin's case, distributing his managerial obligations to others resulted in a perceived increase in time afforded to lead. Could there be a correlation between democratic school leadership practice and a decrease in managerial burdens typical of educational administrators; in other words, can work intensification be lessened with the adoption of a democratic leadership practice? The third and final emerging question considers the views of the students in these two school districts. It would be very interesting to know if the students reflect the stances assumed by the administrative participants in this study. In what ways would the students of these schools explain their experiences of democratic and citizenship education? In what ways would those experiences differ across schools and school districts? These questions offer room for further research in democratic and citizenship education.

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