

# Negotiating for Democratic Communities in Schools: Principals' Perspectives

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## Introduction

This study explored the strategic use of negotiating as a tool for creating and enhancing democratic communities. Principals have been described as an important unit of analysis in examining leadership practice (Spillane, 2006). They have also been described as the “school catalyst for success for all stakeholders” and the chief proponent of the value of democracy (Wilmore, 2002, p. 5). As facilitators of leadership in schools, the patterns of principals' behaviors are likely to determine the extent of the practice of democratic principles.

Democratic ideals of leadership “call for school administrators to commit to new practices of diversity that uphold social justice, concern for oppression and a healthy skepticism toward leadership and authority” (Mullen, 2006, p. 100). According to Mullen, democratic leaders formulate just decisions, ask moral questions, and solicit diverse stakeholder view points. It is through such actions that schools may realize ideals for democratic communities. In the writings of Williams, Ricciardi, and Blackbourn (2006), democratic leadership is described as involving “leaders using various decision procedures that include follower input” (p. 590). Follower input is obtained through consultation, integration, and accommodation of multidirectional communications with subordinates. These actions then lead to the development of networks, and the sharing of power among leaders and followers. Because of the nebulous nature of these networks, defining democracy as finite has been challenged (Furman & Shields, 2005). Just like “the concept of social justice, democratic community is an ideal, a moral purpose toward which educators strive, one that is never fully realized” (p. 120).

## Method

The origins of this article lay with discussions that indicated that knowing what leaders are supposed to do is important, but knowing how they do it (democratic pedagogy, pedagogical leadership,

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and democratic accountability) on a daily basis is essential, both in understanding leadership practice and preparing future school leaders (Place, Ballinger, Wasonga, Pival, & Edmonds, 2006). A qualitative method of study was used to identify repeated and recognizable patterns of behavior indicating how principals engaged members of the school community in decision-making processes. The phenomenological approach to this study focused on increased understanding of processes used by school principals to engage others in decision making and nurturing democratic communities. Phenomenology refers to the lived experience of these principals. Although subjective, the focus of the research method is on the essence of the meaning between participants and the world in which they interact (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

## Research Questions

The research questions generated to guide the study were: (1) How do school principals describe their conceptions of a democratic community? and (2) How do school principals relate to the concept of democratic community?

## Definition of Terms

Democratic community. This study focused on democratic community as a place in which decisions are made “in ways that respect the fundamental equality of each citizen, both as participant in deliberation and as the bearer of potentially equal power in decision[s]” (Mansbridge, 1995, p. 342).<sup>1</sup>

Democratic leadership. Mullen's (2006) conception of democratic leadership and capacity was used where democratic leadership can be characterized as having three strands:

- (a) Democratic pedagogy: School leadership approaches the renewal or improvement of schools, teachers, and students as participatory and community oriented;
- (b) pedagogical leadership: An organization's resources are expanded through community-building efforts where the value of human supersedes that of economic prosperity; and
- (c) democratic accountability: leaders negotiate the seemingly contradictory forces of democracy and accountability (p. 100).

Negotiating. For the purposes of this study, negotiating refers to the ways participating principals mediated, managed, or engaged the school community in deciding matters related to school (Bruffee, 1999; Cranston, 2001; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004; Norton, 2005).

## Participants

Included in this analysis were the discussions of seven focus groups comprised of principals from six states: Michigan, Illinois, Alabama, Missouri, New Mexico, and Ohio. A total of 44 principals from four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school, provided data for this study. Focus groups ranged in size from five to eight participants.

## Mode of Data Analysis

The transcripts were read several times for familiarity. During this process, the researchers looked for convergence in concepts from participants' narratives. Information that demonstrated a common theme was put together through a process of coding and data reduction (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Coding and data reduction involved “organizing them [the themes], breaking them into manageable units,

synthesizing them, looking for patterns, discovering what is important, and what is to be learned” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 157). Through axial and selective coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), the researchers identified themes. The responses leading to these themes were further organized as categories based on the frequency of occurrence in all the focus groups (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). As a check on the reliability of the coding, a second coder, unfamiliar with the data, coded the same data set. The inter-rater reliability between the second coder and the researchers was established at 87%. After themes were identified, the frequencies of occurrence by theme were counted. Themes were then ranked according to the frequency level.

### Findings

Five themes of negotiation were identified through data analysis: Interacting; evoking; empowering; recognizing challenges; and controlling. In addition to the five themes, data indicated that “hiring the right people,” was the foundation for developing a democratic community. Participants described the right people as those who were willing to engage in active discourse, and leaders who listened, modeled their values, and respected what other people had to offer. The principals agreed that shared decision-making yielded better decisions and actions. To make this happen effectively, however, principals needed facilitation skills that enabled them to be perceived as predictable and in control. Although control was the theme ranked last (See Table), participants justified the need for control by explaining that schools are bureaucratic organizations where leaders are expected to be responsible and accountable for outcomes. The principals also expressed concerns about substantive community participation. They stated that often teachers did not come up with substantive suggestions; were not willing to take risks; were too busy; or felt that the principals were paid to make decisions. The principals assumed that teachers, students, and the community perceived the negotiating processes as influential.

**Table**  
**Percentages of Responses by Theme**

Themes	Percentage of Responses by Theme (%)
1. Interacting	39
2. Evoking	22
3. Empowering	16
4. Recognizing challenges	12
5. Controlling	11

#### *Interacting*

Interactions are contextual formal and informal practical conversations rooted in experiences and everyday thinking. Bruffee (1999) wrote that conversations are the most powerful ways of influencing people. Conversations may lead to new products, services, or systems (Nonoka & Takeuchi, 1995). Sergiovani (2006) found that interactions among personnel in schools were necessary for

promoting and institutionalizing decisions. In addition, a principal's interactive style impact a teachers' construction of others as influential (Cranston, 2001; Johnson & Venable, 1986; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Hallet, & Diamond, 2003).

All participating principals in this study used interacting as a way to develop interpersonal relationships or build social capital. Participants indicated that interactions brought in more facts and processes to consider when making decisions. In other words, as they engaged others in conversation about school matters, they were more likely to discover new ways of looking at issues, and questioning or affirming their assumptions, often yielding new facts that were likely to influence their decisions. For example, the team approach was mentioned by principals from Illinois, Michigan, and Missouri. A principal from Illinois used teamwork to bring teachers together to exchange ideas and to develop objective understanding of students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs). Here is how she explained the process of interacting through teamwork, “When we sat as a team,” she said, “...one teacher says, ‘This child, he swears and he doesn't do his work,’ and another teacher says, ‘Mmm, I don't have any trouble with him.’” These dialogues among teachers enabled them to question their assumptions in this case; disown some of their own judgments; and become more objective in their deliberations about students.

Another principal from Illinois explained that he built an engaging school culture through “conversations with other people” and “face to face contact.” For him, interacting “broadened the conversation base” by engaging even parents who “didn't like what I was doing, but bringing in new ideas that I won't necessarily get.” These interactions were seen as building blocks for relationships that would translate into greater community participation.

A principal from Michigan explained that top-down decisions can become democratic “by talking about it as staff” to figure out the best way to resolve an issue. Principals from Missouri emphasized conversations about facts with the hope that a common background (interest) would more likely lead to more widely acceptable conclusions and decisions. They gave the example of a reading program that was not working despite the teachers' best efforts. Teamwork was a method used to determine problem areas and possible solutions.

#### *Evoking*

Evoking, the second most frequently (22%) used negotiating tool or theme, was used to stimulate thoughts, ideas, and interactions among members of the school community. Posing simple, unsophisticated questions, can reveal many important problems and solutions (Blase & Blase, 1999; Bruffee, 1999). Questions, promises, imperative statements, or data challenge school and community members to consider opposing or alternative views. Evoking may also lead to the breakdown of routines, habits, or cognitive patterns and assumptions, providing opportunities to reconsider foundational thinking and perspectives. According to Nonoka & Takeuchi (1995), a breakdown may lead “attention to dialogue as a means of social interaction, thus helping us to create new concepts” (p. 79).

According to Browne, Curley, and Benson (1997), evoking implicitly assumes that the more knowledge, information, or motivation there is, the better the chances of identifying what is relevant to the decision-making process. With the speed at which technology and information changes, evoking other people's skills and knowledge is a source of competitive advantage for any school leader. Evoking may

reduce the impact of Simon's (1979) theory of "bounded rationality" which describes decisions that are made by settling for less than optimum decision making because the decision maker is limited by what he or she knows.

Principals engaged in evoking through promises, questions, imperative statements (directives), or data. For example, to get his staff to take risks, an Illinois principal "promised to take the heat" for any failures. In return, his teachers "have been good about thinking of what else to do. ...I told the staff that if you have questions ask the teachers, if you have complaints, they are mine because it is my decision." He was amazed at "how many more people came on board to help with things" just because he said up front, "I am going to take the heat for it. I still want your input."

Another principal made her intentions known through her critical statements that laid the groundwork for what was expected from teachers: "I am paying for subs. You guys will all have subs and we will bring everybody on the docket and run them through an entire day [of training on IEPs]." She told the teachers, "You need to do what is best for kids before you bring them up to that table." Based on these statements, she claimed, "I have seen just a lot of good ideas coming together."

Evoking was also realized through experimenting, creating alternatives, and using research. Experimenting with ideas or alternatives inspired members to engage in the process together. One principal said, "I feel very strongly that finding ways to ask the right questions helps in getting them [teachers] involved in how to help the kids." A principal from New Mexico indicated that "giving them [parents, teachers and children] the freedom to voice their opinions regardless of what the outcome is, they got to say what they thought and what they felt." In his opinion, people had strengths that may not be known about as a principal unless you "tap into it" (evoke it). All focus groups discussed data and research as ways to get teachers and parents engaged and understand implications of student performance. A principal from Missouri indicated that this approach "has led to real change in the classroom and the teaching approach that teachers use." Whether the principals used data, questions, or imperative statements, the process of evoking encouraged teacher involvement, responsibility, problem-solving, data-driven decision-making, and more thoughtful and deliberative actions.

### *Empowering*

Empowering was the third (16%) most frequently used negotiating tool. The literature is replete with the benefits of empowering teachers and students in schools (Blase & Blase, 2001, 2004; Short & Greer, 1997; Weiss & Cambone, 2000). This study supported previous findings that empowering teachers enabled them to participate in school governance and, thus, expand and create a democratic community.

The sense of empowerment in a school is the degree to which members can make decisions that control events critical to their work and the perceptions that members can effectively make happen what they wish to have happen through their abilities and competence (Klecker & Loadman, 1998; Short & Greer, 1997, p. 139). Leaders empower by creating a culture that supports risk-taking, active problem solving, opportunities for new learning, and by using the competencies and abilities of others. Such a culture leads to the development of "shared understanding of what's important, what's

acceptable, what actions are required, and how these actions will get done" (Wheatley, 2000, p. 341).

Participants recognized that empowerment supported democratic ideals. For example, in response to a question on what it meant to have other people want to have a voice in decision-making, a principal responded:

That's an easy value to espouse... but there is the reality that until you build a culture in the building where the teachers know what you are all about and understand where you are coming from [in terms of involving others in decision-making], it won't work.

In other words, principals needed to establish enabling environments that would lead to shared understandings of expectations in order for others to become constructive participants. One Illinois principal promoted empowerment through listening and providing meaningful opportunities for involvement. He said, "Just the listening to [teachers], getting them involved in consequential activities makes them feel much empowered." He qualified this statement by adding, "I do not mean in a union-empowered way, but just that we are here for the kids and we all have a say, and I think that is a good thing." A principal from Alabama realized that getting all of her teachers in different task forces made a difference in their engagement because "they have that power to make decisions ...they are sharing decisions and things are just lovely."

The principals also referenced professional development and teacher recognition as sources of empowerment. In describing a principal's role in empowering, one principal observed, "An administrators' role is developing staffs' concepts, knowledge, new teaching strategies, and providing them staff development opportunities." She noted that just like children, teachers needed to be motivated to become involved:

It is true, I think sometimes in education we think that they are servants (referring to teachers). Some of the best things that work for kids in terms of recognition, work for teachers also. When the teachers feel good about what they are doing and they feel as if they are empowered by new ideas and strategies, they are going to go to the classrooms and do the best for the kids.

Another principal explained that modeling empowerment and risk-taking by school district leaders enhanced the chances of teachers doing the same. Thus, according to these participating principals, empowering teachers through shared understanding (common interest), professional development, opportunities for meaningful participation, and motivation engendered democratic community and accountability.

### *Recognizing Challenges*

Recognizing challenges was the fourth (12%) most frequently used negotiating tool. Recognizing challenges indicated the continuous tensions that exist in communities between collective and individual interests (Etzioni, 1998; Mansbridge, 1995; Mullen, 2006). As Janis (1972) and Janis and Mann (1977) indicated, recognizing and accepting the existence of challenges in the process of constructing democratic communities increased opportunities for success and decreased the occurrence of groupthink. However, at the point of dealing with the challenges of fostering a democratic community, principals often revert to control, especially when decisions do not reflect their personal interests, vision, or beliefs.

School administrators pursue multiple and often conflicting goals within a network that constrains and restricts maximization of goal achievement (Cook & Levi, 1990; Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007). According to Mansbridge (1995), the challenge for leaders and communities is to find “ways of strengthening community ties while developing institutions to protect individuals from community oppression” (p. 341). Mullen (2006) described this as “negotiating the seemingly contradictory forces of democracy” (p. 100). Principals from Michigan opined that most people who engaged the school had an agenda, least of which was student interests. Participants recognized that dealing with these challenges was part of the process of developing a democratic community. Challenges identified in this study included personal agendas, inconsistency, diversity, and power-sharing without losing authority.

A principal from Alabama asserted that even people who had personal agendas or people who disagreed with school policies still deserved the opportunity to be heard. Weiss and Cambone (2000) reported that principals did not find teachers’ contributions to differ significantly from theirs.<sup>2</sup> The findings may suggest the need for caution against “groupthink,” a term coined by Janis (1972). For this reason, the idea of including dissenters actually may be necessary.

Another challenge expressed in this study was consistency. Without consistency, a leader may lose credibility with the community. A principal from Illinois cautioned that consistency was often contextual and fluid, causing tension between community and individualism, stating, “They [the community] are looking to see whether you are consistent. If you espouse something and change when it doesn’t seem to be the expedient thing to do politically...you have lost it. You’ve lost all the capital you built.” Another principal expressed challenges of consistency in this statement:

Sometimes what is good for kids can be viewed as inconsistent because the staff will say, “Wow, in that situation you did such and such, and in this situation you did this.” Yes, I am individualizing and that is kind of hard.

Diversity of opinions and interest was also discussed as a challenge for developing a democratic community. In one principal’s opinion, “People offer great ideas and somehow it doesn’t fit with the objectives you are trying to align to, then they feel isolated or not listened to. That becomes a challenge. When everybody wants to be heard, that’s hard to do.”

Giving up power and still maintaining authority was mentioned in all of the focus groups as a challenge to establishing a democratic community. Short and Greer (1997) and Klecker and Loadman (1998) discovered that leaders find it very difficult to give up power. Some principals struggled with being absent from teacher-led committees while the teachers often wondered if it was right to have certain discussions without the principal (Short & Greer, p. 145). In an attempt to explain the challenges of power struggles, a principal said,

It’s hard to give up any of that power because you do see it as loss. But you need those other [teachers’] ideas. ...And there are times that not everybody, when you get a bunch of voices in there, has the same goal.

### *Control*

Control was used 11% as a negotiating tool for a democratic community. The use of control in schools was explained by Weiss and Cambone (2000) as follows: “Principals were responsible for

the school and accountable to the superintendent, and in certain cases, they believed that their judgment had to prevail” (p. 371). This finding confirmed the tension between democracy and accountability (Mullen, 2006) and tension between community and self interest (Mansbridge, 1995). In this study, principals seemed to exercise control because of unease about the impact of teachers opting not to participate; operating outside school interests; or acting against the best interest of the child. They considered control as a way to enhance democratic community while protecting children from oppression by teachers or the system. This form of control gave the principal power to create boundaries for participation, and the ability to engage those not naturally inclined to participate for reasons ranging from differences in opinion to self selected isolation. Even though control in ordinary circumstances may be considered negative, it was not considered negative by principals in this study; especially when it was used in the best interest of students.

Wheatley (2000) described control in organizations as designing people’s jobs and requiring them to perform with “machine-like obedience” (p. 339). It is the opposite of empowerment. Leaders who exercised control believed that their vision was required to energize the community, that incentives motivated the community if they had no intrinsic motivation, and that the organization should impose plans on community and avoid real participation (Wheatley, 2000). This is typical of Theory X leadership which McGregor (1960) found to be incompatible with democratic organizations because it conflicted with individual needs fulfillment in the work place. Although control may discourage participation and productivity in organizations, it may be necessary in the bureaucratic pattern of governance that characterizes most school systems, where principals are mostly responsible for outcomes (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; McGhee & Nelson, 2005; Short & Greer, 1999; Thompson, Blackmore, Sachs, & Tregenza, 2003). Control may lead to tension between democracy and accountability as explained by Mullen’s (2006) third strand of democratic leadership capacity - “democratic accountability” (p.100), in which leaders have to negotiate the seemingly contradictory forces of democracy and accountability.

Participants in this study expressed fear of letting others be responsible for that for which they themselves were held to account. Although they perceived their role as that of consensus builder, they found it prudent to exercise control by setting conditions and constraints for members based on student interests, school vision, or leadership accountability. Control was practiced as a self preservation instinct almost at a subconscious level. Etzioni (1998) explained that social and personal tensions cannot be eliminated. For example, the principals referenced “vision” as integral to the development of a democratic community, but they talked of “my vision” rather than “our vision.” One principal expressed the belief that his vision was “required to guide others” or, in Wheatley’s (2000) words, “energize the community” (p. 339). According to another principal, to succeed, “I have to be confident in who I am and what my vision is in order to work with people. It’s possible to lose control of the whole process.” His argument for control was:

As an administrator I am held responsible and accountable for our building. If I don’t have the authority to do something because the conversation has taken that away from me, that is scary because who wants the responsibility without authority?

These principals articulated that control was not only necessary for purposes of accountability, but also as an exercise of power to include those who would otherwise not participate. Their statements indicated that it would be difficult to create a democratic community without some form of control. It was important to find a balance between individual interests and school interest, and ways to be in control of what was happening in the school without constraining involvement of members (school and community).

### Implications and Need for Future Research

In this study, although principals indicated that negotiating led to more informed decisions and/or actions, issues of control/responsibility/accountability were sources of tension and fear. Participating principals were doubtful that every school leader believed that democratic leadership was the way to lead in all schools. Bruffee (1999) explained that most school leaders and teachers are already deeply acculturated in bureaucratic governance. Some of them preferred to govern in the foundational conventions of traditional schooling (as a bureaucracy or as a machine). Despite this, organizations have become more diverse and complex and, social constructivist understandings of leadership have emerged (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Spillane, 2006). Social constructivist leadership involves shared decision-making and a focus on the interactions between leaders and followers. Just as Freire (1990) required teachers and students to be teachers and students simultaneously, social constructionist theories require teachers and leaders to share and exchange roles. How school leaders' behaviors contribute to the social constructionist leadership approach is what is at stake because leaders tend to stay in dominant situations most of the time.

The results of this study found that within schools, principals used certain skills to negotiate bureaucratic roles, and expectations in order to invite all voices. These skills are what Mullen (2006) defined as democratic pedagogy (interacting, evoking, empowering, control). In using these pedagogies, the principals demonstrated that inviting others "can improve the competitive status of the group as a whole by providing an efficient way of solving problems of collective action" (Mansbridge, 1995, p. 342).

Three of the five negotiating tools (interacting, evoking, and empowering) served to expand the principals' resources by tapping into the human capital. Interacting was the most frequently used tool (39%) in negotiating for democratic communities. Interacting, initiated by principals, enhanced dialogue and interpersonal relationships. While Spillane (2006) established that interactions are the key to unlocking leadership practice from a distributed perspective, Liberman, Saxl, and Miles (2000) found that interactions enhanced interpersonal relationships. These interpersonal relationships helped legitimize leaders' positions in case of conflict or resistance in the process of engaging others. Bruffee (1999) proposed that the most powerful form of persuasion was the influence that interlocutors have on one another in the process of interacting. In this study, whenever principals engaged teachers, students, or teams, they distributed and generated knowledge and authority among themselves and thereby expanded and exceeded what the principal would have achieved alone.

Wheatley (2000) asserted that leaders have consistently chosen control over productivity associated with participation of others. This may be true, but in this study, control was used because principals recognized: (1) The fact that they are unilaterally held responsible and

accountable for the outcomes of their schools; (2) they must guard community and student interest; and (3) they needed to include those who may be inclined to self-isolate. It is also important to note that behaviors reflecting the willingness of principals to engage others without control were practiced 89% of the time compared to control at 11% of the time. By using the engaging patterns of behaviors more often, but in combination with control where necessary, principals transcended the traditional binary distinction between control and consensus. They applied the "new golden rule" of greatly reducing "the distance between ego's preferred course and the virtuous" (Etzioni, 1998, p. viii). For many of these principals, in order to achieve the mandate of educating every child, they used a range of mechanisms to engage as many people on staff and in the community without abdicating responsibility and accountability. They recognized that the work of principals and teachers was highly interdependent and neither could succeed without the other. They also tried to ensure that everybody had a common focus. Sometimes this required the use of control. On the other hand, the data indicated that control may have been used as a self-preservation instinct. The principals believed that they had to exercise authority (ego-preferred course) in order to be seen as the leader by those within the school and the larger society.

Fullan (2002) and Wilmore (2002) maintained that beyond a self preservation instinct, there are systemic norms of control. The principalship is an embedded role, and it cannot be assumed that personal strategies alone would lead to the desired democratic community. Systemic norms of control, some of which are beyond the powers of a principal may impact the extent of a democratic community. Therefore, the extent of the democratic community seemed to reside not only in the principals' abilities to maximize inputs from community without control or consensus, but also in the systemic norms, structures, and leadership expectations provided by the school district, the immediate, and larger community. This study suggests the need for better understanding of: (1) How negotiating skills may be developed and delivered in principalship preparation programs; (2) methods of accessing members of the school community and which of the negotiating tools to use with particular people or problems; and (3) how these skills may be developed by practicing school principals.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> According to Mansbridge, forms of democracy depend on the degree of common interest or tension between community and individual. The greater the degree of common interest, the lesser the degree of tension between participants in the deliberation when making decisions. Etzioni (1998) referred to this tension as the “golden rule,” a rule that contains the “unspoken tension between what ego would prefer to do, ...[and that] which ego recognizes as the right course of action” (p. *viii*). He argued that it is very difficult to eliminate this profound source of social and personal struggle. For this reason, Etzioni suggested a “new golden rule” which is, to “greatly reduce the distance between ego’s preferred course [of action] and the virtuous one” (p. *viii*). This rule implies that the levels of democracy depend on the gap between ego and virtue or individual and common interest, where virtue and common interest are the preferred. Thus, the challenge for school leaders in creating democratic communities is to find a balance between personal and community interests. The “stronger the community [interest], the less useful are aggregate democratic forms like majority rule, ...and the more useful are deliberate democratic forms” (Mansbridge, 1995, p. 342). Strike (1999) referred to these varieties of democracies as “thin” and “thick” democracies where thick democracy promotes mutual accommodation and agreement while thin democracy works fundamentally for conflicting interests.

<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, teachers reported that “the fruits of their participation were not visible” (Weiss & Cambone, 2000, p. 373).