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Leadership for Democratic Education in Troubled Times

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Abstract: In this article, the authors address the challenges facing democracy in the U.S., including restrictions on voting rights, declines in the rule of law, disputed elections, and the non-peaceful transfer of power. They assess the historic failure on the part of K-12 education systems and university leadership preparation programs to prepare students for living in a democracy, and pose questions including: "To what extent has our education system contributed to this situation? To what extent have we failed to prepare our students to take their places as constructive and productive members of their communities and of our pluralistic democracy? And if we have failed, what can we, and must we, do about it?" As a path toward more democratic outcomes, the authors propose a greater emphasis on transformative education, in which transformative leaders strive to create the conditions to enact democratic education in ways that truly prepare K-12 students to take their place as informed, engaged, and constructive participants in their communities and our pluralistic democracy. They further recommend attention to transformative leadership in educational leadership preparation programs as an anchor for leadership studies.

Keywords: democracy, civic education, transformative leadership

Introduction

As we write this essay, our democracy is facing a severe test. Voting rights are systematically being restricted, the rule of law is being undermined, the legitimacy of elections is contested, and the peaceful transfer of power has been attacked in unprecedented ways. Given this context, K-12 education and university leadership preparation programs are faced with a difficult and disconcerting question: to what extent has our education system contributed to this situation? To what extent have

we failed to prepare our students to take their places as constructive and productive members of their communities and of our pluralistic democracy? And if we have failed, what can we, and must we, do about it?

These uncomfortable but critically important questions were explored at the Arizona Professors of Educational Leadership's (APEL) 2021 conference. One of its sessions was devoted to the role of school and district leadership and university leadership preparation programs in preparing our K-12 students to take their place as informed, engaged, and constructive participants in their communities and our democracy. Titled *Promoting Skills and Dispositions for Democratic Education*, the session was structured as a panel discussion with a K-12 Superintendent, University Educational Leadership clinical professor, and two research professors, followed by an opportunity for the audience to contribute their perspectives and insights to the dialogue. The authors of this essay participated in the panel.[1]

The dialogue between the panel and audience was organized around the following premise: *In the midst of the 2020 pandemic, societal concerns about systemic racism and equity, the polarizing viewpoints espoused in social media, and projected learning gaps for K-12 students, we must consider the key purposes of public education and how to prepare students and educational leaders for participating in our pluralistic democracy*.

To explore that premise, we engaged with three questions:

1. *To what extent are our K-12 schools currently structured to support students in developing the essential understandings, skills, and habits of mind for constructively participating in their communities, and more broadly, in our pluralistic democracy (a key purpose of public education since the Common School period)?*
2. *How might our K-12 schools be structured to allow students, in their everyday lives at school, to actually participate in and practice democracy in substantive ways, in order to develop the necessary understandings, skills, and habits of mind?*
3. *How can we rethink leadership preparation to better prepare our aspiring school leaders to transform their schools' structures and cultures in ways that address the concerns discussed in questions 1 and 2?*

In this essay, we will elaborate on these three questions as a starting point for developing a conceptual and applied framework that can help us think about the role of public schooling in a pluralistic democracy at the level of practice, while also grounding it in the socio-political environment in which we find ourselves. We invite you, our readers, to think together with us, and if you find this evolving framework promising, to take it to the next level in your own specific contexts, in ways that will support our K-12 schools in becoming the schools our kids, teachers, families, and our democracy need and deserve in these troubled times.

[1] Carl Hermanns is a clinical associate professor and David Berliner is Regents' Professor of Education, Emeritus, at Arizona State University.

Question 1: ***To what extent are our K-12 schools currently structured to support students in developing the essential understandings, skills, and habits of mind for constructively participating in their communities, and more broadly, in our pluralistic democracy (a key purpose of public education since the Common School period)?***

To answer this question, we first need to come to some agreement on the essential understandings, skills, and habits of mind students would need to participate constructively in a pluralistic democracy. To do so, let's begin by reviewing the role of public education in a democratic society from both historical and more recent perspectives. The belief in the vital importance and central role of public education in the development of our country and the sustenance of our democracy runs deep, starting with the colonial concern that the settlers of the New World be able to read the Bible. Support for some form of public education increased during revolutionary times, so that citizens could read, understand, and come to underwrite the amazing Constitution of our new country's fledgling experiment in democratic governance.

This understanding of the importance of education as foundational to the success of democracy is illustrated by the following quotations from some of our nation's founders:

> *I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is, not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.*
>
> ~ Thomas Jefferson, 1820, Letter to William Charles Jarvis

> *The advancement and diffusion of Knowledge. . . is the only guardian of true liberty.*
>
> ~ James Madison, 1825, Letter to George Thompson

> *If Virtue and Knowledge are diffused among the People, they will never be enslavd. This will be their great Security*.
>
> ~ Samuel Adams, 1779, Letter to James Warren

Horace Mann, the founder of the movement for universal public education in the U.S. in the mid-1800s, was influenced by the zeitgeist of those revolutionary times. In championing public education, Mann wrote that "Education is best provided in schools embracing children of all religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds" and argued that "Education is our only political safety. Outside of this ark, all is deluge." And although it is not yet a fully realized truth, he wrote that "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery." Mann believed that public education is "the cornerstone of our communities and our democracy."

These arguments for the critical role of public education in our democracy were echoed over a century later by Amy Gutmann (1987). In *Democratic Education*, Gutmann argues for the importance and legitimacy of public education

to engage children in understanding essential democratic values and developing rational deliberation and critical thinking skills "if they are to live up to the democratic ideal of sharing political sovereignty as citizens" (p. 51).

More recently, in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy* (Berliner & Hermanns, eds., 2022), a number of eminent educational researchers and practitioners reflect on the purpose, promise, and challenges for public education and our democracy. Consider the following arguments made by some of our essayists specific to the issues we address here, and note the understandings, skills, and habits of mind embedded in their descriptions.

Carol Lee (2022) expands on Gutmann's argument for rational deliberation and critical thinking by situating it in the role that public education must play in preparing each new generation of young people to critically interrogate the persistent conundrums and inequities that are embedded in our evolving democracy "and to engage in civic reasoning and civic discourse, informed by a commitment to democratic values" (p. 167). Additionally, since civic discourse and decision-making will inevitably include contested points of view, Lee argues that civic reasoning will require "the ability to empathize with others, to seek to understand something about the experiences of others different from ourselves" (p. 172). She concludes by arguing that civic reasoning and discourse are essential skills for the maintenance of democracy, that public schools play an essential role in preparing young people to become civically engaged, and, echoing Gutmann's argument in *Democratic Education,* that public education

> is the only public institution that can ubiquitously seek to socialize democratic values. This does not mean an uncritical patriotism, but a belief that despite our historical challenges around equity and opportunity, the needle moves slowly forward because of our collective efforts and beliefs in our common humanity (p. 174).

David Labaree (2022) points out that in the mid-19th century, Horace Mann made a forceful case for a distinctly *political* vision of public schooling, as a mechanism for creating citizens for the American republic. Labaree argues that while families are the core institution engaged in developing young children into healthy and capable adults, public schools serve as the "critical intermediary between family and the larger society. They are the way our children learn how to live and engage with other people's children, and they are a key way that society seeks to ameliorate social differences that might impede children's development, potentially serving as what Mann called "a great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (p. 49).

It is clear, however, that many of the espoused benefits of public education have not been distributed equitably in our society. In the same volume, Sonia Nieto (2022) ruefully observes "Unfortunately, what no one ever told me was that the purpose of schooling was not only to educate and socialize us, but also to act as a sorting machine" (p. 110). While public education has often been declared "the great equalizer" and the best hope for the chance of a promising future for all young people regardless of station or rank, Nieto points out that the truth has been more complicated. In reflecting on what she wished might have been, for our

schools to live up to their promise more fully, she writes that she wished "that my teachers had taught me to think critically and to challenge the way things are ... to engage in what Carmen Martinez-Roldán (2021) has termed *daring* pedagogies, that is, equity-oriented and caring pedagogical practices and policies meant to dare young people and their teachers "to co-create a more equitable world" (p. 116).

In a similar vein, Prudence Carter (2022) argues that societal and educational transformation is necessary for education to live up to its promise as a great equalizer and cornerstone of our democracy:

> Currently, our nation is in crisis. ... there is urgency in this moment for societal transformation that pivots from a narrow and egocentric focus on individualistic attainment and the private good to an inclusive vision of the common good in a richly pluralistic democracy. A just, inclusive, democratic society demands an educational system that not only builds human capital but also fosters students' critical thinking, breeds social cohesion, and cultivates healthy debates in the face of enormous diversity (p. 120).

Referencing Horace Mann's quote that "A teacher who is attempting to teach without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn is hammering on cold iron," (*Thoughts selected from the writings of Horace Mann*, 1867, p. 225), Carter observes that

> Teachers have the power to shape minds and shift consciousness. But that often requires a shift in the mindsets and consciousness of teachers themselves. They must understand human development and master engaging pedagogy to be effective. .... Yet to do so effectively and equitably, teachers must possess the cultural competence—the know-how—to understand both their own cultural practices and those of their students, and to firmly grasp that culture is an important part of learning (p. 121).

Carter closes her essay by describing how the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is "forcing a reckoning with both how we organize school and what we expect children to learn" and maintains that now is a time to "radically reimagine the why, what, and how of American public education." She goes on to ask the question we all need to ask ourselves: "In our commitment to public education, like Horace Mann, can we imagine an educational system that gets us closer to our capacity to be an engaged, dynamic society committed to equity, justice, and empathic understanding across multiple lines of social difference?" (p. 124).

To conclude this review on the role of public education in our democracy, we turn to an article on progressive education in the early 1900s by Loss and Loss (2002) and to an essay by the educational philosopher, D.C. Phillips (2022). Loss and Loss describe the Progressive reformers' belief that the rapidly changing landscape of American life in the early 1900s provided public schools "with a new opportunity–indeed, a new responsibility–to play a leading role in preparing American citizens for active civic participation in a democratic society" (p.1). Focusing on John Dewey and citing works such as *The School and Society* (1899),

The Child and the Curriculum (1902), and *Democracy and Education* (1916), the authors describe Dewey's articulation of

> a unique, indeed revolutionary, reformulation of educational theory and practice based upon the core relationship he believed existed between democratic life and education. Namely, Dewey's vision for the school was inextricably tied to his larger vision of the *good society,* wherein education–as a deliberately conducted practice of investigation, of problem solving, and of both personal and community growth–was the wellspring of democracy itself. Because each classroom represented a microcosm of the human relationships that constituted the larger community, Dewey believed that the school, as a "little democracy," could create a "more lovely society" (p. 2).

Loss and Loss (2002) also describe the inspiration that Dewey drew from the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910) and the Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer Pestalozzi (1746-1827). Their theories of learning helped Dewey conceptualize how thinking and doing are joined together as "two seamlessly connected halves of the learning process" and to posit that the relationship between thinking and doing "could equip each child with the problem-solving skills required to overcome obstacles between a given and desired set of circumstances." Taken together, the authors conclude, "these European and American philosophical traditions helped Progressives connect childhood and democracy with education: Children, if taught to understand the relationship between thinking and doing, would be fully equipped for active participation in a democratic society" (p. 3).

Phillips (2022) further illuminates our understanding of Dewey's thinking on education and democracy. Phillips notes that Dewey wrote admiringly of Horace Mann and his ideal of the common school but that Dewey also added this warning: "Only as the schools provide an understanding of the movement and direction of social forces and an understanding of social needs and of the resources that may be used to satisfy them, will they meet the challenge of democracy" (Dewey, 1946, p. 48). Dewey goes on to describe real understanding as developing only when one *acts* in using, or acquiring, knowledge. Phillips uses the following quote from Dewey (1946) to illustrate the point. In describing the early years following the introduction of civics in the curriculum of the common schools, Dewey writes:

> When the subject was first introduced, I think there was a good deal of evidence of faith in the truly miraculous and magical power of information. If the students would only learn their federal and state Constitutions, the names and duties of all the officers and all the rest of the anatomy of the government, they would be prepared to be good citizens (1946, p.51).

But from Dewey's perspective, Phillips explains, "the function of Civics education is to *produce* democratic citizens—that is, to form appropriate pro-democracy dispositions in the students. And according to Dewey this could only happen when they were able to act upon the knowledge they were acquiring" (p. 295).

To bolster the point, Phillips also turns to the philosopher of education Gert Biesta, who appeals to Hannah Arendt and describes her position as follows: "Individuals might have democratic knowledge, skills and dispositions, but it is only in action... that the individual can *be* a democratic subject" (Biesta, 2006, p. 135). Biesta goes on to elaborate:

> The question is, in other words, whether children and students can actually *be* democratic persons in the school. What we need to ask, therefore, is whether schools can be places where children and students can act—that is, where they can bring their beginnings into a world of plurality and difference in such a way that their beginnings do not obstruct the opportunities for others (p. 138).

As we consider this review on the purpose of education and its relationship to democracy, let's return now to the initial question our panel grappled with in our APEL conference session:

> *To what extent are our K-12 schools currently structured to support students in developing the essential understandings, skills and habits of mind for constructively participating in their communities, and more broadly, in our pluralistic democracy (a key purpose of public education since the Common School period)?*

Given the purposes, challenges, and attendant skills and dispositions for democratic education described by the authors cited above, how would you answer this question?

Debbie Meier, a highly acclaimed practitioner and leader of the school reform movement in the U.S., had a firm answer. In a recent essay titled *If We Believe that Democracy is Such a Great Idea, Why Don't Schools Practice it More*?, Meier (2022) wrote: "I would argue that public schools are among the institutions *with the least democratic cultures* in our society. From the way adults relate to children to the way they treat each other, schools teach antidemocratic lessons" (p. 161).

Our APEL conference panel came to a similar conclusion.

Question 2: How might our K-12 schools be structured to allow students, in their everyday lives at school, to participate in and practice democracy in substantive ways, in order to develop the essential understandings, skills, and habits of mind to participate constructively in their communities and our pluralistic democracy?

If K-12 public schools are not structured to support students in developing the essential understandings, skills, and habits of mind to prepare them to participate constructively in our democracy, then what should we do about it, given all of the internal and external constraints and pressures that currently affect our public schools?

Let's begin by stipulating that there are K-12 schools across the nation that are doing incredibly innovative work and that could be interpreted as supporting democratic education. But these schools are not the norm and even when lauded for their innovations and increased student success, they have not scaled up. Why?

There are many structural and cultural reasons that we could suggest, but for the purposes of answering our second question, let's focus on the tendency for our education system to look for *programs* that will fix a problem. Typically educational researchers will identify a problem in the K-12 system and design and test an intervention to address that problem. If the intervention shows improved outcomes, it will be turned into a program that will fix the problem, and if the results are robust enough, be promoted by funding agencies as a program that "works," if implemented with fidelity. However, our experience working in and with schools suggests that implementing a program that "works" – even when implemented with a high degree of fidelity – will not always work as advertised.

One reason may be that when a program is found to be effective, in most cases we do not follow up with the natural next question: *effective for whom, and in what context*? It's our contention that no one program will ever work as initially designed and assessed, due to the myriad differences in size, demographics, and contexts of our public schools. Therefore, rather than propose specific models or programs for how our K-12 schools could be structured to answer Question 2, we've constructed an initial outline of requisite *conceptual tools* for supporting democratic education, drawn from our APEL panel discussion and the literature review described above. We define *conceptual tools* as fundamental mindsets, guiding principles, skills, and supporting structures that are applicable and adaptable across varying school contexts.

We have organized the outline in two parts: a) understandings, skills, and habits of mind and b) supporting structures. We see this not a comprehensive list, but rather an initial menu of potential building blocks to create the conditions for our K-12 students to participate in and practice democracy in substantive ways in their everyday lives at school.

Understandings, skills, and habits of mind

Our APEL conference panel identified the following understandings, skills, and habits of mind:

- *Critical thinking;*
- *Constructive dialogue* (i.e., authentic questioning, close listening, and 'operating on each other's reasoning'[2] to come to common understanding and consensus, rather than seeking to win a debate);
- *Individual and collective learning;*
- *Identifying meaningful problems in the school and/or community and learning to work together to solve them;*
- *Valuing multiple and diverse perspectives;*
- *Development of the ability to listen, articulate, discuss, and diagnose difference;*
- *An understanding of, belief in, and commitment to the common good.*

[2] Berkowitz and Gibbs (1983)

Our panel also noted the degree to which the skills and habits of mind described above intersect with skills that have been broadly conceived as 21st Century Skills, including the capacity to:

- *Understand how to access, evaluate, and analyze information from a number of sources;*
- *Think critically and creatively about applying information to real-world problems;*
- *Be self-disciplined, well-organized, and a self-directed learner;*
- *Be flexible and adaptable;*
- *Collaborate and work well as a member of a team;*
- *Test assumptions and take risks, understanding that failure is part of the process;*
- *Communicate effectively, both in writing and oral presentations;*
- *Engage in systematic inquiry and problem solving* (i.e., pose questions and frame problems; access, analyze, evaluate, interpret, and synthesize a wide range of information resources to answer questions, investigate problems, and present solutions);
- *Apply, transfer, and adapt learning to new and novel situations and problems.*

An additional set of conceptual tools drawn from the review of the literature described under Question 1 include:

- *Civic reasoning* (i.e., the recruitment of logical processes to interrogate warrantable evidence around issues in the public sphere, rooted in consideration of democratic values concerning equity and opportunity as articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution and its amendments);
- *The development of dispositions to be active in civic life* (e.g., voting, participating in local governmental institutions, engaging in community service that addresses community needs);
- *The development of dispositions to empathize with others, to listen to alternative points of view, and to weigh competing evidence*;
- *Dialogic discourse* (i.e., to enter into dialogue presupposing equality amongst participants and with mutual respect; seeking to listen honestly to others who disagree while wrestling with complex problems in the public domain, realizing that through dialogue existing thoughts can change and new knowledge will be created);
- *Conscientization*[3] (i.e. the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and investigation in order to transform it through action followed by further critical reflection);
- *Hope as a resource;*
- *An emphasis on initiative, courage, creativity, self-confidence, mutuality, respect for self and others* (i.e., "the arts of liberty"[4]);
- *An understanding of human development;*

[3] Freire (1970)
[4] Ayers (2021)

- *Cultural competence;*
- *An understanding that thinking and doing are mutually supportive, tightly connected activities – two seamlessly connected halves of the learning process;*
- *An understanding that deep learning is related directly to action* (i.e., real understanding develops only when one *acts*, both individually and collectively with others).

Supporting Structures

Our APEL conference panel identified the following supporting structures that create the conditions for children to learn and practice democracy through action:

- *Project-based and experiential learning*, including projects and inquiries in which students practice participatory democracy by identifying and analyzing challenges in their schools and/or their communities and working collectively to address the challenges;
- *Culturally responsive and deliberative pedagogy* that creates a context in which kids and teachers think together to identify relevant historical and current issues, and solve real-life problems that have meaning in the students' lives;
- *Apprenticeship models of instruction* in which students have the opportunity to work with experts (e.g., teachers, fellow students, community members, professionals) to learn, practice, and attain meaningful skills and understandings in real-world contexts.
- *Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and Participatory Budgeting* as approaches that empower students in understanding, analyzing, and contributing to their schools and communities in real and meaningful ways;

Additional supporting structures drawn from the literature review include:

- *Self-governing schools* (i.e., teachers, students and families have a real voice in the operation and direction of the school; student government has substantive input and power to set the rules, guidelines, and conditions of their school experience; decisions are made through working toward consensus among multiple constituencies);
- *Embedding civic engagement pedagogies and inquires across the curriculum* (i.e., socialization and preparation for democratic participation cannot be reduced to isolated civics courses at 8th grade and the end of high school);
- *Culturally relevant curriculum and critical pedagogies that encourage students to identify, question, analyze, and challenge existing inequities in schools, communities, and societies; to imagine and design possible alternative futures; and that fill classrooms with truth, joy, opportunity, and hope;*
- *Service learning and community projects that provide classroom and graduation credit;*
- *Regular invitations to local politicians, community leaders, and media figures to come into the schools to dialogue with students about student-identified issues and questions.*

As we reflect on the conceptual tools listed above, we note that our public schools are facing unrelenting challenges and constraints, and that the idea of reimaginging how our schools could be restructured for democratic education could seem overwhelming and feel like yet another responsibility to shoulder. We also know that the teachers, administrators, and staffs in our public schools are doing heroic, deeply committed work every day to support their students and families. And so we encourage our practitioner readers to consider these conceptual tools as additional resources for creating the engaging, purposeful, and exciting teaching and learning environments they are working so hard to provide.

Having now identified a set of conceptual tools that could be applied across varying contexts to create the conditions for the enactment of viable and robust democratic education for K-12 students, we turn to our third and final question.

Question 3: *How can we rethink leadership preparation to better prepare our aspiring school leaders to transform their schools' structures and cultures in ways that address the concerns discussed in questions 1 and 2?*

Higher education leadership preparation programs have the obligation to prepare our aspiring K-12 school leaders with the conceptual understandings, mindsets, and applied skills to lead their schools in creating and sustaining excellent and equitable teaching and learning environments that support *every* student to reach their full potential and find success. There are many theories of educational leadership that aspire to this goal. For the purposes of this essay, we focus on *transformative leadership* as a theory of school leadership that addresses equitable and excellent education directly, within the broader context of democratic education described in the preceding two sections. This brief summary of transformative leadership, drawing on the work of Carolyn Shields, is not comprehensive; it is meant to provide a description of foundational themes of transformative leadership that echo the themes for democratic education we have discussed.

Shields (2018) argues that

> Education (as it is generally "delivered" in schools) is neither the custodian of the American Dream, the "great equalizer" envisioned by Horace Mann, nor a catalyst for global peace, prosperity, and sustainability. School reform efforts have done little to disrupt the inequities that inhibit our efforts to equalize the playing field for all students. Thus, the question for educational leaders is how to fulfill our responsibility to truly educate all students for individual intellectual excellence and for citizenship, how to help them reflect on and act on critically important issues of our times, and how to sort out truth from fiction (p. 9).

The answer Shields proposes is transformative leadership, which she defines as "a critical approach to leadership grounded in Freire's (1970) fourfold call for critical awareness or conscientization, followed by critical reflection, critical analysis,

and finally for activism or critical action against the injustices of which one has become aware" (p.11).

Transformative leadership "begins by recognizing that the inequities that prevent our attainment of a deep democracy not only exist in every community, but that these material inequities powerfully and detrimentally affect the possibility of equitable educational outcomes for all students." The goal of transformative leadership, Shields continues, "is both to critique underlying social, cultural, and economic norms, but also to offer promise - to find ways to equalize opportunities and to ensure high quality education and civil participation for all" (p.19).

Importantly, for Shields, transformative leadership identifies "a desired state toward which we strive" (p. 20), but it is not prescriptive -- there are no magic formulas and no set recipes for achieving success. Rather, it is incumbent on the transformative leader to understand and work within their specific contexts to enact transformative leadership as an internally consistent and holistic practice. In attending to their specific contexts, Shields continues, it is essential that leaders understand their students' and families' out of school lives and "how the totality of students' lived experiences affects their ability to concentrate and to learn, their identity construction, their sense of belonging and being welcomed or valued within the learning context." (p. 22).

Additionally, Shields states that "Transformative leaders combine careful attention to authentic, personal leadership characteristics, and focus on more collaborative, dialogic, and democratic processes of leadership; and at the same time, attend simultaneously to goals of individual intellectual development, and goals of collective sustainability, social justice, and mutually beneficial civil society" (p. 18).

Transformative leaders need self-awareness, an understanding of the opportunities and challenges in our schools and the society in which they are embedded, and the capacity to reflect on the institutional practices that advantage, include, and privilege some students and marginalize and exclude others. Transformative leaders identify inequities and the beliefs, values, practices and policies that need to be interrupted and changed to create more equitable learning environments. Most importantly, transformative leaders take "action to redress wrongs and to ensure that every child who enters into an educational institution has an equal opportunity to participate fully, to be treated with respect, and to develop his or her capabilities" (p.11).

Additionally, with the understanding that transformative leadership does not prescribe specific traits, any one 'right' way for leaders to proceed, or a single most appropriate style of leadership that each leader should adopt, Shields offers a summary description of the transformative leader that comprises the following essential understandings, mindsets, and skills:

- authenticity;
- integrity;
- knowing oneself;
- knowing one's values and deepest commitments;

- understanding culture (their own and their school community's) and how it connects to others in the wider community;
- understanding the importance of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality and the differing material realities of others through reflection and action; and finally,
- understanding that to fulfill their conception of the moral purposes of schooling, transformative leaders require the courage that permits them to become advocates of equitable change and educational and societal transformation (p. 23).

We believe that transformative leadership is a robust theory of school leadership that supports a holistic, critical, and hopeful approach to school transformation that is equitable and democratic. Transformative leaders strive to create the conditions to enact democratic education in ways that truly prepare our K-12 students to take their place as informed, engaged, and constructive participants in their communities and our pluralistic democracy.

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a comprehensive description of transformative leadership, [5] we strongly recommend transformative leadership to our colleagues in Educational Leadership programs as an anchor for your leadership studies.

Conclusion

In elaborating our APEL panel discussion on democratic education, our purpose was to present a variety of perspectives about the role of public schooling in preparing students for participatory democracy. We intend the discussion to serve as a starting point for an evolving conceptual and applied framework for leadership and democratic education. If these ideas and arguments make sense to you, we invite you and your colleagues to play with the conceptual tools we have presented and adapt them in whatever ways can work for your specific contexts. And we encourage you to also share your learning with us and others in the field, so that together, we can transform our schools into the kind of democratic, deeply engaging, and joyful teaching and learning environments our children and communities deserve and our democracy needs in these troubled times and beyond.

To close this essay, we turn again to Debbie Meier (2022). Earlier, we agreed with Meier's assessment that our K-12 schools, as currently constituted, "are among the institutions *with the least democratic cultures* in our society." Yet Meier concludes her essay with this more hopeful note:

> But I also argued that we cannot afford to give up. Democracy is based on our power to influence by our public statements and actions what we want the future to look like. And so it matters a lot whether the schools in which our youth spend eighteen years foster democratic or undemocratic values, and in turn nurture the habits of mind and

[5] See, for example, Shields, 2018; 2011a; 2011b; 2010 for a more detailed description of transformative leadership and the theory underpinning it. See also Gary Anderson's work on advocacy leadership for a complementary framework.

skills to truly make this country a "more perfect union." The changes I propose here are about creating a more powerful citizenry and a more caring one. Even then we'll still have lots to argue about, but it's about our kids and our shared future with them. [And that's] worth arguing about (p. 165).

We agree.

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