

## **Democratically Accountable Leader/ship: A Social Justice Perspective of Educational Quality and Practice**

**By Carol A. Mullen**

If a primary educational goal is to create and sustain more democratic schools by enabling the growth of practitioners as democratic leaders (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Giroux, 1992; Jenlink, 2002), then teachers must be given opportunities to express their tacit beliefs as developing democratic-accountable leaders. Democratically accountable leadership can be understood as a dynamic force that shapes the social justice work of organizational leaders. Responsive preparation programs in educational leadership foster both the democratic capacity of aspiring leaders and their readiness for the challenges of accountability-driven systems.

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A significant issue in public education regards ideological-based accountability restrictions on the educational process. In this discussion, I attempt to refocus attention on the quality of K-12 education in the United States, away from standardized test scores and teacher credentialing toward democratic leadership. My strategy involves exploring ideas relevant to aspiring leaders of democratically accountable educational systems with respect to tensions between democracy and accountability. I propose a conceptual framework

known as democratic accountability that places democracy and accountability in harmony as well as in opposition. This orientation to educational leadership fits with the “ideology, or social justice question” that Cochran-Smith (2003) posits as one of the eight key questions that serve as overarching frameworks for problematizing multicultural teacher education (p. 11). I also use *teacher quality* to refer to the capacity of educators to deal effectively with the underlying forces of accountability and democracy that drive the educational enterprise and their work. Rice (2003) confirms that the teacher characteristics affecting education reform and policy are “preparation in both pedagogic and subject content, credentials, experience, and test scores” (p. 2). Hence, the characteristics applicable herein exist outside the nomenclature of teacher quality that prevails within school and policy contexts.

As a leadership professor charged with preparing future school leaders, I am curious about the ability of educational leaders to manage the promises and pitfalls of competing accountability and democratic agendas within the multiple contexts of the classroom and school. This narrative case study of educational quality from the perspective of teachers and leaders has the potential to inform the current democracy-accountability debate. It could prove informative to learn how education practitioners conceptualize democratically accountable leadership and take ownership of their ideas and beliefs. Through an emergent analysis, I identify relevant ideas and contexts, as well as the dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors of such leaders.

Up-to-date preparation programs in educational leadership focus on the necessary dispositions, knowledge, and behaviors that educational leaders should have to effectively lead 21st century schools (Clark & Clark, 1996). As Giroux (1992) asserts, these programs are “trapped” in a “discourse of leadership” that is entrenched “in a vocabulary in which the estimate of a good society is expressed in indices”; missing, then, “is a vocabulary for talking about and creating public cultures and communities” (p. 5). In recent years, this argument has centered on preparing aspiring leaders as critical, democratic thinkers in the areas of citizenship and ethics, social justice, and diversity (e.g., Allen, 2006; English, 2003; Giroux, 1992; Shields, 2006). However, such programs in general have yet to promote sustained dialogue around democratic leadership and its multiple forms in schools and society (Allen, 2006; English, 2003; Giroux, 1992). Democratic schools are “where the voices of teachers, practitioners, parents, and students are heard” (Jenlink, 2002, p. 30); they are active in decision making, support diversity and equality, and value creating and sustaining the community (Jenlink, 2002; Jenlink & Jenlink, 2006; Mullen & Johnson, 2006; Ringo, 2006). In such places, as Larson and Ovando (2001) attest, activists commit to dismantling “systems of racism, exclusion, and power” (p. 3).

A Deweyian democracy represents a much more effective model for education than does the current accountability model, which is based on narrowly defined competencies and standardized tests. English (2003) has argued that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) and state accountability acts are thinly disguised strategies for exercising political control

over classroom teaching and administrative activity. Building on Dewey's (1916) concept of democracy, it is crucial that leaders understand that "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience" (p. 87). Understanding democracy strictly as governance distances educators' understanding of participatory leadership and engagement (i.e., "associated living") and thwarts social justice education. Social justice educators need to bring accountability and democracy together within the same conversation and within a "theory of practice that visualizes human development as social; mediated; influenced by power and axes of power" (Hoffman-Kipp, 2003, p. 37). Alternative voices must participate in this agenda so that a stronger and more inclusive philosophy of education and leadership can be developed than that which has pervaded since *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983).

### Key Concepts of Democratic Leadership

Democracy and accountability are often treated as separate concepts at odds (or even at war) with each other in theory and practice. While *democracy* has been defined to mean "both a discourse and a practice that produces particular narratives and identities informed by the principles of freedom, equality, and social practice" (Giroux, 1992, p. 5), *accountability* has been described, by one group of educators at least, as "focused on shared responsibility among students, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers" (Linn, 2004, p. 74). Democratic leadership has diverse meanings ranging from participatory leadership in which decision making is collaboratively undertaken in work environments to more radical acts aimed at integrating theories of inclusiveness into the lived world of policy and practice. Here I envision *democratic accountability* as marrying two seemingly disparate constructs that, both conceptually and in practice, share resonances and overlaps, dissonances and ruptures. I created this concept to draw attention to the dual capacity necessary for leaders to understand accountability and democracy as overarching frameworks and, importantly, interpenetrating forces shaping the work of today's leaders responsible for managing competing agendas (Mullen & Graves, 2000).

The high-stakes, legalistic world of education forces the interplay between accountability and democracy, overshadowing and further marginalizing the latter. For example, as Shields (2006) explicates, standardized testing contradicts alternative assessments for at-risk students; further, on a curricular level, standardization subverts "culturally relevant curriculum in socially just pedagogies"; moreover, management models challenge "socially just school leadership" (p. 2). Given that "the work of school leaders is vital to linking accountability to equity" (Skrla et al., 2001, p. 134; also Allen, 2006), the deeper, collective commitment of teachers and leaders must be to "secure the future of a democracy and sustain the ethic of social justice ... toward ensuring the ... success of all children" (Jenlink & Jenlink, 2006, p. 2).

As the graduate students in my pedagogical study acknowledged, democracy and accountability share pivotal concerns with human freedom, responsibility, individual autonomy, and civic community; however, democracy also promotes a healthy distrust of authority and power (Brunner, 2002; English, 2003; Olbrys, 2004), a perspective they barely acknowledged. Accountability expectations can either complement the democratic integrity associated with teaching, learning, and leading or oppose it. Democratically accountable leaders create structures and model values that respect the delicate balance between accountability and democracy, and they see school democracy as “a way of living and a way of communicating with others” (Olbrys, 2004, p. 10; see also Dewey, 1916).

### **Methods, Activity, and Participants**

This study was designed to elicit concepts and practices of democracy and accountability from education practitioners—graduate students who are teachers and leaders in schools and who are differently positioned as workers in higher education systems. My intention was to prompt active and reflective thinking on the part of the students with respect to the cultivation of their dispositions and behaviors as emerging democratically accountable leaders. Through a writing activity I created, I attempted to present summations of the learning that they had internalized, expressed, and mediated. Alternatively or as a next step, democratic discourse can be used to interrogate taken-for-granted beliefs and practices around diversity and acts of oppression; such an encounter has the potential to force change in people’s identities (Ringo, 2006; Stevens & Mitchell, 2006). As a first step in this long-term process, I developed an activity to expose the thinking of practitioners for whom social justice should be a pressing concern.

Narrative, reflective data were obtained from teachers and school leaders studying in an educational leadership program at an urban, public, doctoral/research university in Florida. A subset of data was obtained from education practitioners whose work status is as paid employees with the University in which they simultaneously studied in various higher education programs. The population sample I selected was highly purposeful—all had studied with me in my capacity either as a classroom instructor or dissertation supervisor.

From fall 2006 to spring 2007, 116 education graduate students were emailed the democratic writing exercise. Recipients of the e-survey had taken my master’s courses (Administrative Analysis and Change, Foundations of Curriculum and Instruction) or doctoral courses (Issues in Curriculum and Instruction, Mentoring Theory and Leadership Practice). The doctoral courses are open to all students in the college; hence, advanced graduate students outside educational leadership were included in this study because, at a minimum, they all had exposure to school-based ideas through their coursework. Moreover, because the concepts of democracy, accountability, and democratic leadership are fundamental to my teaching—while

*democratic accountability* per se was not covered—the students whom I reached out to shared some basic knowledge. However, I did not compare the school-based and higher education groups' responses, as this was not my intention and the latter group's numbers were far fewer.

Fifty-one students (44% response rate) returned the writing activity with all three questions answered (one reminder had been emailed). Twenty-eight females (55%) and 23 males (45%) constituted the respondent pool, a White majority with 8% minority (specifically, African Americans and Hispanics). Within this group, 38 (75%) were pursuing doctoral degrees (three were recent graduates), 10 (20%) were enrolled in master's programs, and three (5%) were taking or had completed the educational specialist degree. While 46 (90%) of the respondents were pursuing an educational leadership/administration degree, five (10%) were from various higher education programs (e.g., instructional technology), working in such areas as academic computing and student advisement, and all but two had K-12 teaching backgrounds. The students as a group had performed in their current roles (e.g., teacher, assistant principal, principal) anywhere from 1 month to 20 years. The school practitioners were mostly elementary classroom teachers (including two learning resource specialists), predominately in science and language arts. However, eight (16%) of them were from middle and high schools, and 12 (24%) were simultaneously functioning in administrative roles as department chairs or acting assistant principals, or mentors to new teachers. Four were district supervisors in public school systems.

No incentives were offered for completing the writing activity, and I had no leverage for encouraging participants to respond. I designed the exercise in such a way as to disassociate it from the authoritative power structures of courses and graded assignments (e.g., the activity was disseminated to students not studying with me at the time, and my graduate assistant handled all communications). It seems especially important for faculty researchers to avoid perpetuating dominance in forums constructed to promote thinking about social justice education. Those who completed the exercise may have wanted to show what they had learned from their coursework. Or they may have thought they could learn from the exercise itself, as personal notes they forwarded suggested. Some may have felt compelled to do the activity, having come to appreciate the need for participation from targeted groups in studies.

The exercise prompted education practitioners to think about democratic and accountability issues, separately and in connection, and to draw upon lived experiences in their responses. The democratic leadership activity sheet indicated that the questions were open to interpretation and that personal insights mattered. The writing exercise appears in Table 1.

For the purpose of data analysis, key words and phrases in the students' written responses were highlighted in search of potential themes, using Miles and Huberman's (1994) model of qualitative analysis. A doctoral graduate and I independently coded the data with respect to this guiding question: What ideas do education

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**Table I. Democratic School Leadership Writing Exercise**

Dear colleague:

Please consider undertaking this writing exercise (sections I and II) and returning it electronically to [anonymous, graduate researcher] at [email address] by [date]. Write as much as you can in section II. Remember: There is no “right” answer—it is your insights and ideas that matter here. Draw upon your personal and professional experiences. Complete sentences are preferred. The spaces will widen as you type. Individual responses will be thematically and anonymously presented.

**I. Basic demographics**

Degree you are doing (or have recently completed):

Graduate program you are in and stage (e.g., coursework, exams, candidacy):

Name of program:

Stage:

Where you work:

K–12? Indicate level: Elementary ☐ Middle ☐ High ☐ District office ☐

Other? Specify here

Current professional role or title (e.g., classroom teacher, assistant principal):

Years completed in your current role:

If applicable, years completed as a classroom teacher:

Gender: M ☐ F ☐ Race—specify here:

**II. Democratic accountability terms:**

A. What does democracy mean to you?

B. What does accountability mean to you?

C. What does democratically accountable leader or leadership mean to you?

practitioners have about democracy, accountability, and democratic accountability? The systematic analytical process we used was in keeping with a basic qualitative study design. In order to assure the trustworthiness of our conclusions, we enacted an interpretational analysis of the data by individually coding and classifying the material in order to identify salient codes and themes. The systematic procedures followed in this analysis included the identification and initial coding of text, the development of categories by methods of constant comparison, and generation of themes that emerged from these categories (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). We searched the texts for units of meaning, collapsed and refined categories, and explored relationships and patterns until consensus and saturation were reached.

Striving to eliminate unnecessary bias in the interpretation of results, we made comparisons only after the independent coding was completed. The proliferating categories of democracy (DEM), accountability (ACC), and leadership (LEAD) were evident in all of the students' responses. To further differentiate these, we developed subcodes; in the case of *democracy*, government and societal norms, shared decision making, and the ethics of equality, freedom, and voice all emerged as associations. *Accountability* was linked with established goals, political ideologies,

and organizational and interpersonal dynamics. Concerning *leadership*, respondents specified actions consistent with the ideals of democracy and accountability, decision-making approaches, and certain dispositions and behaviors.

I shared the data and results with an impartial qualitative researcher as a strategy for soliciting questions about the analysis within the conceptual framework presented. No problems were identified. I then used the codes and memos as the material for creating this narrative. Trustworthiness of the data and its interpretation was established by combining conventional data procedures with interrater reliability. These efforts at data analysis yielded three major themes—what democracy means, what accountability means, and what democratically accountable leader/ship means. Each is discussed in turn.

### **Practitioner Reflections on Democracy and Accountability**

Here I present thematic results from the democratic writing exercise, organized to highlight the students' conceptions of democracy, accountability, and democratic accountability.

#### ***What Democracy Means***

Responses to the question, "What does *democracy* mean to you?" were typically definitional and abstract in nature. The education practitioners referred to systems and forms of government and societal norms; they commonly used these descriptors: a set of values, rules of behavior, a social contract, voice in decision-making and determining leadership and laws, participation, publicly elected representatives, government by the people, consensus building, equality of voice and expression, fairness, personal choices in lifestyle, protection of self and others, liberty and justice for all, and the freedom to speak one's thoughts. For them, democratic organizations facilitate feelings of ownership, loyalty, safety, and respect, as well as opportunities to participate in decision making and collective forms of leadership.

The view of democracy as governance was closely linked to citizenry participation in the making of laws, particularly voting and representation, and in the establishment of societal norms and contracts. Comments of a typical nature are as follows.

Democracy is a form of government. With elected representatives (elected by the people) whose job it is to ensure the laws created to protect and govern the people are honored and followed. Within this form of government the people choose their representatives and have the right to vote on new proposed laws before they become law.

Democracy means the individual is the centerpiece of the decision-making process. "One person, one vote" is the essence of a democracy. In it, the individual is the cog that makes the wheel turn, and the individual's rights are respected. The individual drives the system.



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Statements echoing these sentiments upheld democracy as “a system of governance in which all participants’ views are solicited on all issues and in which all conscientiously contribute and work to reach consensus in the group within a structure of mutually agreed upon procedures”; “a social contract that ensures all individuals (as established by the group) are heard equally, and that the majority’s decisions will be responsible to and for the whole group”; “the ability of the people of a nation to participate in the proceedings of the government by selecting the officials (politicians) who will vote on their behalf”; “having the ability, as an individual or through chosen representatives, to engage in the establishment of societal processes, norms, values, standards, and identity for a group of people.” Additionally, “Democracy represents a pure form of governing/decision making in which each individual has exactly one equally weighted vote guaranteed to us under the Constitution.”

Regarding the ethics of equality, freedom, and caring, conceptualized in the context of governance, the students wrote: “All have a voice in the decision-making process”; “Democracy, to me, means fairness and equality”; and “Democracy is liberty and justice for all—no matter race, ethnicity, religion, and so forth. It also means freedom of choice and will.” The students defined these ethics as “the freedom to choose how I will live my life”; “equality of voice and expression; responsibility for one’s actions, especially in consideration of the common good of fellow man; fairness; belief in a system of accountability in which *right* is clearly differentiated from *wrong* and just action is carried out in societal structures.” About the ethic of caring, an elementary teacher commented, “We have the land of opportunity at our fingertips and we must not abuse this. Above all, we should all strive to take care of each other.” Moreover, a social worker viewed democracy as “a system that should guarantee fairness and equality for all.”

Responses of a more complex nature incorporated qualifiers of and obstacles to democracy. In these instances, political positions and personal beliefs were advanced: “We cannot have a complete democracy in schools because of local, state, and federal mandates in education” and “Democracy is a form of government where all the citizens contribute to the decision-making process. The United States is not a democracy—it is a republic; we use representatives to make the decisions for us.” A computer advisor communicated his personal belief through a cartoonish metaphor:

Our traditional accountability system sets forth standards that are often enforced by an outside body with little or no feedback from those who are to be held accountable. One can imagine the Florida legislature sticking its head below the clouds of Mt. Olympus, straining to hear the voices of teachers and students in the villages in the distance.

Another higher education professional, an immigrant from a socialist country, shared:

When I think of democracy I imagine majority rule, publicly elected individuals, and fairness with respect to policy making. However, lately, I also see corruption,



confusion, and abuse of power. Having been born and raised in a socialist country, I believe that a political system can be corrupted to serve the means of the few.

On the other hand, a military officer argued that a “true democracy” would be “cumbersome” to maintain and “much more volatile than a representative government.” In the few politically declarative statements received such as “democracy no longer serves the majority of people in [the United States],” democracy was portrayed as a seriously compromised ideal.

The other example students used in articulating their political ideas and beliefs was the classroom or school setting. Teachers and leaders who recognized the value of these contexts in their definitions of democracy incorporated lived experience as a frame of reference. An assistant principal wrote: “If students, faculty, and staff have buy-in, then the culture will be more positive and the group will be more productive. At the classroom level, democracy involves decision-making opportunities that include students, parents, and educators.” Other school leaders described processes in which teachers and students “create classroom rules together and then the parents sign off” and “groups that create contracts for behavior and goals.” One elementary principal referred to how democracy can be seen in action where, for example, principals push beyond mere rhetoric by sponsoring “a variety of teams that assist in local decision-making.”

Six elementary school leaders listed democratic teams, which included leadership teams (e.g., principals, assistant principals, other resource personnel, such as guidance counselors and social workers who do not regularly serve students), steering committees (e.g., reading coaches, resource teachers, team leaders), and child study teams (e.g., guidance counselors, social workers, school psychologists, Exceptional Student Education [ESE] specialists, lead teachers). A litmus test for democratic schools, an assistant principal ventured, is that committees form as different issues arise. A teacher pointed out the democratic capacity of “professional learning communities for encouraging faculty to make decisions in their teams and across grade levels.”

Only two students explicitly referred to accountability in their definition of democracy, as in “responsibility for one’s actions” and a “belief in a system of accountability.” An example was given of how educators “encourage students and parents to have high expectations so that students are able to meet district-and-state benchmarks.” Yet democracy, like accountability, was identified as a “democratic accountability term” on the activity sheet. However, as I next clarify, connections between democracy and accountability were nonetheless considered.

#### ***What Accountability Means***

Accountability was conceptualized as a system in which goals are established, implemented, and judged and an accountability measure is put in place: “Accountability is any system in which all participants formulate a set of personal and group goals and plan, carry out, and evaluate the results according to a rubric [measure]

established in the initial phase or plan”; and “Accountability means that you are able to provide proof for performance, whether it be student performance or faculty and staff performance.” In this worldview, individuals are obligated to uphold a “social contract” and its implied duties and obligations, and they are “held responsible for their actions” or “to some outcome,” which “implies an acceptance of that responsibility.” It is a reality that individuals may not be able to influence an outcome for which they are being held responsible: “What’s important,” as one person put it, “is that, perceived or real, the individual is being held responsible for something.”

A subset (nine) of respondents presented a one-sided view, attributing accountability to either an external or internal force. With regard to accountability as external force or power-granting position, highlights were: “I believe accountability means responsibility—having to answer to someone or something” and “Being responsible for your decisions and actions.” An elementary principal added, “In educational terms, [accountability is] documentation in the performance of a student’s education.” Other responses include: “Accountability is how people are measured on what they are expected to do in their work responsibilities. It is a measurement based on data gathered from past experiences.” Embedded examples of this conceptualization of exteriority include: “Accountability is a measuring tool used to ensure progress toward a goal,” and “Responsibilities include spending budget monies ethically and actually doing the work, ethically and legally, promised to followers.” For two school administrators new to their roles, accountability was simply tied to their position description. A middle school principal defined accountability in simple economic terms as the “justification of one’s cost, time, and methods.”

In contrast, two practitioners associated accountability with internal responsibility: “Accountability means responsibility for one’s actions and decisions.” However, three respondents bestowed greater complexity to the concept of accountability, citing a connection between responsibility to an external power and responsibility to oneself, as captured by this statement: “[Accountability means] to answer for actions of myself or organization to which I am a part of, to answer to a “governing board” or higher power.”

Political nuances resonated across the data, but explicit statements were far fewer. Six school practitioners associated accountability with educational laws and standardized testing that limit the quality of education, and with accountability tools infused with political ideology. A secondary teacher ventured that “Today, because of the NCLB, accountability simply means Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on standardized tests (such as FCAT [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test]).” His explanation went beyond standardized testing: “I feel that accountability is making sure that all individuals are held responsible for their part of educational practice.” He saw such practices as learning, teaching, leading, and supervising, as well as such formative accountability tools as the Florida Performance Measurement System, as all “limited by political points of view.” This same teacher advocated for a system of accountability “that is col-

lectively interdependent,” whereby “individuals hold each other accountable in a symbiotic relationship.”

The higher education (nonschool) participants also reflected on organizational and interpersonal arrangements and alluded to ethics in their description of accountability. However, a noncritical view of hierarchy (including rewards and punishments) was posited, as in: “Individuals, companies, or governments are responsible for their actions and may be required to explain them. In a hierarchical organization, leaders are accountable for the actions of their subordinates.” The group associated accountability with high-stakes gains and losses, where “one or more individuals have ‘some skin in the game.’ When a project fails (or succeeds), an unambiguously defined individual or group can be ‘punished’ (or rewarded).” A military officer distinguished between accountability and responsibility: “Responsibility is the commitment to act, and accountability is the commitment to answer for one’s actions.” A university advisor described transparency as a leadership attribute of ethically responsive leaders.

#### ***What Democratically Accountable Leadership Means***

The education practitioners all viewed the democratically accountable leader as “one who models and adheres to the ideals of democracy and process of accountability.” They referred to the processes of governance and the responsibility of elected representatives to ensure that decision-making structures and actions are both accountable and democratic. This accountability-democratic stance was expressed in these ways: “It means holding our elected officials responsible—they must answer to us, explain why they are voting the way they are, and why they are supporting certain interest groups” and “[It is] the responsibility given to individuals or their representatives to promote, exhibit, and engage in the process of accountability and democracy.” Democratically accountable leaders “would serve the requests of the majority within the community, even if decisions were against their own beliefs and wants.” The socialist-minded worker asserted, “After being elected by a majority, the democratic leader has the integrity to admit to any mistakes and the ability to take corrective actions. It is also someone who cannot be bribed or swayed by a special interest group or religious dogma.”

Democratically accountable leadership holds all stakeholders (i.e., students, teachers, administrators, citizens, governmental officials) responsible for their parts. This form of accountability is ideally performed “as a collective” and “in a distributed manner,” and where “all stakeholders are equal” regardless of their “role in the strata.” This leader not only “facilitates the decision-making process” but also “orchestrates changes based on group decisions by utilizing an accountability infrastructure.” An elementary principal underscored having the freedom to develop how schools are demonstrating measurable outcomes, as in the case of state officials having to “work *with* school districts on developing a plan on meeting measurable educational outcomes for students [instead of *on* districts via]

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high-stakes testing.” A middle school principal asserted the authority of his role, supplying the paradox of “allowing” others to participate in a change effort: “The leader of the organization, knowing she has the ultimate responsibility, allows staff to participate in decision-making processes.”

However, in such instances, the democratically accountable individual or team was depicted as either hierarchically oriented—“[He or she] formulates a personal plan of action for learning, carries out the plan, and evaluates the results and shares them with others”—or community oriented—“[He or she] involves staff in important decisions and implementation of change.” On the whole, the students seemed to favor “democracy rooted in hierarchy, “public control,” and “accountability to the public.”

A democratically accountable leader has identifiable dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors that underscore the fundamental ability to “act responsibly with a high degree of personal accountability.” Notably, he or she is a visionary and “good listener” who “involves all persons who are part of a system in decision making while holding all parties involved responsible for the outcome of the decisions made based on preset criteria.” As a visionary, “this leader has a pulse on what needs to be done to have a functioning organization. This pulse is controlled by the views and desires (vision and mission) of organizational members.” Further, he or she values transparency, openness, reciprocity, and the views of others and has the ability to pursue corrective actions; this individual is also honest, selfless, equitable, moral and fair, caring, motivational, standards-minded, and capable of diagnosing the performance levels of various groups, as well as supportive of the professional development of faculty and staff. Accountability (equated with standards and performance) and democracy (seen as team effort and support “of all stakeholders”) were viewed as interpenetrating forces: “Democratic accountable leaders are aware of the standards for students and schools. They use leadership teams to diagnose low student performance, accelerate all learners, and monitor student performance. They also support faculty/staff with appropriate professional development and materials.”

Moreover, the leader is one who “acts equitably, delegates work to others, and assesses the completed work fairly and justly” and “takes responsibility for leading others, celebrating each success within the organization while assisting underachievers to accomplish better/improved results.” These individuals are also driven by “a selfless pursuit of what they believe is right and just.” An elementary teacher added that it is “not just about upholding the laws of the land, but doing this moralistically and fairly—one needs to serve as a role model to others.” She added that democratic leaders “are accountable to other people and their welfare, so it’s a role that should not be taken lightly.” The democratically accountable leader is caring and so “asks, ‘What is good for the people?’ or ‘Is this good for the people?’” With this type of leadership, not only does “genuine concern” find expression but also a demonstrated capacity to “motivate individuals to achieve beyond what they would achieve without the influence of the leader.”

A district administrator's response transcended the importance of soliciting feedback from others and functioning interdependently "toward a common goal." She emphasized that democratically accountable leaders "use that feedback to chart a course for continual growth of the system and for each person in it." In this Deweyian worldview in which educational processes are predicated upon continual growth (Dewey, 1938), "each person is responsible for some aspect of the growth" (same student); moreover, such individuals "know their strengths and weaknesses," which better enables them to "gain a sense of control over the situations that will best move the organization forward" (same student).

## Discussion:

### ***Moving Toward Democratically Accountable Leadership***

Democratically accountable leader/ship was an unfamiliar concept to many of the students. A higher education professional thought of it as somewhat ambiguous and awkward. He reasoned that "if we ignore *accountable*, we're left with *democratic leader*, which is somewhat contradictory" because "being truly democratic implies putting everything up for a vote (with individuals having equally weighted votes), which isn't leadership at all." On the other hand, "if we ignore the word *democratic*, we're left with *accountable leader*." He further explained that, while accountability is a desirable attribute, it belongs to the enterprise, not the leader, for, unless the organization "enforces" consequences "when that leader makes mistakes, the leader is not accountable." For a special educator, the use of *democratic* as a modifier might have less potency than previously because many people today "have had rights all of our lives."

Many participants resorted to definitions and abstractions of democratic accountability without personal examples, implying cognitive distance, maybe even disassociation or lack of ownership. Conversely, their "I believe" and "I feel" statements connoted greater personal investment in the work of democratic leadership. The personally situated, narratively oriented disclosures revealed greater deliberation; here, practitioners drew upon lived experience, probing connections between accountability and democracy through such contexts as professional development systems, faculty learning communities, classroom activities, and site-based committee structures. A critical consciousness was signaled with respect to governmental and other external forces that control educational practices. Some shed light on accountability structures (e.g., laws, policies, benchmarks) that dominate schools and perpetuate systemwide ideological conservatism; the deeper issue, involving systems, groups, and individuals that produce hegemony by socializing educators to perpetuate injustice and inequity for people based on race, class, gender, and sexuality (Kincheloe; 2005; Ringo, 2006) barely surfaced in the data.

Also skirted was critical reflection on one's own positionality and identity as a democratically accountable leader who, while committed to social justice, must

contend with competing forces that limit human understanding and connectivity (Mullen & Johnson, 2006). No student challenged his or her assumptions about democracy or accountability, although allusions were made (in notes attached to the exercise) to the democratic space this exercise permitted for an intellectual encounter with the “surprise” hybrid—democratically accountable leader/ship. The democratic writing activity prompted dialogic engagement about complex concepts that probably served to expand the students’ thinking, but it is unknown to what extent new insights might have been sparked.

However, the students collectively gave credence to the notion that democracy is not just about the world of governance but also that which is actively created and recreated through communal relations, core values, and shared decision making (Dewey, 1916). Democratic leaders foster citizenship and community and further social justice goals, and these systems of accountability have the potential to influence and empower when social justice, self-regulation, and equity are core values. We who teach aspiring leaders are confronted by the democratic and accountability aspects of educational systems, but to what extent do we study how these mesh or collide? With the influences of federal laws and state policies, civil rights, and school restructuring models, accountability–democracy tensions function as powerful and potentially synergistic forces for educators at all levels.

## **Conclusion**

Higher education faculty must endeavor to design leadership programs that prepare practitioners as democratic leaders for work in accountability-driven systems (Draper, Hall, & Smith, 2006; English, 2003; Ringo, 2006). To focus on the accountability debate to the exclusion of democratic issues is a deficit approach that results in hegemony and an incomplete, if not biased, education for aspiring leaders. Because high-stakes testing is imposed on school leaders, and because it is central to their goals and discourse, leadership faculty, like their school-based counterparts, may feel compelled to focus on it. Hence, faculty will need to persevere against the pressures that come with integrating social justice into their educational discourse and pedagogy.

Bringing accountability and democracy together within the same conversation will take thoughtfulness, creativity, and willpower (Mullen & Johnson, 2006). Leadership faculty and aspirants alike could benefit from studying the ways in which democracy and accountability overlap, as well as conflict, in theory and practice. An example of an issue surrounded by vigorous debate is the NCLB Act, which is aimed at closing the achievement gap in American schools and increasing the quality of the teaching force. Instead of adopting an ideological position steeped in conjecture and rumor, leadership professors can lead students through a democratic-accountability exercise that, for instance, requires them to read selected legislation, scrutinize scholarly, well-documented arguments (e.g., Hursh,

2005), and analyze reported data from schools. As another idea, faculty can use case studies demonstrating the democratic-accountability tension, as in the case of Shield's (2006) study illustrating that social justice work is compatible with academic excellence in the school situation; they should also be encouraged to deconstruct the arguments that refute social justice positions.

Hence, major related goals for the leadership field and, more specifically, leadership-preparation programs and schools are: (1) to introduce ways to transform the positive aspects of accountability and democracy into a comprehensive school improvement strategy that recognizes the fundamental necessity of one serving in the interest of the other; (2) to develop leadership strategies that can enhance the whole child and creativity in the classroom in spite of accountability; (3) to promote the democratic accountability of all constituents and the critical reflective capacity of school leaders to lead change; and (4) to identify the dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors of democratically accountable practitioners who work with competing accountability and democratic agendas within the multiple contexts of school.

The teachers and leaders who engaged in this writing activity pondered concepts and practices related to democracy, accountability, and democratic leadership. Some graduate students were thoughtful and critical, while others relied on definitions as handholds, communicating detachment. Investment was signaled through personal belief statements, specifics beyond definitions, and extensive examples. In effect, then, Dewey's (1916) notion of democracy was at least recognized through the view of organizational and governmental structures as living entities that embody the human commitment for collective leadership and whole-community work on shared problems. It is often difficult to learn the extent to which values espoused by educational leaders are transferred to practice.

Implicit in this discussion, school administrators and teachers need ongoing preparation for changing systems and their own "social responsibility" that involves a "political and social function" (Giroux, 1992, p. 5). We need to ask ourselves, what meaning does the domination of "educational discourses by accountability, high stakes testing, and a new gold standard of scientific research" (Shields, 2006, p. 4) have for developing teachers and leaders and the ways in which they situate themselves within this dialogue? Educating for leadership means learning that democracy and accountability operate as sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting, forces in our working lives and within ourselves, and that these dynamics require constant attention. Finally, pedagogic activities, like the writing exercise described herein, can facilitate discourse about democratically accountable leadership and practices of critical mindfulness.

Finally, implications of this research for teacher education highlight the role of reflection and experience in the making of justice-minded educators. Creative and bold approaches for exploring how developing teachers and leaders alike understand "social justice education" (Hoffman-Kipp, 2003, p. 37) with respect to thought-provoking concepts are needed. Because the study participants had to



record their ideas in response to open-ended questions concerning democracy, accountability, and leadership, instead of just checking off items on a survey, they were induced to articulate their own social justice values and to produce unique statements. Understanding how developing democratic-accountable leaders actually conceive of these phenomena is an important starting place towards preparing graduate students to deal more effectively with them. Similarly, a corresponding study of preservice teachers' social justice thinking could stimulate insight into the phenomena of democracy and accountability, and their intersection. Schools and society can benefit from learning experiences that prepare future teachers and leaders as strong advocates for social justice.

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