The Democratic School: First to serve, then to lead

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Abstract

Today there has been a shift in the organizational structure in our schools (Murphy and Seashore Louis, 1999). These include educational leadership shifts in roles, relationships, and responsibilities; the alteration of traditional patterns of relationships; and the fact that authority tends to be less hierarchical. Senge (1990) believes systems that change require a variety of leadership types at different times in organizational development. As schools move toward democratization, it appears that servant-leadership may be one such vehicle for possible systems change, within educational organizations. Servant-leadership is not a panacea. It is a transformational, democratic form of leadership that requires time to implement and to provide abundant opportunities to involve all members of the learning community. The following paper will present the theoretical framework of servant-leadership, a concept identified by Robert K. Greenleaf in his seminal work, *The Servant as Leader* (1970/1991), and link servant-leadership to current literature on democratic schools. The paper will conclude with suggestions for the sustainable development of servant-leadership in the educational milieu.

Introduction

Today, our schools are moving towards a more collegial, cooperative, transformative, service approach in the learning community. Murphy and Seashore Louis (1999) state the changes reflected in present day educational institutions:

> In these new postindustrial educational organizations, there are important shifts in
> roles, relationships, and responsibilities; traditional patterns of relationships are
> altered; authority flows are less hierarchical; role definitions are both more
> general and more flexible; leadership is connected to competence for needed tasks
> rather than to formal position; and independence and isolation are replaced by
> cooperative work (p. xxii).

In their introduction to the Handbook of Research on Educational Administration 2nd ed., Murphy and Seashore Louis (1999, p. xxii) describe the current changes to the "hierarchical, bureaucratic organizational structures that have defined schools". These include educational leadership shifts in roles, relationships, and responsibilities; the alteration of traditional patterns of relationships; the fact that authority tends to be less hierarchical today than over the past 80 years; role definitions have become more general and flexible; the idea of leadership is now connected to competence and not a formal position; cooperative work and a focus upon the human element are common (Murphy and Seashore Louis, 1999). As well, there is an emphasis on the development of a democratic learning climate within educational organizations. Fullan (2003) agrees with these changes,

> The environment cannot be improved only from the top. The top can provide a
> vision, policy incentives, mechanisms for interaction, coordination, and
> monitoring, but, to realize this vision, there must be lateral development- that is,
> people at one's own level giving and receiving help across schools. In this way
> the moral imperative becomes a palpable, collective endeavor (p. 47).

These shifts or transformations effect how we see ourselves as educational leaders. Bennis and Goldsmith (1997) state, "In order to transform ourselves as leaders, we must recognize and shift the paradigm through which we view leadership itself" (p. 71). The following paper will present one possible leadership shift discussed through the theoretical framework of servant-leadership, a

leadership concept identified by Robert K. Greenleaf in his seminal work, *The Servant as Leader* (1970/1991) and through connections between servant-leadership and current literature on leadership in democratic schools. The paper will conclude with suggestions for the sustainable development of servant-leadership in democratic schools.

Servant-leadership

Fullan (2003) writes that a strong education system is the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous, and democratic society and he reminds us, "One of the great strengths one needs, especially in troubled times, is a strong sense of moral purpose" (p. 19). Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2005) state, "In a democratic society, it is vital that students learn to think reflectively, function at high stages of moral reasoning, and be autonomous decision makers" (p. 156). Hence, the role of school leader and/or teacher becomes critical in providing the example and environment to foster such democratic ethos. The old leadership paradigm of the 19th and early 20th centuries suggested three particular beliefs: (1) that leaders were born and not made (your lineage or pedigree class endowed you with the look and personality of a leader- a hierarchical position); (2) good management made successful organizations; and (3) one should avoid failure at all costs, a belief that promoted risk avoidance and fear (Block, 1993; Hickman, 1998). Leadership was defined in the literature as being hierarchical, patriarchal, coercive, and related to wealth and influence (Bennis and Goldsmith, 1997; Block, 1993; Hickman, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1992).

The paradoxical term servant-leadership is inclusive of personal service to society regardless of position (Block, 1993). This premise of a leadership-service combination was in direct opposition to the hierarchical model of leadership. In hierarchical leadership the power of the leader was visible and obeyed by those lower in the organization (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, Beckhard, and Schubert, 1998; Senge, 1990); whereas, in servant-leadership, it was through strategies of service and stewardship, that a leader was identified by the people to be first among equals or "primus inter pares" (Greenleaf, 1976, p. 16).

The term "servant-leadership", a new leadership paradigm, was introduced by Robert Kiefner Greenleaf (1904-1990) in his first essay entitled, *The Servant as Leader*, written in 1970 at the age of 66. Greenleaf worked first as a lineman and eventually moved into organizational

management at AT&T between the mid 1920s and 1960s. He lectured at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.), Dartmouth, and the Harvard Business School. Greenleaf (Spears, 1998a) tells the story of how he discovered the concept of servant-leadership through reading a small book called, *Journey to the East*, by Herman Hesse (1956/2000). The book tells the story of a band of men who set out on a long journey. Accompanying the men was a fellow named Leo; his job was to care for the band of men by doing all of the menial chores and providing for their comfort. The journey progressed well until Leo disappeared. At this point, the travelers or band of men aborted the journey, when they fell into disarray without Leo.

Many years later, the narrator of the story encountered Leo. It was at this point that the narrator realized Leo was the titular head of the order that sponsored the journey. He was the leader, but his nature was that of a servant.   His leadership was bestowed upon him and could be taken away by the band of men. His desire to serve the group of men came from his heart and was the real person. Leo wanted to be of service to the band of men. Leo was a servant first by taking care of their basic needs each day while on the journey. Greenleaf believed the message of the story was that one has to first serve society and through one's service a person will be recognized as a leader. Leadership must be about service (Spears, 1998a). Greenleaf (1970/1991) describes a servant-leader,

The Servant-Leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant: - first, to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived? (p. 7)

Purkey and Siegel (2002) speak about two significant implications in Greenleaf's definition of servant-leadership. First, Greenleaf points out that leadership without service is less substantial, more ego-driven and selfish, instead of being community centered, altruistic, and empathetic.

Second, Greenleaf believes "that leadership involves teaching and mentoring, as one of the major requirements of leaders to invite others toward service" (p. 181).

Greenleaf (as cited in Frick and Spears, 1996) a Quaker, believed strongly in the equality of all human beings. Greenleaf worked with educational, business and industrial organizations (Spears, 1998a) and his goal was for the development of strong, effective, caring communities in all segments of our society (Greenleaf, 1976; Spears, 1998b). An important realization was identified by Greenleaf (2002). He told of the subtleness of the servant-leader in action and how they were viewed by others, "They do not see the servant-leadership in action as you saw it. And that may be the fundamental key. Effective servant-leaders can be so subtle about it that all anybody is likely to see is the result. They don't see the cause" (p. 151). Purkey and Siegel (2002) describe "the little nameless acts that reveal a true leaders character, inspire trust and respect among colleagues" (p. 177). Starratt (2004) stresses the need for real leaders to "bring themselves, including their convictions, beliefs, and values, to their work. They are consistently themselves in their leadership activity" (p. 65). Fullan (2003), writing in *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, discusses Badaracco and the concept of "leading quietly" or being a "quiet leader,"

> They choose responsible, behind-the- scenes action over public heroism to resolve tough leadership challenges. These individuals don't fit the stereotype of the bold and gutsy leader, and they don't want to. What they want is to do the "right thing" for their organizations, their co-workers and themselves- inconspicuously and without casualties
>
> (p. 70).

Ten Characteristics

Autry (2001) states that the transition to a culture of servant-leadership requires time for the development of necessary features or qualities for a servant-leader. Spears (1998b) identified ten characteristics of servant-leadership: (1) listening, (2) empathy, (3) healing, (4) awareness, (5) persuasion, (6) conceptualization, (7) foresight, (8) stewardship, (9) commitment to the growth of others, and (10) building community. Possibly these qualities are in a hierarchy that begins with the internal action of listening. Descriptions of each of the ten characteristics follow:

1. *Listening*- This refers to a deep commitment of listening to others, possessing a high level of attentiveness, devoted to understanding the communication of others (Autry, 2001; Bennis and Goldsmith, 1997; Frick and Spears, 1996; Greenleaf, 1970/1991; and Secretan, 1996). Greenleaf emphasizes the need for silence, reflection, meditation and active listening and actually "hearing" what is said and unsaid. The best communication forces you to listen (DePree, 1989). Effective leaders are great communicators and must be good listeners, to themselves (through their inner voice), as well as to others.   Educators must take time to reflect upon their practice and through their personal listening/hearing they may make effective decisions for/with students.

2. *Empathy*- A good servant-leader strives to understand and empathizes with others. Secretan (1996) describes empathy as "identifying with the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others" (p. 240) and suggests that "civility is built upon empathy" (p. 78). But this understanding should be supportive as opposed to patronizing. Block (1993) writes, "It is a misuse of our power (as leaders) to take responsibility for solving problems that belong to others" (p. 72). Nel Noddings (2003) stresses an ethic of care while Starratt (2004) explains his conceptualization of "being present" or in the moment with others, "Being present implies a level of concentration and sensitivity to the signals the other sends out" (p. 86), and "This being present is also an unspoken message, responding to the other from your own spontaneous authenticity" (p. 87). Teachers who reach out to students and extend a caring attitude may present an inviting and safe atmosphere for students. This type of environment may encourage student effort, problem solving, and academic risk taking. Greenleaf (Spears, 1998a) wrote that trust could be developed through the use of empathy when he stated,

> Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are
> accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged
> critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and
> who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be
> trusted (p. 81).

3. *Healing*- The servant-leader has the potential to heal one's self and others. Sturnick (1998) writes extensively about stages of healing leadership. One must first have an understanding about personal and/or institutional health. Sturnick (1998) warns that it is not always possible as

a healthy leader to find followers and she believes that, "sick organizations really do contaminate" (p. 191). Secretan (1996) reminds us that our words "have the capacity to raise or dash each other's spirits. We can make our organizations inviting or sickening to our souls" (p. 101). Goodlad (1979/1994) writes at length about the health of schools: "Schools are like living organisms, with characteristics that can be described in varying degrees as healthy or unhealthy. Schools, as cultures, must assume responsibility for their health and be held accountable" (p. 72). Noddings (2003) stresses the need for students "to learn to feel some social responsibility to reduce suffering" (p. 43). Gardiner (1998) suggests that healing can come through just quietly being and that a "quiet presence is an act of renewal" (p. 122), and Greenleaf, a lifelong meditator, tells that he views the action of meditation as a service because one is taking time to think about things, to reflect and he writes in Gardiner (1998), "I prefer to meditate; I have come to view my meditating as serving" (p. 123). Starratt (2004) speaks specifically about the school leader: "The leader is responsible for sustaining and developing a healthy environment for authentic learning and teaching, for democratic working relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and school officials and for promoting the learning and practice of civic virtues" (p. 62).

4. *Awareness*- The servant-leader has a general awareness, especially self-awareness. One develops awareness through self-reflection, through listening to what others tell us about ourselves, through being continually open to learning, and by making the connection from what we know and believe to what we say or do. This is called in the vernacular, "walking your talk" (Bennis and Goldsmith, 1997, p. 70-71). Palmer (1998) tells us that we must find every possible way to listen to that [inner] voice and take its counsel seriously. Teachers who struggle with a challenging student may be guided by Palmer's advice, "If someone in the outer world is trying to tell us something important and we ignore his or her presence, the person either gives up and stops speaking or becomes more and more violent in attempting to get our attention" (p. 32).

5. *Persuasion*- The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather then coerce compliance. Transparent, fair, and consistent action by administrators and teachers may invite and persuade student and parent participation in the learning community. Greenleaf explains (cited in Frick and Spears, 1996) about persuasion:

One is persuaded upon arriving at a feeling of rightness about a belief or action

through one's own intuitive sense, persuasion is usually too undramatic to be

newsworthy. Significant instances of persuasion may be known to only one or a

few, and they are rarely noted in history. Simply put, consensus is a method of

using persuasion in a group

(p. 139-140).

6. *Conceptualization*- The servant-leader seeks to nurture their own abilities to dream great

dreams. Servant-leaders need vision to lead their organizations effectively towards a goal.

Starratt (2004) emphasizes, "Those who lead schools need to have moral depth and a well-

articulated platform for the moral work of learning in the school, as well as a clear sense of how

to proactively engage teachers and students in an authentic process of learning" (p. 136).

Greenleaf, (cited in Frick and Spears,1998) describes conceptual talent as:

The ability to see the whole in the perspective of history- past and future- to state

and adjust goals, to evaluate, to analyze, and to foresee contingencies a long way

ahead. Leadership, in the sense of going out ahead to show the way, is more

conceptual than operating. The conceptualizer, at his or her best, is a persuader

and a relation builder"

(p. 217).

7. *Foresight*- This is the ability to foresee or know the likely outcome of a situation. Teachers

are likely to develop foresight through their experiences in the classroom. Greenleaf

(1970/1991) says it is a better than average guess about "what' is going to happen "when," in the

future. He says it is "the lead that a leader has" (p. 18). Greenleaf (1970/1991) goes on to state:

Foresight is seen as a wholly rational process, the product of a constantly running

internal computer that deals with intersecting series and random inputs and is

vastly more complicated than anything technology has yet produced. Foresight

means regarding the events of the instant moment and constantly comparing them

with a series of projections made in the past and at the same time projecting future

events- with diminishing certainty as projected time runs out into the indefinite

future (p. 18).

8. *Stewardship*- Greenleaf believed all members of an institution or organization played significant roles in holding their institutions in trust (caring for the well being of the institution and serving the needs of others in the institution) for the greater good of society. Fullan (2003) suggests that school principals (and teachers, as well) must be mindful that "changing context is the key to deeper change" (p. 21) and principals must ask: "What is my role in making a difference in the school as a whole" (p.21)? De Pree (1989) emphasizes the need for us to make a contribution to society. "The art of leadership requires us to think about the leader-as-steward in terms of relationships: of assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, of civility and values" (p. 13). Purkey and Siegel (2002) believe that through service, "He or she may discover an astonishing capacity to be a steward of the public good- to be a servant, in the most ennobling sense of the word" (p. 177). Sergiovanni (1992) explains that stewardship, "involves the leader's personal responsibility to manage her or his life and affairs with proper regard for the rights of other people and for the common welfare" (p. 139). Greenleaf (1970/1991) speaks of *primus inter pares* or the "first among equals" where the leader is among the people, not above but more on a lateral plane. Fullan (2003) states a similar message, "The Leadership I am talking about involves strength through the middle, not high-flying dominant saviors" (p. 71).

9. *Commitment to the growth of people*- The servant-leader is committed to the individual growth of human beings and will do everything they can to nurture others. DePree (1989) reminds us, "The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers. Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving"? (p. 12). Sergiovanni (2001) puts this in a school perspective:

> The leader serves as head follower by leading the discussion about what is worth
> following, and by modeling, teaching, and helping others to become better
> followers. When this happens, the emphasis changes from direct leadership based
> on rules and personality, to a different kind of leadership based on stewardship
> and service (p. 34).

And, Starratt (2004) believes school leaders "should challenge the students, in collaboration with the rest of the community, to take more responsibility for coproducing the school as a human place for authentic learning and for practicing civility and civic responsibility" (p. 109). Goodlad (1979/1994) reminds us that education is ongoing individual growth and a becoming that flourishes in the process. Fullan (2003) specifies that one responsibility of the school administrator is to encourage others to assume leadership positions:

> The pipeline of leadership is crucial. You cannot have highly effective principals unless there is distributive leadership throughout the school. Indeed, fostering leadership at many levels is one of the principal's main roles (p. 25).

10. Building community- The servant-leader seeks to identify some means for building community. Approaches to building community include giving back through service to the community; investing financially into the community; and caring about one's community. Novak (2002) encourages schools to move into the community (through their service and real life problem solving) and move the community into the school through parent groups or community members becoming involved in school planning. Such simple pro-active steps are moves toward school democratization. When Pinchot (cited in Hesselbein, Goldsmith, Beckhard and Schubert, 1998) considers the concept of community he suggests that the person who gives or contributes or invests the most to a community has the highest status; in other words, "giving it away, rather than keeping it, earns status" (p. 126). Noddings (2003) believes that, "active participation in community life may also be a direct source of happiness" (p. 236). Noddings (2003) encourages volunteering in communities and the promotion of democratic mode of association. Sergiovanni (1994) writes that caring is an integral part of shared community. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (cited in Hesselbein et al., 1998) emphasize the sense of belonging defined by a shared sense of purpose that does not eliminate one's uniqueness, but focuses all energies into a resilient community. Starrat (2003) writes about the cultivation of meaning, community, and responsibility and states, "In appealing to their sense of community, we invite youngsters to work toward it" (p. 95) and that in order to cultivate civil learning communities the school leader must work "with parents on projects to coproduce structures and procedures through which teachers' and parent' concerns can be heard and acted on" (p. 59).

Possibilities

How can learning communities incorporate the servant-leader concept? Educational organizations may integrate servant-leadership into the schools in various ways. (1) A school could begin with a reading and discussion of Greenleaf's writing, through the use of staff study groups, beginning with *The Servant as Leader.* (2) The ten characteristics of servant-leadership could be used as a framework by staff while developing school plans. (3) The concept of volunteering or "giving back" in the community and the rationale for such service could become an underpinning in the school culture. Noddings (2003) states, "Schools can promote community participation and service in many ways. Community service is a requirement for graduation in some high schools, and interest in service learning seems to be growing" (p. 236). (4) Servant-leadership could become the modus operandi for school administrators in a school division or district and the concept could provide seed for discussion during administrative council meetings. Sergiovanni (1992) states that "servant-leadership is more easily provided if the leader understands that serving others is important, but that the most important thing is to serve the values and ideas that shape the school" (p. 125). (5) Servant-leadership may provide a foundation for healing, listening, dialogue, and problem solving during school/school division conflicts. (6) The philosophy of servant-leadership could be introduced as professional development for teacher candidates going into the field. The belief that it is an honour and privilege to serve as a teacher is critical to creating a positive approach when dealing with the many challenges in the classroom today. (7) Servant-leadership may provide a foundation for responsive and caring action that is particularly needed by special education resource teachers. The concepts of inclusivity, empathy, acceptance, and foresight fit nicely into a servant-leadership model and provide a positive, proactive mindset when dealing with special needs students and their parents. (8) The servant-leader philosophy for building shared and distributive leadership within schools and committees through primus inter pares enhances the growth of the learning community by including and involving parents, students, staff and support staff. (9) The topic of servant-leadership could be included as a component of university educational administration courses for study and discussion.

Greenleaf (1986) states,

> This is not a bandwagon idea; it is not a best-seller kind of thing; but nevertheless,
>
> these people (servant-leaders) do exist, and some of them have become very
>
> important to me (p. 343).

And,

> The difference between organizations is how people relate and how they actually
>
> function, which may not bear a whole lot of relationship to how the thing is
>
> sketched out on paper
>
> (p. 347).

Conclusion

Although several dissertations have probed the servant-leadership concept
(http://www.greenleaf.org/leadership/read-about-it/Servant-Leadership-Articles-Book-
Reviews.html), the body of research related to servant-leadership in educational organizations is
small. Much of the proceeding information about servant-leadership has come from the world of
business, i.e., Autry (2001); Block (1993); Bennis and Goldsmith (1997); De Pree (1989, 1992);
Pinchot (1998); Senge (1990); and Sturnick (1998). Is servant-leadership a viable model for
present day schools? Greenleaf (1977) speaks directly to educators,

> Many teachers…have sufficient latitude in dealing with students that they could,
>
> on their own, help nurture the servant leader potential, which I believe, is latent to
>
> some degree in almost every young person. Could not many respected teachers
>
> speak those few words that might change the course of life, or give it new purpose
>
> (p. 5)?

Questions remain as to how this form of leadership could be introduced?   What outcomes could
be expected? And, how could these outcomes be measured? Such questions and more point to a
need for school research using the lens of servant-leadership.

Senge (1990) reminds us that systems that change require a variety of leadership types at
different times in organizational development. It appears that servant-leadership may be one
vehicle for possible systems change within educational organizations. Servant-leadership is not a
panacea. It is a transformational, democratic form of leadership that requires time to implement

and abundant opportunities to involve all members of the learning community. However, a school that is in chaos or crisis would need a different form of leadership, one that is transactional and much more directive in nature to stabilize it before embarking upon the process of building a democratic school culture. Also, certain school issues require a more ordered approach, i.e., fire drills, medical emergencies, and other immediate response procedures.

Noddings (2003) presents a strong rationale for service and echoes a servant-leadership connection. Noddings (2003) views democracy "as a dynamic arrangement continually under construction" and "marked by a commitment to inquiry and communication" which produce common values without coercion and "it supports the individual growth of its members" (p. 238-239). Purkey and Siegel (2002) believe leaders who serve others are "stewards of the public good- to be a servant, in the most ennobling sense of the word" (p. 177). Today's schools must instill a shared sense of mission that creates a culture of collaborative service toward strong, caring communities. Finally, Sergiovanni (1999) encourages consideration of a servant-leadership approach for our present day schools and for our raison d'etre,

> Such ideas as servant leadership bring with them a different kind of strength- one based on moral authority. …. What matters are issues of substance. What are we about? Why? Are students being served? Is the school as learning community being served? What are our obligations to this community? With these questions in mind, how can we best get the job done? (p. 61)

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