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The UCEA Project on Education Leadership: Voices from the Field, Phase 3

Guest Editors: Michele Acker-Hocevar, Teresa Northern Miller, and Gary Ivory

This special issue of *Educational Considerations* is devoted to the national research study "Voices from the Field: Phase 3" (hereafter referred to as Voices 3), conducted by the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) to study the perceptions of superintendents and principals regarding school improvement, social justice, and democratic community. These constructs were drawn from Murphy's (2002) conceptual framework for rethinking the work of administrative preparation programs. Lead researchers were Gary Ivory and Michele Acker-Hocevar, who worked collaboratively throughout the project with dozens of other researchers. The history of this project; planning for the study; description of the conventions used to quote the superintendents and principals; and a brief description of the articles follows. A listing of the presentations and publications that have grown out of the project is found in the Appendix.

Different Phases of Voices

The first phase of this project, *A Thousand Voices from the Firing Line* (Kochan, Jackson, & Duke, 1999), began in the mid-1990s with one-on-one interviews. The goal was to enhance collaboration among UCEA's member universities and to learn from principals and superintendents "their perceptions of their jobs, their most vexing problems, and their preparation" (Duke, 1999, p. 10). UCEA set out to have each of its 50 member universities collect interview data on ten superintendents and ten principals, thus yielding data from a thousand school leaders.

Phase Two of the project, under the leadership of Barbara Y. LaCost and Marilyn L. Grady, moved from one-on-one interviews to focus groups. The current and third phase of the Voices work, Voices 3, has continued with focus groups where the lead researchers attempted to structure the data collection more systematically and build on the constructs of school improvement, social justice, and democratic community. Voices 3 conducted 29 focus groups with superintendents and principals across the United States between

2004 and 2006.¹ We began with two research questions:

1. How do superintendents and principals from a variety of locations and within different contexts describe their perceptions of and experiences with educational leadership?
2. How do educational leaders relate to the concept of leadership for school improvement, democratic community, and social justice?

The articles in this special issue are the result of transcript analyses of comments by these educational leaders.

Planning of the Study

Planning of the Voices 3 study is described in detail by Ivory and Acker-Hocevar (2003) and Acker-Hocevar and Ivory (2006). For Voices 3, we standardized focus group procedures. The goal was to be able to compare responses from educational leaders in different situations (i.e., school level, size of the district, and geographical locations of the schools and districts); to find common themes; and to note differences where they existed. All moderators were trained on and followed a protocol for structured interview procedures developed by the lead researchers (Acker-Hocevar, 2004).

Our approach to sampling recognized that although studies using qualitative data seldom claim to be representative, we were in a position to collect data from a broad range of educational leaders, and we wanted to capitalize on that fact. Even though we were dependent on volunteers at two levels--researchers who volunteered to conduct focus groups and practitioners who chose to participate--we still wanted to interview educational leaders with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. In addition, one critique of our pilot study was a lack of input from women and ethnic-minority leaders (Ivory et al., 2003). As a result, we alerted focus group moderators to be sensitive to the need for diversity in focus groups.

We concluded from review of Ritchie and Lewis (2003) that we should interview no more than 100 participants from each group. With approximately six people per focus group, our goal 16-18 focus

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Teresa Northern Miller is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership in the College of Education at Kansas State University. She served 28 years in public education as a teacher, gifted education facilitator, and principal at both elementary and secondary levels. She is currently a university liaison for site-based partnership academies with school districts to train aspiring leaders. She is coauthor of the book, Closing the Leadership Gap: How District and University Partnerships Shape Effective School Leaders (Corwin Press), and has served as a researcher with the Voices 3 project since 2005.

Gary Ivory is Academic Department Head and Associate Professor at New Mexico State University. He has taught in grades five through eight and at the community college level. He has been coordinator of research, testing, and evaluation in a school district of 50,000 students. He is coeditor of the book, Successful School Board Leadership: Lessons from Superintendents (Rowman & Littlefield) and editor of What Works in Computing for School Administrators (Scarecrow Education), serves on the editorial review board for the Journal of Research on Leadership Education, and is interested in philosophies of education. He was co-principal investigator for the Voices 3 project with Michele Acker-Hocevar.

groups each for principals and superintendents. Their participation was voluntary, and the focus groups lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. The study's protocol was built on Krueger and Casey's approach (2000), specifically working to establish rapport at the beginning of the dialogue and then summarizing what was heard at the end to verify participants' responses. All focus group moderators asked participants to respond to prescribed questions (See text box at right). The conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed.

For the superintendent sample, we divided the U.S. into four regions—New England and Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest and West—and calculated the percentages of superintendents in each region using the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) 2000 survey of superintendents (Brunner & Grogan, 2007) ² and the percentages of districts of different sizes (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008b). Since only 6% of districts in the U.S. had enrollments greater than 9,999 students, we sought one focus group to represent districts of that size. However, despite our efforts, we were unable to do so. Superintendent focus groups completed are shown in Table 1.

Table 2 shows the breakdown, by gender and ethnicity (self-reported), of the superintendents who participated in focus groups. At the time we designed the sample, Brunner and Grogan (2007) reported that women comprised 12% of U.S. superintendents and ethnic minorities 5%. Our focus groups, with 22.2% women and 1.2% ethnic minority participants, over-represented women and under-represented ethnic minority superintendents. (One participant did not report ethnicity.)

For principals, we stratified the sample by level of school: elementary; middle; or high school (Snyder, 2008c), and by the number of accountability sanctions in place in the state (Education Week, 2004, January 8). However, the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* has done much to equalize accountability pressures on principals, so we found less variation in the number of accountability sanctions across states than we anticipated. Principal focus groups completed are shown in Table 3.

When we designed this study, the U.S. Department of Education (Snyder et al., 2008a) reported that 56% of U.S. principals were male and 44% female. Also, 84% were white; 11% black; and 5% Hispanic. Our sample contained 83 principals, of which 9 did not report ethnicity and gender, and one male did not report ethnicity. (See Table 4.) Taking into account the missing data, 48.4% of the sample was female, and 41.9% male, denoting an over-representation of women by 4.8%. Of the participants who reported ethnicity, 10.8% and 9.7% were black and Hispanic, respectively, indicating that the former group was slightly under-represented, and the latter substantially over-represented.

Although we continue to grapple with questions about how to characterize the research design for this study, we believe it falls under the broad rubric of qualitative research and employs interviewing techniques unique to focus groups. We acknowledge that in qualitative research, the quality of the findings depends on the skill and judgments of the researchers. We also acknowledge that the study concentrates on the perceptions of a non-random, volunteer sample as opposed a random, stratified sample study representative of an entire population. Thus, claims made and insights presented in the

Focus Group Questions

<p>Opening Question: <i>Each of you please, tell me who you are, where your district is, and one of your interests outside school.</i></p>
<p>Transition Question: <i>Think back to an experience with school leadership that made a strong impression on you, either positive or negative. Please share it with us.</i></p>
<p>Key Question (1) : <i>Superintendents talk about doing what's best for students. Tell me about your experiences with that.</i></p>
<p>Key Questions (2): <i>What has "No Child Left Behind" meant for you as a leader in education?</i></p>
<p>Key Question (3): <i>There is a piece of paper in front of you. Write an answer to this question and then we'll share our responses with one another: What does it mean that other people want to have a voice in decision making?</i></p>
<p>Key Question if needed and if time permits (4): <i>Think back to an experience you've had with doing what's best for students or school accountability or other people having a voice in decision making that was outstanding. Describe it.</i></p>
<p>Key Question if needed and if time permits (5): <i>What has been your greatest disappointment with doing what's best for students or school accountability or other people having a voice in decision making?</i></p>
<p>Ending Question (1). Summary question: <i>Moderator gives a two- to three-minute summary of the major issues covered and then asks, "How well does that capture what was said here?"</i></p>
<p>Ending Question (2). All things considered question: <i>Of all the issues we discussed here today, which one is most important to you?</i></p>
<p>Ending Question (3). Final Question: <i>Is there anything about educational leadership that we should have talked about but did not?</i></p>

Table 1
Number of Superintendent Focus Groups Completed

School District Size and Student Enrollment	Region of the United States			
	New England & Mid-Atlantic	Midwest	Southeast	Southwest & West
Small: • Student enrollment, 1-999		2	1	1
Medium: • Student enrollment, 1,000-9,999	2	1	1	1
Mixed: • Small and medium school districts		2		2
Medium: • Mix of participants, superintendents and board members from medium school districts				1

Table 2
Gender and Ethnicity of Superintendents: Number and Percentage

Gender	Ethnicity									
	African American	%	European American	%	Other	%	No response	%	Total	%
Female	1	1.2	16	19.7	0	0	1	1.2	18	22.2
Male	0	0	58	71.7	5	6.2	0	0	63	77.8
Total	1	1.2	74	91.4	5	6.2	1	1.2	81	100.0

Table 3
Principal Focus Groups Completed and Number of State Accountability Sanctions Experienced by Group

Number of Principals by School Level	Number of State Accountability Sanctions		
	0-1	2-3	4-6
Elementary Schools	3	3	3
Middle Schools		1	2
High Schools	1	1	1

Table 4
Gender and Ethnicity of Principals: Number and Percentage

Gender	Ethnicity											
	African American	%	European American	%	Hispanic	%	Other	%	No response	%	Total	%
Female	7	7.5	26	28.0	5	5.4	7	7.5	0	0	45	48.4
Male	3	3.3	28	30.1	4	4.3	3	3.3	1	1.0	39	41.9
No Response	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	9.8	9	9.7
Total	10	10.8	54	58.1	9	9.7	10	10.8	10	10.8	93	100.0

articles in this special issue are limited to the superintendents and principals that participated in the focus groups. The study, however, has a breadth of viewpoints, and we believe these viewpoints merit consideration.

Conventions for Identifying Superintendents and Principals

With regard to the articles in this issue, we have protected the confidentiality of participants but, at the same time, tried to give readers a flavor of their individuality. From the beginning, we were concerned that some states had such a small number of superintendents that they might be identifiable. As a result, superintendents' locations were identified only in terms of regions. Even though there are many more principals in a state than superintendents, for consistency, we identified principals in the same way. Next, we randomly ordered the superintendent focus groups and numbered each superintendent consecutively from the first focus group to the last. The same procedure was used with principal focus groups.³ In addition to a number and a region, superintendents were identified by the size of their district while principals were identified by their school level--elementary, middle, or high school. Both superintendents and principals were identified by the year the focus group took place.

Overview of the Special Issue and Articles

In this issue, our goal is to add a few more perspectives on educational leadership, based on the richness of the data found in the Voices 3 transcripts. Five research teams have combined to provide a range of perspectives about the many nuances of life as a school leader in today's world and ways that life has changed with increased accountability. We would like to thank the outside reviewers--Julia Ballenger, Tom Kersten, Azadeh Osanloo, Deb Touchton, Tony Townsend, Wanda Trujillo (Deceased), Kathy Whitaker--for their careful reading of the article proposals and suggestions.

In the first article, Mariela Rodríguez, Elizabeth Murakami-Ramalho, and William Ruff help us understand more about the balancing act

principals have to perform, meeting both externally imposed accountability requirements and the needs and wants of their communities. They offer a dramatic picture of principals in the Southwest trying to serve two masters with heart and efficiency.

Continuing the investigation of accountability issues for school and district leaders, Christopher Johnstone, Amy Garrett Dikkers, and Amalia Luedeke investigate the meanings of these issues for superintendents. Perhaps the nature of the job requires a superintendent to emphasize efficiency over heart. Certainly these superintendents are well aware of the advantages of imposed accountability systems, but they are also concerned about their potential negative effects.

Teresa Wasonga and Dana Christman describe principals' perspectives on fostering democratic community in their schools. Their treatment of the data affirms for us that it is not sufficient to either pledge allegiance to the notion of democratic leadership or merely reject it. Rather, the principals found themselves constantly balancing openness to input against their perceptions of what needed to be done. From the focus group data, Wasonga and Christman were able to identify tactics principals used to work toward that balance.

Teresa Northern Miller, TRudy A. Salsberry, and Mary A. Devin take a similar approach with the superintendent data, viewing these educational leaders' descriptions of their use of power. The authors apply the typology of French and Raven (1959), later expanded by Andrews and Baird (2000), to superintendents' discussion of their uses of power, in effect testing the typologies.

The final article by Gary Ivory, Rhonda McClellan, and Adrienne Hyle is an essay on the promise of pragmatism as an epistemological approach to research on small district leadership. They contrast their views on pragmatism with current scholarly approaches.

Voices 3 researchers are discussing other ways to mine these rich data from our colleagues in the field of public PK-12 education. Two book concepts are being developed, and we have had brief discussions about the form the next phase of UCEA voices should take, Voices 4, dare we say? The totality of this research proceeded from beliefs that motivated Kochan, Jackson and Duke's 1999 study; that

is, the academic knowledge of UCEA members and the practical knowledge of practitioners can be collected, considered, and synthesized to improve and expand our knowledge base about how to lead educational efforts for the betterment of programs and students of educational leadership.

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Endnotes

¹ Although a total of 29 focus groups were conducted, demographic data were collected only on 28.

² Data source: C.C. Brunner and M. Grogan.

³ In rare cases, focus groups took place where participants could enter late or leave early, and so it was not always obvious from the transcripts who each particular participant is. In those rare cases, it may be that some participants were double-counted. For example, one superintendent may be referred to as "Superintendent 8" in one place and "Superintendent 10" in another, such that transcriptionists could have numbered ten superintendents when there were actually only nine in the focus group.

Appendix

Publications and Presentations from Voices 3

Journal Articles

Alsbury, T.L., & Whitaker, K.S. (2007). Superintendent perspectives and practice of accountability, democratic voice and social justice. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 45(2), 154-174.

Hyle, A. Ivory, G., & McClellan, R. (in press). Hidden expert knowledge: The knowledge that counts for the expert small-school-district superintendent. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*.

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Conference Proceedings Paper

Dominguez, R., Ivory, G., & McClellan, R. (2005). Mentoring superintendent leadership for school improvement, democratic community and social justice. In D.C. Thompson & F.E. Crampton (Eds.), *Proceedings of the University Council of Educational Administration 2005 convention*. Retrieved from <http://coe.ksu.edu/ucea/2005/DominguezUCEA2005.pdf>.

Paper Presentations

Alsbury, T.L. (2007, April). *Voices of superintendents and board members: Finding common ground*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.

Alsbury, T.L., & Whitaker, K. (2006, November). *Voices from the superintendency: Accountability, democratic voice, and social justice*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the University Council for Educational Administration, San Antonio, TX.

Dickers, A.G., & Johnstone, C. (2008, October). *Leadership and accountability: Superintendents speak out*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the University Council for Educational Administration, Orlando, FL.

Freeman, J., Alford, B., Murakami-Ramalho, E., Rodriguez, M., Roettger, C., Roettger, L., & Christman, D. (2006, November). *Voices III: Principals discuss democratic community*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the University Council for Educational Administration, San Antonio, TX.

Freeman, J. (2007, April). *Leadership for democratic community: Elementary principals lend their voices (III) to the discussion*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.

Hyle, A., McClellan, R., & Ivory, G. (2007, August). *What counts as essential knowledge for preparing leaders? Small school district leaders' perspectives*. Paper presented at the First International Conference on Teacher Training and Professional Development and the 12th China-U.S. Conference on Education, Beijing.

Hyle, A.E., Ivory, G.M., & McClellan, R.L. (2008, March). *Academic preparation or experience: What/whose knowledge counts in the small school district? Superintendents' thoughts about leadership*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.

Murakami-Ramalho, E., & Rodríguez, M.A. (2007, November). *Leading with the heart: Experiences of urban elementary principals*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the University Council for Educational Administration: Alexandria, VA.

Place, A.W., Ballenger, J., Freeman, J., Alford, B., Blyden, P., & Ntarella, M. (2005, November). *Principals' perceptions of social justice*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the University Council of Educational Administration, Nashville, TN.

Place, A.W., Ballenger, J., Wasonga, T.A., Piveral, J., Edmonds, C. (2006, November). *Voices III: Some principals' discussion of social justice*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the University Council of Educational Administration, San Antonio, TX.

Wasonga, T.A. (2006, October). *School leaders' perspectives on democratic leadership for social justice*. Paper presented at the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management Conference, Lefkosia, Cyprus.

Symposia

Acker-Hocevar, M., Ballenger, J., Alford, B., Christman, D., Freeman, J., Busman, D., Hipp, S., Piveral, J., Edmonds, C., Dean, D., Gieselmann, S., Hensley, P., Burmeister, V., Kelly, C., Kersten, T., Miller, T., Rodriguez, M.R., Murakami-Ramalho, E., Painter, S., Place, W., Roettger, C., Roettger, L., Wasonga, T., & Stratton, S. (2006, November). *Interstices for democracy with social justice, building community and working on school improvement—principals' voices from different school types*. Symposium conducted at the annual convention of the University Council for Educational Administration, San Antonio, TX.

Christman, D., McClellan, R., Hyle, A.E., Wasonga, T., Alsbury, T., & Miller, T. (2006, April). *Voices 3: Principals' and Superintendents Perceptions of leadership for the public interest*. Symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

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Ivory, G., Fairbanks, A., McClellan, R., Whitaker, K., Cox, B., Dexter, R., Alsbury, T., Johnstone, C., Painter, S., Ruff, W., Dean, D., Pivalar, J., Edmonds, C., Gable, K., Miller, T., Patterson, F., Hyle, A., & Sherman, W. (2006, November). *Roles and responsibilities of superintendents in addressing issues of democracy, accountability, and social justice*. Symposium conducted at the annual convention of the University Council for Educational Administration, San Antonio, TX.

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Newsletter Articles

Acker-Hocevar, M., & Ivory, G. (2006). Update on Voices 3: Focus groups underway and plans and thoughts about the future. *UCEA Review*, 48(1), 22-24.

Ivory, G., & Acker-Hocevar, M. (2003). UCEA seeks superintendents' and principals' perspectives in "Voices 3." *UCEA Review*, 45(2), 15-17.

Books

Miller, T.N., Devin, M. D., & Shoop, R. J. (2007). *Closing the leadership gap: How district and university partnerships shape effective school leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.¹

Ivory, G., & Acker-Hocevar, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Successful school board leadership: Lessons from superintendents*. MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education.²

The book contains the following chapters: Aiken, J.A. Success strategy: Prioritize and decide; Alsbury, T.L. Challenge: Needing to be reelected; Arellano, E. Success strategy: Obtain meaningful communication; Dexter, R., & Ruff, W. Challenge: Fostering student achievement; Devin, M., Miller, T.N., & Salsberry, T.A. Success strategy: Maintain good relationships; Dominguez, R. Success strategy: Learn about education and your role; Gerstl-Pepin, C. Challenge: Mandates and micropolitics; McClellan, R., Hyle, A., & Restine, L.N. Challenge: Shortages of resources; Patterson, F.E. Success strategy: Recruit, develop, keep, and rely on good staff; Restine, L.N. Challenges: Understanding your superintendent's perspective; Ruff, W., & Dexter, R. Success strategies: Base decisions on data; Rusch, E. Success strategy: Sell the vision; Whitaker, K., & Watson, S.T. Challenge: Leading in an era of change.

¹ Quotes from Voices 3 transcripts were used in this book.

² Quotes from the Voices 3 pilot study as well as Voices 2 and the original study, *A Thousand Voices from the Firing Line* (Kochan et al., 1999) were used in this book.