Politics in Education:

An Era of Suppression of School Leader Agency and Voice

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Abstract

U.S. elementary and secondary schooling is a complicated, layered, political and bureaucratic contest. At the school house door, school leaders must negotiate competing demands, district rules, and state and federal statutes; a muddle that is a fundamental and definitive political dynamic. Yet, perhaps the most dysfunctional legacy bequeathed to today's school leaders remains the Progressive Era's professionalizing agenda, effectively neutering their political acumen (Cibulka, 2009; Plank & Boyd, 1994; Tyack, 1991). From mid-20th Century well into the 21st, robust findings revealed that professionally-oriented superintendents tended to churn through districts, while more politically savvy superintendents sustained their tenure (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young & Ellerson, 2011; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971). Arguably maintaining one's own job cannot be the sole measure of successful school leadership, so additionally, leadership preparation must attend to the fact that high rates of school personnel turnover, including the churning of superintendents and principals, lowers student success (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2013; Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Ronfeldt, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2013). The current era's attempt to nationalize school leaders' licensure with a "laser-like focus on student learning" (CCSSO, 2015, p. 3) sustains an ill-advised ignorance about the depth and breadth of political conflict in school leadership. Furthermore, the current proposal includes an erasure of the 20-year old so-called "political" standard in favor of apolitical rhetoric and further, it coopts discourses of social justice eschewing the authentic dispositions and skills of democratic and political leadership.

Keywords: political acumen, political agency, policy, politics, street-level bureaucrats

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Across more than three decades, the conflation and inflation of global educational policy transfer places school leaders in the nexus of implementation politics (Ball, 2001; Carpenter & Brewer, 2014; Rivzi & Lingard, 2010). Historically, the U.S.'s educational policy and politics complexity further entangles school leadership and practices (Boyd, 1987; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The turn of the 20th Century marked the Progressive Movement persisting attempt to regulate politics in education through the notion of professionalizing teachers, administrators, and school governance (Mehta 2013; Tyack, 1991). The persisting misinformed meme of that era is that professionals were apolitical, and that professional school leaders not only avoid politics, but skillfully suppress and avoid conflict. Either way the current era included national attempts to rewrite 20-year old standards for the development and evaluation of U.S. school leaders by scrubbing away a standard specifically focused on the macro- and micropolitics of schooling (Council of Chief State School Officers -- CCSSO, 2015). Although those focused on underserved students and marginalized communities have raised serious concerns about the drafted changes (Superville, 2015), I argue that these concerns do not go far enough in addressing the political realities of leading schools in a complex, Western democracy. While professional responsibility and accountability must involve consciousness and action for social justice, awareness isn't enough to enable student success. These issues require political acumen, which is a form of critical thinking with a substantial commitment and strategic skillset to marshal resources for student empowerment and achievement.

First, the current denial of the political in educational leadership encompasses the rhetoric of a "laser-like focus on student learning" (CCSSO, 2015, p. 3). Yet, this expression merely poses as the latest version of persisting forces' denial of the political in the work of school

leaders. Thus, I confront three misunderstandings about the nature of school leadership which reduces the complexity of the role to a merely technocratic and singular focus on learning. These three misunderstandings include the following misguided notions that: (1) conflict and emotions are both unprofessional and avoidable (Bridges, 2012; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Lindle 2004); (2) power is not rife in schooling (Apple, 2013; English & Bolton, 2016); and (3) schooling's daily routines are not inherently political moments of balancing individual rights and the common good (Kirst, 1984; Lindle & Reese, 2014). After confronting the fallacies of these misunderstandings, I summarize the sustained recommendations from scholars on politics in education about these three political skills necessary to school leadership: (1) surfacing conflict (Bridges, 2012; Immegart & Boyd, 1979); (2) promoting deliberation (English & Papa, 2010; Gastil, 2008; Hargreaves, 1998), and (3) acknowledging consequences (Lumby, 2013; Stefkovich, 2014). The sources for elucidating both the perseveration of these misunderstandings as well as the enduring recommendations include nearly seven decades of work by U.S. and global educational scholars who focus on politics in schools.

Denial and Misunderstandings about Politics in Schools

A legacy aphorism of the Progressive era at the turn of the 20th Century persists into the 21st. Namely, that all politics is corrupt and that schools must be sanitized of the turbulence of democratic processes (Tyack, 1991). The logical fallacy that schools, the institutional mechanism for an educated democratic citizenry, should eschew democratic processes prevails in the *anti-political* stance of today's efforts to revise the nearly 20-year old ISLLC standards a creature of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

> By antipolitics we mean a style of political action common to reformers from all parts of
> the political spectrum, in which the advocates of reform seek to spare themselves the

rigors and uncertainties of interest mobilization and coalition-building by shifting consideration of key issues from legislatures and school boards to institutions that are less 'political' and more authoritative, such as courts and markets. (Plank & Boyd, 1994, p. 264)

Selective connotation of the word, political, as only a pejorative note to the give-and-take of relationships surrounding schooling, also denies administrators' practical wisdom that *lowercase-p-politics* simply describes how things work in schools (Ball, 2012; Lindle, 1994; 1999; Marshall & Scribner, 1991). When construed as politics-is-evil, school leaders can be misled by at least three contorted expectations, which in turn threaten their potential efforts in addressing improved teaching and learning. The three contortions include that professionals (a) avoid conflict and emotions, (b) deny power in schooling, and (c) oversimplify the balancing of individual rights and the common good. These three misunderstandings require further explanation in light of the contrasting research based on effective school leadership.

Problems with avoiding conflict and emotions. A rising literature base on the essential emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979; 2003; Kruml & Geddes, 2000) associated with any service profession now infuses literature on school leadership. The lack of acknowledgement of the emotional work in school leaders stemmed from its origins as a masculinized position and the depiction of professionalism as head, not heart, driven (Crawford, 2011; Milstein, 1992; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Wilensky, 1964). Despite this myth, the reports of emotional interactions, ranging from abuse to trauma, in routines as well as in school reform efforts are documented phenomena (e.g. Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Blase & Blase, 2002, 2003; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Lindle, 2004; Patterson, 2000). Routine school conflict stems from the daily issues associated with scarce resources in schools (Ball, 2012; Farmer, 2009). Change, the substance of school reform, also generates conflict (Kirst & Wirt, 2009; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). Arguably, a school leader who avoids conflict, is also avoiding the fundamental

requirements of the role of leadership. Since conflict is connected to emotions, then the denial of emotions while avoiding conflict seems to be a recipe for incompetence in school leadership.

Denial of power in schooling. The sociology of teachers persistently reveals a preference for individual work with assumptions about the equality of colleagues and the treatment of presumed equals (Lortie, 1975; Hargreaves, 2005; Koppich, Humphrey, & Hough, 2006). Given the career path for the majority of school leaders originates among the teaching ranks, then novice school leaders may persevere in reifying the notion that they are equal among equals despite the centrality of administrator responsibility for hiring, development and evaluation of teachers (Ingersoll, 2007; Marks & Nance, 2007; Murphy, Hallinger & Heck, 2013; Lumby 2013). While teachers remain conscious of the line between the classroom and school or district offices, the bulk of research on successful school reform shows that the administrators who acknowledge that line and empower teacher participation also lead schools with improved and higher measures of student success (Ingersoll, 2007; Marks & Nance, 2007; Louis & Robinson, 2012).

Power relationships also generate many of the daily conflicts between students and teachers and related issues between parents and school personnel (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Thompkins, 2000; Watts & Erevelle, 2004). While many of these incidents ostensibly start with student deportment, the root causes may reveal deeper issues of power embedded in clashes of culture and morés, pedagogy and curriculum (Apple, 2013; McLaren, 2007). Among the many value-laden conflicts surrounding public schools, one of the foundational power-based questions is who gets to decide what for which students (Kirst, 1984; Stout, Tallerico & Scribner, 1995; Zhao, 2014). School leaders who ignore the presence of power in their work are more likely to lose their jobs than those who are aware of how power influences their practice (Bjork &

Kowalski, 2005; Carpenter & Brewer, 2014; Fusarelli & Petersen, 2014; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971). The acknowledgement of power also requires strategies for balancing competing parties with shared rights to non-compatible outcomes.

Balancing common good and individual rights isn't inherently political. The most routine dilemma for school personnel is a prevailing contradiction in any democracy, the irresolvable competition between individual rights and the common good (Plank & Boyd, 1994; Zhao, 2014). The denial that this competition exists, denies the fundamental ethic of professional judgment, deciding in the best interest of students (Stefkovich, 2014) while dealing with the complexities of a pluralistic society (Strike, 2007). Today's schools are demonstrably more segregated in a society that is more diverse (Diem & Frankenberg, 2013; Reardon & Yun, 2003). The clarion calls exhorting school leaders to recognize and enact socially just decisions and rules represent a righteous cause (Scanlan, 2013; Santamaría, 2014), but without enough practical guidance to go beyond pointing at problems (Furman, 2012). The potential strategies for deliberating the continual tensions among individual and groups in a democracy inherently are political, and micropolitical (Ball, 2012: Gastil, 2008).

Three Fundamental Political Skills

An ancient skillset resides in the long-standing practices of politics. Among the many soft skills demanded in the information age (Robles, 2012), the practice of politics encompasses intra-personal and interpersonal awareness, tactics and strategies. Only three are offered here as evidence that the political can be taught and applied in effective school leadership.

Surfacing conflict. When school leaders enforce a bureaucratic, closed climate, they enable covert conflict and relegate teachers and students to a norm of automated performativity (Ball, 2012; Lumby, 2009). They "pull rank" (Drake & Goldring, 2014, p. 47) and destroy any

chance for authentic partnerships with students, teachers or community stakeholders with this authoritative power play (Auerbach, 2012). The remedy for overcoming hierarchical repression is deliberate surfacing of issues through an approach known as problem finding (Brewer, 2011; Immegart & Boyd, 1979; Lindle, 2005). More than 40 years of research suggest that problem finding, more than a political tactic, is a key aspect of leadership to promote student learning (Hallinger, 2011). Subsequently, the next steps must include a resolution, but again, the move to resolution could engender more turmoil, without a careful recognition of who might engage in the decision processes for that resolution (Stout et al., 1995; Zhao, 2014).

Promoting deliberation. Politics and policy implementation require the practice of deliberation (Gastil, 2008; Fowler, 2013; Louis, Mayrowetz, Murphy & Smylie, 2013; Louis & Robinson, 2012). Deliberation involves school personnel and stakeholders in the necessary sense-making for problem resolution (Crawford, 2012; Supovitz & Tognatta, 2013). School leaders may need to buffer pressures from teachers and those external to the school community to enable sense-making conversations (Bennett, 2012; Louis et al., 2013; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013).

Acknowledging consequences. Popular notions of politics as a negative venture originate in corruption and failures in the delivery of patronage or promises. Thus, school leaders as both an ethical and a strategic practice must acknowledge, openly, the range of consequences every political contest presents (Johnson & Kruse, 2009; Stefkovich, 2014). The balanced acknowledgement of which individuals and groups stand to gain, or lose, from proposed options, may extend deliberations and associated sense-making (Lukensmeyer, 2014). The political skill involved in acknowledging consequences is connected to the political skill of surfacing conflict to promote sense- and decision making.

Relevance and Interest to Educational Leadership

The tension between professionalism and the necessary skill set of politically savvy school leaders is a delicate balance in the history of American schooling. The proposals and protests generated by the latest revisions of the ISLLC standards both fail to acknowledge the political nature of school leadership in conception and in practices. This latest round of the conscription of both ends of the theory-to-practice-conceptual-continuum in school leadership preparation demands notice, documentation, commentary, and mobilization.

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