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A New Agenda for Research in Educational Leadership: A Conversational Review

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A New Agenda for Research in Educational Leadership, by William A. Firestone and Carolyn Riehl. New York: Teachers College Press, 2005. 243 pp. ISBN 0807746304.

Purpose: *The authors review a volume that emerged from a 2-year participatory effort to look at new research directions in educational administration. The review is presented as a conversation between two researchers—an old-timer (Karen Seashore Louis) and a relative newcomer (Meredith Honig)—to probe for differences and convergence in perspectives on what this collection offers to the field.*

Keywords: *leadership for learning and equity; participation; scholarship; educational research; educational leadership*

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE VOLUME? HAS THE VOLUME MET ITS PURPOSE?

Karen Seashore Louis: This book is the product of a committee that I initiated in 2000 during my tenure as vice president of Division A. A previous committee, chaired by Diana Pounder, was challenged to review the state of scholarship in our field and to make suggestions for improvement. The task force members used both new data and reviews of existing scholarship to produce a special issue of *EAQ* in August 2000.

Editor's Note: Seeking to provide an alternative/innovative approach to reviewing books, the editors of *EAQ* asked a seasoned and junior scholar to respond to the recently edited William A. Firestone and Carolyn Riehl volume, *A New Agenda for Research in Educational Leadership*, using a question-response experimental format. We thank them for this contribution.—Bob L. Johnson Jr., Senior Associate Editor, *EAQ*

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Those reports include a rich mix of perspectives, ranging from a study of "productive" educational administration scholars to an effort to frame and categorize the variety of research within an increasingly diverse field. The obvious question for me, as a new vice president, was to look for critical issues that demanded more investigation.

With that in mind, I asked Bill Firestone and Carolyn Riehl, both of whom served on the first committee, to organize a new group that would open new challenges for inquiry. As part of that, I asked them to look for arenas in which the field of educational leadership and administration overlapped with emerging areas of inquiry in other divisions. Their job was not simply to review existing literature—the revised *Handbook of Research in Educational Administration* had been published only recently—but also to help reshape a research agenda. Drawing on a diverse group of participants, including some who do not consider themselves to be "Ed Ad" folks, Carolyn and Bill called a series of meetings during the course of 2 years that resulted in provocative papers that were presented in special work sessions at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference. These draft papers were sufficiently lengthy that it is was obvious they could not be included in a special *EAQ* issue; thus, Bill and Carolyn moved toward a book. Critiqued, revised, and updated, the chapters in this volume represent the core of that work.

The 33,000 hits generated by a Google search on *leadership for learning* give some sense of the salience of that theme. Popular though it may be now, this catchphrase is of relatively recent origin, particularly when applied to educational administration. An Education Resources Information Center search using the terms *leadership for learning*, *schools*, and *principals* had only 123 hits in journals, of which about half were published since 1999. Although the volume that Meredith and I have been invited to comment on cannot represent the full range of our field, I think that it has done a remarkable job of conveying the centrality of student development to our research agenda.

Meredith Honig: The book brings together some of the nation's most important scholars of educational leadership and educational research more broadly in the words of the introduction "to establish strong connections between . . . leadership and . . . learning and equity." In the process, the volume aims to bring together traditionally discrete fields and arenas—namely, learning theory and the research and practice of educational leadership. As Karen noted above, this volume comes in response to increasing demands on educational leaders of all stripes to shift the main focus of their roles from managing the fiscal, organizational, and political conditions of schools to becoming integral participants in efforts to foster learning and equity.

In many ways, this volume should help center learning theory solidly on the educational leadership map. Part of this contribution comes in the early chapters, which explain that advances in learning theory have helped to reconceptualize how youth and adults learn. Learning is now understood as a profoundly social process. As part of this process, students and teachers do not passively receive information but rather, actively construct knowledge in part by drawing on their prior knowledge and other resources. In these and other ways, students and teachers alike operate as essential agents in the learning process. Scholars of teaching and learning have highlighted that this conception of how people learn ups the ante on teachers to become able constructors of opportunities for all students to engage in these social, knowledge-building processes; research on teachers and teacher education has followed suit and begun to establish a body of knowledge about what teachers do when they enable students' and their own learning in these ways.

The chapters in this volume take the next step by beginning to explore the implications of these developments for educational leaders by linking trends in educational leadership research to contemporary learning theory. As such, this volume begins to blur traditional boundaries between learning theorists and scholars of educational administration. Particularly for leadership students and scholars who are relatively unfamiliar with learning theory, this volume will probably serve as an important introduction to intersections between these two arenas.

WHAT IS NEW?

Karen Seashore Louis: A major committee task was to build bridges from what we know to a robust research agenda for the core of the field. Thus, I approach the "What's new?" question hoping not for radical suggestions but proposals that shift our thinking without being too uncomfortable to live with. In that regard, the book is a bit of a Rorschach test—as an individual reader, I can report only on what made *me* think about new directions. Even that lens is applied selectively because some of the topics covered in the volume are ones that I will never become personally involved with—for example, inquiry that requires familiarity with cognitive psychology. Meredith and I conducted a mini-experiment by asking each other "Which chapters resonated most with you?" Although we think that our research interests are congruent, we had somewhat different lists, and even those chapters that caught the attention of both of us did so for different reasons.

Mary Kay Stein and Jim Spillane do a remarkable job in chapter 2 of laying out the gap between the emerging knowledge from the past decade of research on teaching and what we know about how school leaders influence classroom practice. We have, as Leithwood and Riehl's chapter 1 points out, a fair amount of information about how school leaders shape the conditions for teaching and learning, but we know little about the way in which specific leader behaviors, predispositions, or values change the way in which individual teachers or groups of teachers learn or practice. I may not do this work myself, but I certainly have students interested in filling this gap. Chapter 5, by Mary Driscoll and Ellen Goldring, identifies another intriguing space for future work, noting that we know a lot about how the community context affects children's learning and a lot about how schools affect learning but almost nothing about how leaders' practices affect the interplay of school-community relationships. Although recent work on trust has begun to investigate this territory, it is still largely limited to studies of parent relationships, which is an important but narrow definition of the out-of-school contexts in which children learn. Finally, Firestone and Shipps (chapter 6) expand the boundaries of educational administration to include more emphasis on the policy contexts in which leadership for learning plays out, whether in schools or districts. This chapter (and the empirical investigations of this topic that have already begun to emerge at AERA) solidifies Division A's link with Division L-Policy, reminding us that classrooms are nested in schools, which are in turn located in districts, states, and countries—all of which lead to complex but loosely connected stimuli to which leaders respond.

Meredith Honig: I agree with Karen that the chapters help call new or renewed attention to how leadership intersects not only with teaching and learning but also community and policy. Importantly the research questions the authors pose at these intersections generally aim to elaborate how leaders' *participation* in school- and neighborhood-based communities of learners (sometimes called communities of practice) matters to learning and equity. This emphasis on participation in communities of learners moves away from some traditional views that leadership is an individual trait or that leadership is a body of knowledge to be acquired by individuals. Rather, as Smylie and colleagues (chapter 9) begin to point out in their chapter on leadership development, leadership is a capacity that can be cultivated. For such capacity to have value, it must be exercised, and its value will depend on various contextual conditions such as students' and teachers' readiness to learn and school and community resources, as well as school principals' individual prior knowledge and dispositions and their

opportunities for transformative conversations among themselves and with others. (See the chapter by Furman and Shields for an important elaboration on the importance of opportunities for leaders and others to socially construct meaning as part of the leadership process.) This is where the concept of leadership as participation becomes a particularly important and distinct frame for leadership research. It calls researchers' attention to what leaders do day-to-day and how their choices and performance necessarily depend on the choices and performance of others and the communities in which they are situated. These concepts should focus the field on deep explorations of leaders' day-to-day practice on the job and the multiple micro and macro contexts in which their work unfolds.

WHAT IS PROMISING AND WHAT IS NOT YET ADDRESSED?

Meredith Honig: This book is particularly promising in two respects. First, it aims to highlight the complexity of leadership that fosters learning and equity in contemporary school systems. Second, it begins to marshal theory to advance knowledge about the complexity of educational leadership and how educational leaders manage that complexity day-to-day in practice. However, on the whole, the volume leaves key dimensions of leadership under conditions of complexity largely unaddressed—namely, who counts as an educational leader and how multiple leaders might operate and interact in complex systems to strengthen learning and equity. Given the significant ground already covered in the volume, these omissions are not entirely surprising. However, highlighting them here might further help advance the volume's purposes.

To elaborate, as the introduction notes,

> many educational decisions are highly contingent because problems and their contexts are complex and constantly changing. Decision makers, from teachers to policymakers, must consider more factors when deciding how to proceed than can be covered in any one research study or synthesis of many studies.

Decades of implementation research likewise have revealed that no one set of programs or practices works for all students in all places all the time; educational scholars interested in learning and equity would do well, then, to aim to uncover the conditions under which particular programs or practices do seem to work for particular students and teachers.[1]

Strands of this volume's chapters begin to paint a portrait of educational leadership as the management of complexity. For example, Reyes and

Wagstaff (chapter 7) argue that leadership in the context of racially and ethnically diverse schools and neighborhoods must be "context specific"—highly attuned to the particular needs and strengths of their own local communities. Likewise, Leithwood and Riehl (chapter 1) posit that leadership exists within social relationships and leadership is highly dependent on the practice of others and various contextual conditions. Prestine and Nelson (chapter 4) frame instructional leadership as "a complex function enacted by groups of people rather than individuals acting alone." Furman and Shields (chapter 8) emphasize that leadership should operate along multiple dimensions at the intersection of democratic community and social justice.

Some chapters take this line of inquiry a step further and call for robust theories about what leadership in complex arenas entails and the factors that help or hinder it. For example, Stein and Spillane examine the "mediational paradigms" that help explain the relationship between "what a teacher or principal does and what students learn." They explicitly note that traditionally, research on educational leadership, like research in other areas, has been too atheoretical—"seeking causes in behaviors not in meaningful mechanisms or explanations." They suggest in part that leadership researchers should anchor their scholarship "in what is known about how teachers learn." Likewise, Prestine and Nelson offer sociocultural and constructivist theories as a "conceptual bridge" that might link leadership and "the core technology of schooling." These theories shift traditional units of analysis in educational leadership studies from the individual leader to the various networks and communities in which leaders might participate and the activities at the heart of those interactions. A primary question for educational leadership research then becomes not what type of leaders support learning and equity but rather, what are the practices of leaders when they participate in systems of support for learning and equity and how might these practices be fostered systemwide.

The editors clearly indicate that they do not view the volume as comprehensive or as a "straitjacket" for future research but rather, a jumping-off point and inspiration. Taking the book's emphasis on complexity and the importance of theory as my own jumping-off point and inspiration, I argue that the volume could have pressed further in its treatment of complexity and theory in several respects.

First, a point the field knows well: Educational leaders may be found throughout formal public educational systems from federal departments of education to school classrooms. Although virtually all the chapters refer broadly to educational leaders, the chapters mainly draw on research on school principals. (One exception is the chapter by Firestone and Shipps concerning how school district central office staff interpret accountability policy). Some

authors acknowledge that leadership is a function that may be carried out by people in various roles and indicate that they focused their chapters on principals because they found the research about principals relatively extensive. However, various educational research literatures elaborate leadership roles for teachers, district central office administrators, state and federal administrators, elected officials such as local school board members and, increasingly, students. The volume might have set clearer expectations about its scope with a simple title change to *A New Agenda for Research on the Principalship*.

Second, if we view educational leaders as those who aim to enable learning and equity, then we should extend our definition of *educational leader* to include the multiple people who matter to youths' learning and opportunities. As Goldring and Driscoll (chapter 5) point out, youth learn throughout their day with multiple teachers in and out of school. Presumably then there are multiple "educational leaders" beyond school walls—directors of youth organizations, social workers, athletic coaches, and librarians among them—whose practice also matters to students' and teachers' opportunities to learn and teach. This youth- and learning-focused view of who counts as an educational leader is consistent with advances in learning theory that reveal leadership for learning in such nonschool settings as Girl Scout troops and grocery stores. The volume mentions that communities outside school have resources that matter to how school principals operate but generally does not elaborate how educational leaders in and out of schools shape learning and equity outcomes in their own right. The distributive leadership concepts advanced in several chapters in this volume could set an appropriate frame for such inquiry if they are applied to in-school and out-of-school settings.

When educational leadership is viewed in this way—as stretching across and beyond formal school systems—a third dimension of leadership complexity, acknowledged by Firestone and Shipps, emerges: educational leadership as a nested or ecological phenomenon in which the practices of multiple educational leaders shapes educational outcomes. This line of inquiry raises essential questions such as the following: What are appropriate and productive leadership roles and responsibilities at each point in the system? How do educational leaders within and beyond formal school systems interact to expand or curb learning and equity? and If leaders in states, districts, and schools are all using the same student performance data to drive their decisions and arrive at different conclusions about school improvement strategies, who ultimately decides how to proceed? These questions become imperative given the complexity of educational leadership for learning and equity. They suggest that although focusing entire school systems on learning and equity has obvious advantages, it also can

create new complex challenges that will not be well understood by studying pieces of educational systems separate from the broader ecologies in which they are situated.

In sum, this volume charts essential directions for future research by training researchers' attention on the complexity of leadership for learning and equity and the importance of rich theories to link leadership, learning, and equity. Research that builds on these emphases should examine leadership throughout and beyond formal school systems and how interactions among leaders and leaders' multiple demands shape learning and equity outcomes.

Karen Seashore Louis: What is missing from some chapters in this volume is the fundamental connection of research in educational administration and other disciplines. That is not surprising in a volume whose intent is to focus on the connection between leadership and learning, but I get many of my best ideas—and often some of the most pertinent research questions—by going to literature that is completely outside of education, whether in political science, sociology, or business. The two chapters that reach outside are those that deal with creating democratic, just schools (Reyes and Wagstaff's and Furman and Shields's). The former draws on the evidence of changing student and community characteristics, whereas the latter incorporates political and social theorists such as Lani Guinier, Amy Gutman, and Benjamin Barber to define broader goals for schools. I think that we will continue to find that our field is best served by sniffing out the interesting threads—new or past—in related disciplines and reinventing them in an educational context. The most recent example in my own research, which centers on the interaction between state and district policies, is the need to draw on the disciplinary studies of state political cultures—largely because the number of serious investigations of this topic in education has been small. We cannot always anticipate where these leads will be found or where they will take us.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS IN SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE TO MOVE THE FIELD IN NEW DIRECTIONS?

Meredith Honig: Per my comments above, this volume points to a number of directions essential to advancing *scholarship* in the field. First and foremost, the volume highlights the importance of focusing leadership research on what we now know about how people learn and the conditions that support adult and youth learning. In keeping with this focus, many of

the chapters in this volume raise fundamental questions about what educational leaders do when they promote the kinds of social interactions at the heart of learning. These questions generally direct researchers to identify not individual traits or bodies of knowledge associated with leadership for learning and equity but rather, to how leaders participate in communities that aim to support learning and equity. In this view, leadership is a competency that must be continually developed. As Smylie and colleagues highlight throughout their chapter, future leadership research should aim to understand leadership capacity—the knowledge, skills, and dispositions the enable leaders' participation in such communities—and how dimensions of capacity vary by various contextual conditions.

Second, this volume by inclusion and omission directs researchers' attention to key questions about the complexity of leadership for learning and equity. As discussed above, confronting complexity means examining how leaders manage the sheer diversity of the supports that their students, teachers, and other learners may require to participate productively in communities of learners. A focus on complexity also means attending to leadership as a practice in which multiple actors across and beyond formal educational systems may be engaged.

Research on leadership and administration in the public management and organizational decision-making literatures—barely mentioned in this volume—could help ground the future study of leadership complexity in educational settings. Strands of this research highlight that in complex settings, feedback on performance likely will be ambiguous in a number of respects, including with regard to whether leaders' actions do or do not contribute to particular learning and outcomes. Future studies of educational leadership might do well to explore educational leaders' decision making in light of the various daily ambiguities fundamental to their work.

Ultimately, the chapters in this volume suggest that the practice of leadership for learning and equity will be markedly difficult to exercise and researchers likely will not find many examples of this practice fully in action in contemporary school districts. However, the number of schools, districts, and states attempting this practice is likely to increase as advances in learning theory begin to become more widely known in school systems. Studies of these efforts should take care not to assume that because the work is difficult it is not going well. As I have written about central office leadership elsewhere, the work might appear difficult precisely because it is going well.

Karen Seashore Louis: Practically speaking**,** we should remember that we have little to offer unless our research is solid, but educational administration is also an applied field. Like business or public policy schools that

edge too far toward theory and lose their connections with "real leaders," we must assess our knowledge against both a truth test and a utility test. The research agenda set out in this book says more about truth than utility, but it is easy to see the ways in which the knowledge summarized and the studies hinted at could be appealing to practitioners and policy makers who are interested in making sure that students are well served. It is also important to reiterate that not all research studies in an applied field need to be applicable from the start but that the overall corpus of our work should have something to say about practice.

Measures of school effectiveness will shift—and we all hope that we will soon see authentic, multiple assessments of student development—but the need for research that links social structures and teacher and administrator behavior to student learning is not going away. However, leaders will also continue to need research that is not directly linked to student learning. Schools are large, complex agencies that demand political maneuvering, fiscal policies, and strategies to make better use of human resources. Of course, we should keep the end in mind, but that does not require us to be simplistic. It is to the credit of the authors in this volume that they acknowledge the difficulty of finding out what makes leaders "successful" in supporting student development and also the need to understand better the impacts of what leaders do in a broader sense.

In addition, we should remember that current practice- or policy-friendly summaries of "what works" in schools are another form of scholarship, and alternative methods such as "design experiments" that involve scholars in creating and studying change may be difficult but worthwhile. It is not surprising that the best scholars sometimes turn their attention toward helping with (if not doing) practice-friendly work toward the past decade or so of their careers when they have deep "sticky knowledge" based on their own and other's research and a sense of urgency about making a difference. In addition, as Meredith pointed out to me, some universities may not regard this kind of work as scholarly—another reason why younger members are counseled to avoid it. Our research alone cannot change schools, but the more we know about what leaders can do to make them function better, the more relevant our work will become.

NOTE

1. See Honig (2006).

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