LEADERSHIP IN A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, this work is dedicated to my wife and daughter. My wife supported me through my doctoral degree at the University of Pennsylvania by encouraging my application and seeing me through the ups and down of nearly six years of work. She loves me for who I am, and for that I am grateful. She also challenges me on a daily basis, for which I am also grateful. It is truly a gift that you are my wife, and that we can be parents, lovers, and learners of life together. I love you, Jess, more than you will ever know.

To my daughter, who, at the time of this writing, is three years old. I am so proud to be your Dad and always will be. My hope for you, Amy, is that you will grow up to become passionate about something in your life—it does not matter what that “something” is; hopefully it will be many things. Be a learner, regardless of what you do. Learn about others and their lives, and be curious about the world around you. You are a beautiful, assertive, and empathetic young girl and words cannot express how much I do and always will love you.

This work is also dedicated to both of my late grandmothers, who were educators long before most women went to college, let alone became independent professionals.

This is also dedicated to my mother, who encouraged me to “do what I love—the money will follow.” And, to my Dad, who always encouraged me to pursue a terminal degree in whatever profession I chose. Mission accomplished, Dad.

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interests—out of love and concern for me. I also want to thank my in-laws for encouraging me and pointing out new and innovative ways of thinking about this research. Their love has been important to me through the past six years, as well.

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Thanks also goes out to the faculty at my school, “Springboard,” as well as Jim and Dan, who were instrumental in helping me think out loud about what we do every day and how to make sense of it.

At the time of this writing, democracy is very much a relevant topic of conversation in the United States and around the world. My hopes are that it always will be.
ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of a democratic school leader and understand how his conception of leadership is congruent or incongruent with notions of democracy and democratic leadership. This small, participant-observer case study follows a democratic school leader and his staff for a year and examines those challenges and opportunities. Specifically, the research addresses how a school leader’s belief system impacts their approach to school governance. It also examines the tensions leaders in this context encounter and how those tensions are navigated. The data uncovers unique opportunities that similarly situated democratic school leaders encounter, and the best approaches for practitioners in the field.

The research traces the history of democratic schools and the diverse set of ideas that define the broad spectrum of these types of schools. This work also examines recurrent leadership themes in literature and pairs them with some of the defining characteristics of democratic schools. It then looks specifically at research aimed at understanding democratic school leadership. It creates a conceptual understanding of democratic schools based on an intimate and practitioner-based understanding of the research site: voice in decision-making, curriculum, and community.

The findings uncover a school leader who is pulled in many different directions, but one who remains committed to the democratic process of deliberation and listening.
The findings also elucidate a tension with autonomous teaching and curriculum writing, as well as the process of terminating students from community. While revisiting existing research, this work explains some new understandings about leadership in a democratic school context and contains some practical suggestions for leaders in similar situations.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Leadership in any context is difficult. One definition of leadership implies “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2013, p. 5). In the educational context, leading a school or participating in a school community is no exception to the difficulty of influencing administrators, teachers, parents, and students toward accomplishing a common goal.

To make matters more complex, democratic schools are unique sites at which to observe leadership and are challenging schools to lead. By their very nature, democratic schools invite broad community participation—and therefore invite many people into the process of operating a school (Apple & Beane, 2007; Dewey, 1916). Democratic schools try to be true to their name by embodying not just the rhetoric of democracy, but also by practicing democratic governance. They are comprised of educators and community members “whose belief in democracy is a lived process [that] is put into practice everyday” (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. vii). Democratic school leadership may sometimes look somewhat laissez-faire, as if the leader is not “doing” anything. However, leaders who work democratically are often listening, seeking opinion, and deferring judgment or decision-making until there is consensus. This type of leadership is easier to conceptualize than it is to actually practice.

Focusing on the work of a school leader in a democratic school uncovers complex and challenging work of leadership in the context of a democratic school. At first blush, traditional notions of the “strong leader” may seem to conflict with notions of democratic consensus-building and decision-making by school leaders. Is this truly a practical
tension experienced in democratic school leadership, or simply a theorized tension? If tensions like the previous one exist, how does a democratic school leader navigate those challenges? What might this say about a leader’s personal conceptions of leadership that they bring to their work? From where do these personal conceptions originate? How would a leader in a democratic school describe those concepts? And, for practitioners who are considering leading and transforming their schools according to democratic principles, what are the implications for future practice? What about future research directions? Examining these questions in a democratic middle school is the focus of this dissertation.

**Motivation for Research**

As a teacher for the past nine years, I have been involved in relatively undemocratic schools and educational organizations. My career started through Teach for America (TFA) in an underserved urban district. TFA told me *what* material to teach and *how* to teach it. The district in which I taught had lost the opportunity to govern itself locally and was instead operated by the state legislature, situated several hours from City Hall. The city school system had been deprived of its ability to govern itself, and—unwittingly—I was part of an organization that was helping continue this undemocratic process. After this experience, I taught at a private school run by a Fortune 500 company. While the school mission was benevolent, the management of the school was corporate and hierarchical. It may be an increasingly all-too-common story for the early 21st-century teacher—that they, along with students, are cogs in a school machine and are simply the recipients of policies and initiatives. Sadly, this trajectory in my teaching career
continued when I was hired by an urban charter school. The same treatment of teachers, students, and parents continued: hierarchical management, arrogant attitudes, and a fundamental lack of investment among everyone involved. Here again, the content I taught was already decided. My job was dependent upon student test data and value-added algorithms foreign to even my principal. I became so disenchanted with schooling at that point that I asked myself: Does school have to be this way? And, as I looked at how the principals in these various schools navigated these undemocratic environments, I wondered: How much is a school leader even in control of whether a school is democratic or not? Is it possible to make a school more democratic? What kind of person undertakes such a task? Am I up to that task?

As I began to ask myself these questions and reflect on them during my doctoral studies, I started to search for democratic schools in which I could teach. When I located one, was hired, and became involved in the school community, I immediately focused on the leadership of the school. As I witnessed and experienced leadership at my school, I wondered: How important is this person in creating a democratic community? Very similar school struggles and tensions were still there, just as they were in the previous settings. But, somehow, something was different. Democracy was at work in this school, and the school leader appeared to be important in sustaining this democracy. But how important? And, how necessary? Where and how did he come to believe in his leadership style? Should not democracy be able to thrive without a leader like him? These curiosities led me to ask my research questions.
Research Questions

1. How does the democratic school leader conceptualize the work of leadership?

2. What challenges and tensions (as perceived by leader and instructional staff) emerge for the leader of a democratic school?

3. How does the leader navigate those challenges and tensions?

4. What unique opportunities present themselves for democratic school leaders?

5. What are the effective practices of a democratic school leader in a given situation?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE

Conceptualizing Democratic Schools and School Leadership

The research here will draw on several different topics: the democratic schools family and their history; scholarship on school leadership theory; and, more specifically, research on and with democratic school leaders.

Democratic School History and Similar Models

Progressive schools. One label that is frequently used in the family of democratic schools is that of “progressive schools.” The term is taken from the Progressive Era in the early 20th century, and is historically defined by the tenets of the Progressive Education Association, founded in 1918 (Hayes, 2007). Those tenets may still be partially intact today; they are seen piecemeal in some schools but are absent from others. They can be divided into five large ideas: the freedom to develop naturally; self-motivated questions as the source of all learning; teachers as guides, not autocrats; holistic descriptions of student development; and the school as a leader in educational movements. These ideas certainly did not start in 1918, but developed under the guise of Progressivism at the time. Progressive schooling, like democratic schooling or even “free” schooling, almost certainly can find its roots as far back as Rousseau’s (1762) famous work Emile, in which he argues that children learn best when they discover for themselves. Until the Progressive Era prior to World War I, most progressive education was isolated and limited. Horace Mann, an early advocate for public schools in the United States in the mid-19th century, challenged the notion of traditional education in which children are
meant to memorize facts and typically are not given opportunities to learn by doing (Hayes, 2007). His challenge to the status quo would later give rise to progressivism in schools in the early 20th century.

Progressive schools today might include programs similar to Montessori education or Waldorf education. In both instances, there is an emphasis on the individual child and molding the curriculum to the student. In this molding process, it is believed that society is served in the long run because the student will experience individual fulfillment and therefore give back to society (Hayes, 2007). Importantly, there is a focus on how individual fulfillment serves the larger community and ultimately society. However, apart from individual program idiosyncrasies, there is not specific mention of progressive schools operating in an overtly democratic manner, in which students practice democracy as they experience school. Today, progressive schools operate in pockets in the United States, but are the rare exception in educational philosophy, especially since the standards movement in the 1980s (Hayes, 2007).

Dewey’s work and the Laboratory School. Any discussion of democratic schools must include John Dewey and his prodigious amount of work. Much of his writing either directly discussed democracy or tangentially touched upon it (Dewey, 1902; 1916; 1927). In 1902, Dewey discussed how the school should be the hub of social activity and the key to community engagement. School, he argued, is the glue that holds communities together. His belief in schools as the primary point of citizen engagement led him believe that the school serves a more important role than even the traditional operations of the State and its problem-solving functions (Dewey, 1902; Saltmarsh,
Schools as community problem solvers later became Dewey’s (1927; 1929) belief; he argued that schools are communities unto themselves, and are equipped to help the surrounding community engage in problem solving (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007). Naturally, then, children become part of this community problem-solving endeavor and learn civic engagement through their school experience. The school’s engagement serves as its curriculum as much as anything else does. Practicing and actively living out community through the school experience—and not only solving community problems—was equally important to Dewey (1927). Dewey (1902; 1927; 1929) might argue today that living in community is an education by itself, especially when the conflicts a community encounters are treated as problems to be solved democratically (Benson et al., 2007).

Dewey helped found the Laboratory School in 1896, which was largely based on progressive education principles, but also on some specifics that were particular to Dewey’s vision (Mayhew & Edwards, 1965). The school itself was largely the grist for Dewey’s philosophical writing after the school closed its doors in 1903. Few rigid policies drove the Laboratory School, but there were some guiding principles Dewey believed should govern the school. Two of those principles were that the Laboratory School should operate in a cooperative manner, and that classrooms should be driven by the inquiry process (Mayhew & Edwards, 1965). Knowledge was generated from actively doing the things being studied. Similar to the Just Schools movement of the late 20th century, student character and discipline was cultivated as a result of living in community with one another. Also, reminiscent of what might later have inspired the Summerhill
School, teachers were to be guides and leaders of knowledge, and were to honor the child’s natural inquisitive nature. The Laboratory School, as Mayhew and Edwards (1965) pointed out, was a significant departure from traditional school education. Parents were viewed as key stakeholders in moving the school forward, with the hopes that their participation would move “sympathetically [along] with the endeavors, experiments, and changes of the school itself” (Mayhew & Edwards, 1965, p. 16). Although the Dewey Laboratory School closed after seven years, the principles embedded in it are seen in the democratic family of schools today.

**Sudbury, Summerhill, and “free schools.”** The family of democratic schools might also be traced back to England and the creation of the Summerhill School by A. S. Neill in 1921. One of the basic ideas of Summerhill was its commitment to creating a school experience to meet the needs of the individual child, as opposed to molding the child’s needs to meet the school’s. Radical in nature then, and even now, Summerhill’s idea was essentially akin to Meier’s (2003) idea that schools should serve as sites of resistance to mainstream schooling ideas and practice (Ayers, 2003). In a curricular sense, Summerhill might be called a “free” school today because it operated on the notion that children should “live their own lives” (Ayers, 2003, p. 17). Neill wanted children to be intrinsically motivated to learn on their own, and he believed that the ideal way to learn is to “know and feel at the same time” (Ayers, 2003, p. 17). Underlying much of Summerhill-type programs or free school programs today like Sudbury Valley Academy in Massachusetts, is the idea that the learner should be trusted to bring their own questions, and that trust should be extended repeatedly regardless of what the child
chooses to learn (Vangelova, 2013). Teachers, then, operate in a less traditional sense, and become partners in learning—or are perhaps better labeled as facilitators, or followers of children’s learning.

Structurally, there is some similarity between how John Dewey (1902; 1927; 1929) defined democratic schools and how Summerhill-type programs operate. Ayers (2003) pointed out how Summerhill students were fundamentally involved in school governance, creating rules and handing out discipline to their fellow students. A. S. Neill imagined a school community entirely run by students, with the adults standing on the outside, looking in. True freedom in a school, Neill believed, was lived out in community along with all the risks, conflicts, and joys experienced in a self-regulated community (Ayers, 2003).

Certainly, Neill’s thoughts and the creation of Summerhill—as with most free schools—stemmed from a concern for democracy. But, he was most concerned about the “diminishing power of people and the growing power of business, and the dehumanization industry” (Ayers, 2003, p. 36). Therefore, Summerhill-type programs are very much democratic schools in nearly all aspects of their founding. Even if there are moments in which these schools struggle with questions that are potentially non-democratic, the fact that students, themselves, are wrestling with those questions exhibits the practice of democracy that Dewey (1902; 1927; 1929) imagined.

**Just schools and Quaker schools.** Another category of schools frequently grouped with the democratic school family are those driven by the philosophy of the Just Schools Movement (Power, 2004; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). The Just Schools
Movement (also referred to as Restorative Schools) includes schools that focus not only on moral character development, but also the development of an awareness of the school community and the greater community—not solely on student individuality. The term “just” as a descriptor for these schools, according to Power et al. (1989), means that there are caring relationships marked by trust, including broad participation in school life from students, staff, and parents. Friendships among students, for example, should be inclusive rather than exclusive. When exclusivity occurs in schools like these, group conversations within the community often occur about how to remedy the situation (Goodman, 2010). Just schools view behavior management uniquely, marked by the belief that an offending student can be restored to the school community by efforts to reconcile their actions to the people (or group) that were injured (Hopkins, 2004). The differentiation that is often made is that these schools are restorative with students as opposed to being retributive toward them (Hopkins, 2004). This quality tends to balance relationships and the power dynamic between adults and students, which is why these schools may fall within the democratic family of schools. Friends (Quaker) schools often exhibit qualities consistent with the Just schools (and therefore democratic school family) movement because the concept of community is often (and historically) an organizing principle around which Friends schools are founded (Jones & Brader-Araje, 1999). But, to place these schools more squarely within the democratic family, they often go beyond a focus on community, and additionally focus on relationships of equality. Parents are invited to voice their concerns and join in critically important conversations about school life (Jones & Brader-Araje, 1999). And, student voice is also important in structuring daily activities and
classes, as well as airing concerns that may improve school culture and governance. In short, as Jones and Brader-Araj (1999) described these schools, “[they have] a very different vision from how public schools may view authority” (p. 43).

**Toward a definition?** With the wide range of democratic school philosophies, a person may be left wondering, what exactly is a democratic school? As the history suggests, there is no singular agreement in the literature on what exactly constitutes a democratic school. At best, there are a wide variety of schools and theories that may fall within the broadest interpretation of the democratic school definition. In fact, some schools may advertise themselves as democratic but may not operate democratically much of the time. As the research indicates, there tends to be disagreement on what exactly is meant by “democratic” (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002, p. 126).

Although there may be no singular definition of a democratic school, Apple and Beane (2007), along with Jones and Brader-Araj (1999) and Power et al. (1989), comprised a suitable definition of democratic schools that incorporates many of the concepts that apply to the school researched in this work. This research will be used later in the creation of my conceptual framework. Apple and Beane (2007) contended that democracy is threatened—particularly from public policy pressures put in place by the state and federal governments over the past half-century. Operating on that assumption and critique, Apple and Beane wrote that democratic schools must essentially be sites of resistance where communities who do not agree with the public policy status quo can create their own school models. As such, they set forth two of my three categories that define a democratic school.
**Voice in decision-making.** Apple and Beane (2007) referred to this category somewhat differently, as “democratic structures and processes” (p. 10). But the two names, in my opinion, are synonymous. The point of this category is to encapsulate the student voice literature (Arnstein, 1969; Mitra, 2008) with the structural definitions set forth by Dewey (1902; 1927; 1929) and democratic school vision set forth by A. S. Neill at Summerhill. At the school in this study, there are long-standing traditions of incorporating student voice, parent voice, and teacher voice in decision-making. Apple and Beane (2007) saw the engagement of young people, their families, and educators as a fundamental and “genuine attempt to honor the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives” (p. 10).

**Curriculum.** Apple and Beane (2007) were clear that any definition of democratic schools must include curriculum. Of course, academic work may look different from one democratic school to the next. Therefore, it is predictable and normal that the democratic family of schools is diverse and varied depending on the school model and conception of democracy. Despite the diversity of school models, Apple and Beane stated that the democratic school curriculum must fundamentally ask *what* knowledge is valued and *who* values that knowledge. In the case of the school in this study, the students’ interest and engagement in knowledge is considered and balanced simultaneously with the staff’s interest and engagement. Only in a secondary sense are external curricula or state standards considered—those questions are reserved for later, once student and staff interests and requests for knowledge are probed and curricula are
developed. This category, along with the school’s approach, reflects the Summerhill, Sudbury, and Progressive visions for democratic schools (Hayes, 2008).

**Community.** Finally, living out a democracy, as Deborah Meier (2003) wrote, is sometimes unnatural—perhaps because neither students nor adults have come to expect experiences similar to democratic schooling. Meier (2003) stressed this point, emphasizing that democratic schools are difficult to maintain and sustain, mostly because they can frequently feel like unnatural settings—often (and paradoxically) because adults are not used to living in communities like these. Community is heavily stressed at the school in this study; notions of mutuality and interdependence appear to be the hallmarks of this school and echo not only Meier’s observation, but particularly Jones and Brader-Araje’s (1999) work in Quaker schools. There are also ways in which the Just school movement (Hopkins, 2004; Power et al., 1989) intersects with the democratic school in this study. Living as an interdependent democratic community is perhaps the most internally discussed quality at this school site; outsiders often cite this quality as the most notable and distinctive, as well. For these practical reasons, as well as it being supported by research, community will be regarded as a key feature in identifying democratic schools.

Therefore, the organizing principles for this study when democratic schools are discussed will be decision-making, curriculum, and community. It is important to note that democratic schools do not occur by happenstance. Rather, they are very purposeful communities that are established according to particular democratic values in which the school community strongly believes (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 9). It is also important to
note that “democratic school” or “democratic classrooms” are not titles that are achieved after completing a checklist of prerequisites—they are constantly being created, maintained, and recreated by those involved (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 25). When these purposeful democratic schools arise or are desired, who are the people who lead them? In a more foundational sense, what are the ways in which leadership, as a concept, is considered? And, what are the potential leadership styles common to school leaders, particularly in democratic settings?

**Understanding School Leadership**

As indicated at the outset, leadership is related to the idea of influencing others. But it is more than that; it is influencing people inside and outside of an organization to move toward a common, shared goal (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010). And yet, even this description of leadership still somehow lacks depth. DePree (1990) explored these depths a bit more by explaining that leaders (and leadership roles, in general) owe multiple debts of leadership moves and skills to an organization. These debts and skills correspond to themes that arise out of the school leadership style and practice literature, discussed below.

DePree (1990) explained that leaders owe debts to: (a) the people in an organization; (b) the understanding of who holds power; (c) the value systems of an organization; and (d) the decisional process in an organization. The debt to people in an organization requires that leaders be relational, and be concerned with interpersonal social relationships among and between followers. Organizations are made of people, and people are led, partly, through relationship—if leaders fall short in the relational aspect of
their work, then a significant part of their ability to lead is lost. Leaders must also understand *who* holds the power in an organization, and *when* it is appropriate for that power to be held. At times it will be the leader, alone, who holds the authority. At other times, it will be shared authority and power. Knowing when those situations shift and change is an art (DePree, 1990). Leaders owe a debt to maintain momentum in an organization, and that momentum is often communicated through a clear and articulable vision—which is also a leader’s obligation (DePree, 1990). Finally, leaders owe a debt to the organization in the form of “openness to change” (DePree, 1990, p. 7). Similar to the notion of power, openness to change requires that the leader be clear about how decisions are made and who will be able to participate in decision-making.

There are numerous ways leaders move people and organizations toward a goal—and those ways may, in part, be influenced by leadership style. DePree’s (1990) work conveniently corresponds to several themes that arise in leadership style and practice literature. I am mentioning these themes that arise out of the leadership style and practice literature here because they are later revisited in the synthesis and conceptual framework section that will look at how these themes potentially interact within a democratic school environment.

**Relationship-based leadership.** Relational leadership is formally named in academia, but it has been integral to effective leadership long before it ever became a researched concept. As DePree’s (1990) work asks and underscores, if organizations are made of people, how can leadership *not* at least partly thrive on the existence of relationships? The idea of relational leadership falls under the larger umbrella of
Leadership Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). LMX theory emphasizes the importance of the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers, and how that relationship helps create more highly involved and communicative employees (Northouse, 2013). Similarly, relational leadership names a way that leaders (or other members in an organization) socially influence others and create change or growth through the process of building mutual understanding of one another in a work relationship (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leaders who are relational stress this aspect of their work (relationships) as opposed to organizational charts, or anything resembling hierarchical or directive leadership styles. Rather, relational leaders are apt to discuss their social interactions with co-workers and how those interactions translate into new understandings and change between and among people in the organization. It would be hard to imagine a democratic school—or any school for that matter—that somehow ignored or did not contain some aspect of relational leadership.

Similar to relational leadership, adaptive leadership is partly focused on social relationships—but mostly on personal transformation, particularly the influence leaders exert over followers so that personal change occurs in the lives of leaders and followers. Much of the literature on adaptive leadership emphasizes cultivating morality in leaders and followers. Northouse (2013) credited Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) with creating a unique perspective on adaptive leadership. Heifetz et al.’s (2009) work operates on several tenets: fostering change in the individual that allows them to thrive in a given environment; building the capacity for change in individuals based on recognizing who they are; and taking into account their personal history to create this
change. Heifetz et al. recognized that this work takes time. In the context of schools, adaptive school leaders mobilize people (teachers, students, parents) to meet the individual challenges in their lives, which then shapes school-wide culture—potentially creating the opportunity for an adaptive organization (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004; Heifetz et al., 2009). In the democratic school context, adaptive leadership would certainly be welcomed, but is not entirely necessary—the individuality of all people in a democratic school is typically honored, and if the adaptive leader is seeking to fundamentally change others, then this might pose a philosophical divide within a democratic school. However, viewed from another perspective, moving toward becoming a democratic school and asking others to adopt the corresponding perspectives and beliefs may precisely call for an adaptive leader.

In a similar vein to relational leadership and adaptive leadership, constructivist leadership emphasizes the construction of authentic relationships between leaders and followers (Lynch, 2012). Drawing on classic constructivism in which knowledge is built within the learner, leadership in this style is characterized by “the ability to move outside of oneself, and differentiate one’s perspective from others—and practice empathy” (Lynch, 2012, p. 172). Lambert (2002) described this type of leadership as a “reciprocal process” (p. 29), where leaders learn to lead the school by cooperatively constructing meanings with teachers and students about the purpose of the school. School leaders who exhibit this style learn from and rely on relationships with teachers and students in order to learn how to lead in the ways that the collective school body desires. Leaders with constructivist styles and approaches would be welcomed in most democratic school
environments. In fact, this description of leadership is sometimes used synonymously with democratic leadership, discussed below (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Lambert, 2002; Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002).

Essential to the discussion of the literature about relational leadership is the notion of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Relational trust is the “complex activity of discerning the intentions of others” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 22). These discernments occur every day in schools, particularly between the school leader and teachers—although all participants in the life of a school engage in some degree of relational trust. Mutually beneficial outcomes occur between teachers and school leaders when both parties trust one another. More specifically, teachers trust their school leader when they believe their leader understands they are making their best efforts to advance positive relationships and learning with parents and students. Reciprocally, school leaders feel trust from teachers when teachers believe they are treated fairly and with equal process from the leader. When relational trust exists in a school, it allows initiatives to occur more effectively. As Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) observed, relational trust can be compared to what an oven does for ingredients in a recipe—it bakes them together to make the finished product viable. Moreover, when trust is established in a school culture, it enables teachers to sustain their difficult work, helps establish positive relationships in the community, and helps new initiatives survive the risk associated with change (Bryk et al., 2010).

**Authority and power.** Authority is a term that underscores the societally and legally shaped power in a position. While power and authority are not the same concept,
they are often explained in conjunction with one another (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010). Power is more of an “umbrella concept” under which authority may reside; power is the ability to have other people follow a given set of directions (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010). Distributed leadership is a type of leadership that acknowledges the contributions and importance of individuals within a school. It also inherently recognizes that, at particular times, power and authority reside in different individuals within an organization. Synonymous with participative leadership, this style of leadership uses the assistance of teacher leaders and support staff, and recognizes that expertise and authority within a school can be distributed across many people (Spillane, 2004). It may be possible that, to operate a democratic school, a leader needs some form of distributed leadership, without which there will likely exist some degree of top-down autocracy.

Servant leadership (as a concept) emerged in the 1970s in the business sector, but was adopted in literature for schools with Senge et al.’s (2000) popular *Fifth Discipline* series (Parris & Peachey, 2012). The fundamental idea is that school leaders exist to serve those who help make a school operate—teachers, parents, and students. This means that school leaders are primarily motivated by their mission to serve others, and that this belief is a core value they hold dear in their conception of themselves (Parris & Peachey, 2012; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). The assumption about power and authority within servant leadership is that power and authority frequently reside outside of the titular leader—and may instead belong primarily to parents, teachers, and students. While it may seem rather unorthodox, this style of leadership fits quite well in the democratic
school tradition—and may prove to be a leadership style commonly cited by participants in this dissertation.

**Vision.** Articulating a clear vision and goals for an organization from the bully pulpit of the leader’s seat is an important task for all leaders. As Guthrie and Schuermann (2010) pointed out, if a leader cannot communicate these ideas effectively to people inside and outside of the organization, then they may be “hopelessly handicapped” (p. 387). By using inspirational vision and organizational goals, transformational leaders focus on followers’ intrinsic needs, thus creating followers’ ability to identify with the leader’s needs and persuading them to follow (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010; Lynch, 2012). Transformational leaders are somewhat different than authoritative or autocratic leaders. Through personal charisma, articulating an inspirational vision, encouraging creativity in their followers, and providing individualized attention to followers, transformational leaders create environments that help followers belong to a learning community (Burns, 1978). While transformational leaders are highly regarded by those who follow them, the notion of a singular, charismatic leader in a democratic school seems to undermine the idea of shared decision-making. At the same time, however, the qualities of a transformational leader may be required to move a non-democratic school toward more democratic practices.

**Decision-making.** As DuPree (1990) mentioned, leaders need to be clear about who will participate in decision-making. Increasingly, it is evident from both school-based research and business-based research that participative decision-making reflects better outcomes for organizations (McCaffrey, Faermann, & Hart, 1995; Sarason, 1990;
Specific to schools, participative decision-making (PDM) has been shown to increase the quality of decisions, enhance the quality of work life, increasingly motivate teachers, and, importantly, increase organizational citizenship behavior (Somech, 2010). When leaders allow for broader involvement in decision-making, they are potentially signaling an openness to change, as DuPree (1990) pointed out. Broader involvement and participation in decision-making, as well as an openness to change, are concepts that would be welcomed in most democratic schools.

Democratic leadership—also used interchangeably with ethical leadership and constructivist leadership (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Lambert, 2002; Northouse, 2013; Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002)—differs from distributed leadership because the latter will tend to value parameters from strong leadership, whereas democratic leadership values the personal autonomy and freedom of every person in an organization—not only as a tenet, but as a foundational philosophy (Woods, 2005). Democratic leaders are constantly evaluating what is best for the common good through repeated dialogue and deliberation. By encouraging not just simply autonomy, but also decisional autonomy, this type of leadership replicates itself in followers, so that it is practiced independently of the “nominal” leader of school (Woods, 2005). Similar to authentic leadership and transformational leadership, democratic school leadership, encourages human potential, empowerment, and growth. Finally, in an effort to create a dialogue about social justice, democratic school leadership recognizes and invites diversity of opinion and participation in a school community (Woods, 2005). If titular leaders are clear that individuals in an organization are empowered to make decisions without having the formal title of
“leader,” then the leader has likely created a leadership structure open to organization change and adaptation (DuPree, 1990).

**Guiding Conceptual Model**

In imagining this study, I sought to build a model that creates connections between the four leadership themes, and Apple and Bean (2007) and Jones and Brader-Araje’s (1999) three categories for understanding and sustaining democratic schools. Because there are such broad definitions of democratic schools, it is important to set some parameters for what it means to be a democratic school. I chose to work with the three principles (voice in decision-making, curriculum, and community) for a democratic school because they broadly touch upon each of the school models that belong to the democratic school family, and appropriately fit the research site where this work was conducted. In my experience at this school, I have found that the criteria of voice, curriculum, and community appropriately describe the practical difficulty and potential of working in and leading democratic schools—while at the same time, remaining firmly grounded in theory. At a first glance, it is conceivable that all of the leadership themes connect in one or more ways to the three principles for a democratic school. As you will see in the subsequent chapters, the connections prove to be different in some ways and similar in others to how they were originally imagined in Figure 1.1. I will address these originally anticipated connections starting from the leadership themes first, and determining how they may correspond or potentially undermine the three categories of democratic schools. Figure 1.1, below, illustrates the potential connections I anticipated. Following this
illustration, I explain how I think the theories connect with one another in the school in which I work and studied.

Figure 1.1: A Conceptual Map of Leadership in Democratic Schools

Leaders’ relationships and community. These connecting ideas ask whether relationships are built between the principal (formal leader), teachers, and potentially students at the study site. If these relationships are built, how influential are they? And, in what ways are they influential? Is there space and time reserved for the purpose of leader–follower relationships? Are there particular people at the school who have developing or existing personal philosophies of democratic schooling? Is democratic schooling the topic of conversation at all? A foundational question here is: How much is
it (democracy) talked about? And, from an adaptive leadership perspective, how much does the principal (or teacher vs. teacher) encourage people to leave behind less democratic notions of school, or encourage their personal transformation so that they can thrive in a democratic environment? From a constructivist perspective, how much does the principal allow for his leadership style to be a two-way street, so that his perspectives are shaped by others around him? The connection between these sub-categories of literature are natural—relationships are not only at the heart of leadership, but they must somehow also be at the heart of building interdependent democratic school communities.

Leaders’ power, authority, and voice in decision-making and curriculum.

How does the principal view his power and authority at the school? In my own experience, “my” principal has talked about himself frequently as being in a servant leadership role as opposed to being a directive, autocratic leader—a style that would not be expected in this setting, anyway. But, despite his vision of servant leadership, is it the way his leadership style actually plays out when teachers are asked about his power and authority? Is he acting as a servant when it comes to the diversity of perspective teachers may have about democracy? When it comes to the privacy of each teacher’s classroom, is the principal willing to allow for less democratic classroom settings and serve those, too? Conversely, is he serving others when it comes to sustaining democratic decision-making? There are times when his power and authority are evident—he asks teachers to perform certain tasks, and they do. Therefore, at these times, it might be expected that power and authority in the school are centralized. During these times of more directive power and authority, are the principal and the teachers working from the same opinion of
a democratic school or from different ones? How much autonomous power and authority do teachers believe they have, especially when it comes to academic tasks or instructional models in the classroom? When considering Apple and Beane’s (2007) ideas of voice in democratic decision-making and democratic curricula, how do these factors moderate the decisions the principal gives to the school via advisory council (decision-making body) versus the decisions he keeps for himself? As Arnstein (1969) asked, are these decisions “token” decisions (p. 217), or do they truly envision all participants as citizens? Likewise, is it possible that distributed leadership (Spillane, 2004) intersects with student and teacher voice not only in school-wide decision-making, but also classroom curricular decisions? Do teachers wrestle with these same questions?

**Leaders’ vision, and curriculum and community.** A foundational question here might be, what is the leader’s vision? And, if a coherent vision is articulated, how is it articulated in the democratic school setting? When gathered publicly as a school or more privately as a staff, how does the principal talk about his vision? Does he frame it as “his” vision, or, does he talk about it as “our” vision? Does he communicate this in a way that can be articulated by others—is it replicated verbally, at all? Is there a mission or vision statement readily accessible? Could the school persist without the principal re-articulating this vision? The notion of vision seems critical here, especially because I observe the staff foundering at times to articulate it. Leadership vision appears to operate on at least two levels: the larger school culture and mission, and the smaller classroom cultures. Is there a vision that extends into teachers’ classrooms? Does it extend into civic education in as far as the principal instructionally coaches the teachers on this topic? This latter
point specifically connects vision to Apple and Beane’s (2007) notion of “hidden”
democratic education seeping into everything a school does and teaches (p. 14). Often, I
hear the principal talk about our school defining itself as being a community before it is a
school (in order of priority). Does this highlight one aspect of democratic schooling (the
Just schools philosophy) to the detriment of another (civic education)? At the very least,
it seems to highlight the leader’s vision that community is an important part of being a
democratic school. It is also possible that, despite a (possibly) muddled vision, the
principal lives out a vision with all aspects of our school. For example, our principal, in
anecdotal observations, seems to be highly “processual” (Furman & Starratt, 2002). This
is perhaps unarticulated, but highly lived out in his vision—he often seems to wait and
gather input from students, in particular. While teachers, parents, and even the principal
himself may be experiencing discomfort in the lack of decision-making, he often
maintains his commitment to hearing students’ opinions on a wide variety of matters.
This would seem to indicate a commitment to persist in democratic decision-making
regardless of others’ discomfort. However, this practice (seeking students’ opinions)
might just as easily connect to the democratic themes of decision-making and voice.

**Decision-making and community.** The obvious connection here is decision-
making in the leadership realm (and literature) and decision-making in democratic school
realm (and literature). The school in this dissertation elects and seats a 14-member
advisory board comprised of nine students, two parents, two teachers, and the principal.
This body makes many decisions for the school as a whole, and is open to general student
input and participation (even if non-elected). This body addresses issues ranging from the
mundane to the more serious, like teacher and student discipline. Notably, the principal holds veto power over some (but not all) of the board’s decisions. Interesting questions to consider here include: What decisions could conceivably be vetoed? What decisions will likely not be vetoed? What decisions are symbolic and meant to convey that students have decisional power (Arnstein, 1969)? It appears that decision-making is partly driven by the combined theories of participative decision-making (Somech, 2010), as well as democratic leadership (Woods, 2005). However, what happens when these approaches to decision-making encounter the difficult dilemma of not necessarily favoring what the adults in the school want? In this event, the democratic school may begin to resemble the “free school” model more than any other. Then again, this assertion may depend on the gravity and seriousness of the decision. But what does this look like in practice? And, how is it experienced by the principal and, potentially, the teachers? This study intends to tell that story and explain the connection between leadership theories and democratic school theories by examining the principal’s (and others’) perspectives.

Similarly, decision-making from a leadership perspective also interacts with how decisions are made that affect the community life of the school. The principal in this study has made several decisions that affect the community life of the school, particularly with respect to student enrollment and historic traditions of the program. These decisions are not made unilaterally, but they impact the community. This particular connection asks how democratic a leader’s decision must be when controversial issues impact a school that imagines itself as democratic.
Synthesis of Literature on Leadership in Democratic Schools

Literature and academic study of leaders in democratic schools increased following World War II (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009). At the same time, there was increased value placed on research of market-based and corporate models of leadership. Market-based and corporate models of leadership have received the majority of the academic attention, whereas the practical use and implementation of democratic leadership, especially in schools, has not been as thoroughly researched (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Rusch, 2002). Although not ubiquitous in academic literature, several studies of democratic school leaders in the past two decades are particularly helpful in understanding the tensions, the navigation of those tensions, personal conceptions of leadership, and the implications for future leaders. There are several themes that arise from these studies that are congruent with the research questions I examine in this study: (a) the source of democratic school leaders’ beliefs; (b) the tensions experienced as a democratic school leader; (c) the navigation of these tensions; (d) the unique opportunities available in democratic schools; and (e) the effective practices of democratic school leaders. I will discuss these themes somewhat out of order.

Tensions Experienced

Referring back to Figure 1.1, it is possible to imagine that all of the dotted arrows represent tensions experienced by the leader. The themes in this particular area will serve to guide data collection, revisited later. Rusch (1998) conducted a comparative case study of two democratic school leaders over a five-year period and noted that the leaders struggled when it came to disparate viewpoints within their schools. Rusch observed that
school leaders (of any style) tend to create environments based on the rational need for control, which undermines their ability to synthesize “the cacophony” of voices and perspectives in a school into meaningful relationships of ownership (p. 5). According to Rusch, the act of negotiating relationships and making meaning from them is what impairs democratic schools. To navigate the tensions of needing to control relationships versus navigating relationships within the “cacophony,” Rusch uses the Progressive Movement’s principles of democratic administration of schools as a touchstone. According to Rusch, the progressives believed that school should be defined by the substitution of individual control for group control; the utilization of group reaction in educational administration; the facing of social realities; the building of an organization broad enough to guarantee flexibility; the building of an organization functional enough to protect teachers’ energies; the provision of needs for all groups simultaneously; a continuous appraisal of progress; ongoing cooperation as a result of a variety of group activities; participation as an aid to learning; improving the community through a dynamic and functional curriculum; and the abolition of administrative vetoes and prerogatives. (p. 219)

Although these principles do not all specifically point toward the tension of disparate viewpoints, they do uncover several tensions that may arise during this dissertation—and are important to keep in mind. Rusch kept these principles in mind as she analyzed her data and looked for areas of similarity to Progressive principles and tensions. The themes from Rusch’s work that specifically highlighted the tensions of democratic school leaders were: (a) de-emphasized power versus increased or emphasized power (the idea that principals downplay their role and power, and are just “one of the group” versus feeling the need to exert more power); (b) conflict versus avoidance of conflict—conflict is common in these schools (and all schools), but it is welcomed and encouraged in some schools, rather than shied away from; and (c) embracing the risk of change versus abiding
by district norms—principals found themselves out of step with district culture, but risked change anyway. Building on Rusch’s findings, Mullen and Johnson (2006) uncovered some similar issues.

Mullen and Johnson (2006) conducted a classroom study using narrative data from practicing and aspiring democratic leaders in schools. Thematic analysis revealed that aspiring democratic leaders experience tensions, particularly when they encounter federal, state, or local policies that conflict with their personal or moral sense of obligation to students. As Mullen and Johnson pointed out, how the participants experienced this tension largely depended upon how the democratic leaders perceived their “clients” and what those clients need (p. 95). Were those clients the students themselves? The school culture? The local school board? When democratic leaders are heavily involved in “adhering to standards and demonstrating outcomes, the system becomes the primary client” (Mullen & Johnson, 2006, p. 95). The authors recalled that this latter scenario may directly conflict with the educator’s ethical obligation to “help young people become effective citizens in a democracy by placing their interests first” (Mullen & Johnson, 2006, p. 96). This is also connected to where leaders’ beliefs come from, which is addressed as an additional theme in the literature, further below. In Mullen and Johnson’s study as well as the work of Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken (2009), Reitzung and O’Hair (2002), and Gutmann (1987), there is agreement that democratic school leaders constantly encounter the tension of external, large-scale pressures (federal, state, or otherwise) on their schools versus local, smaller-scale pressures (district, parental, or community).
Reitzung and O’Hair (2002) studied the Oklahoma Networks for Excellence in Education, which was a consortium of schools focused on moving toward democratic practices and community. Their action research partnered not only with schools, but also with the leaders who aspired to move toward more democratic forms of leadership and practice. Again, “tension and struggle” arose as a theme in the partnership (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002, p. 125). Schools experienced tension around defining what everyone meant when they said “democracy.” Not everyone had similar answers or was working toward understanding this concept together. Similarly, there were divergent opinions and understandings on whether the school should exist to prepare students for life in a democracy, in the spirit of Dewey’s experiment (Mayhew & Edwards, 1965), or whether the school structure and curriculum should be less geared toward living in a democracy. For principals specifically, there was tension as some leaders stepped back and allowed the school to operate without exerting overt control, instead providing passive support for teachers and their initiatives (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002). At other times, active support for teaching and learning was necessary, but leaders experienced tension and struggle as they questioned if they were acting democratically by doing so. Is it acceptable for leaders in a school (whether they be teachers or nominal leaders) to “seize power” at times in such a way that power is no longer shared in those moments (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002, p. 129)? And, similar to the question that Quaker schools or Just schools might ask: To what extent is the individual emphasized in a democratic community? Or, conversely, to what extent should individuals focus on the whole school community.
rather than on themselves? These tensions and struggles were common themes in Reitzung and O’Hair’s (2002) research partnership with democratic school leaders.

**Navigation of Work and Tensions**

Matthews (2014) shed light on the tension uncovered by Rusch (1998), Mullen and Johnson (2006), and Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken (2009) with regard to how popular notions of leadership can seem to miss the mark when it comes to democratic communities and the navigation of tensions in such a community. There is a popular notion that singular, strong leaders must step forward to move an organization, versus the democratic practice of promoting others to also step forward at the same time to demonstrate leadership.

Matthews (2014) has advocated for “leaderfulness” (p. 123). The idea of leaderfulness in a democratic school is the idea that anyone can step forward in a leadership role, and that there is a role for everyone to play in the school community. The key to leaderfulness, Matthews (2014) argued, is encouraging individual participants to demonstrate initiative-taking. “In leaderful communities, the people who take initiative are distinguished by the way they interact with their fellow citizens. They are door openers rather than gatekeepers” (Matthews, 2014, p. 125). In other words, Matthews imagined leaders within a democratic school as people who are constantly seeking to broaden participation, and who are seeking to connect to people interested in the school community. This, however, can invite differences of opinion and conflict about how leadership should look.

Perhaps Sudbury Valley’s “leader,” Daniel Greenberg, would embrace Matthews’ (2014) notion of leaderfulness. Although Greenberg (2000; 2001) did not specifically talk about the tensions of leading Sudbury Valley (it is not entirely clear that he would
describe his work as leading), he did imply that Sudbury Valley’s philosophy itself exists as a tension within educational philosophy. As a school leader and member of Sudbury’s school community of learners, Greenberg (2001) argued that an increased and nearly obsessive focus on technology in the classroom is perhaps marshaling in a period in which teacher-driven learning may become obsolete. Greenberg’s attention to this matter exemplified Rusch’s (1998) idea of embracing the risk of change (and being out of step with dominant school cultures). Greenberg (2001) welcomed the risk, change, and the discontinuity with dominant school cultures despite the fact that school systems around him might not embrace this perspective. One of the tensions of democratic leadership, in part, looks like what Greenberg (2001) was doing—taking the risk of being out of step with the community of educators around him. While Greenberg would likely object to being called a leader, he demonstrated “leaderfulness” by speaking out on an issue he believed was important to education—and he would likely encourage this in not only the Sudbury staff, but especially Sudbury students.

Overall, there is a dearth of research on democratic school leaders’ specific practices that explains how they navigate tensions—or really, any empirical work on specific practices at all (Furman & Starratt, 2002). However, Reitzung and O’Hair (2002) explored the ways in which democratic school leaders navigate the specific tensions of their work in their description of school leaders in the Oklahoma Network for Excellence. Principals were moving their schools toward more democratic practices (and they, themselves, were leading more democratically), sometimes becoming more passive in an effort to allow others to step up and lead. At the same time, other principles began to
more actively push people in a directive manner. Reitzung and O’Hair pointed out that neither approach is necessarily helpful in a democratic school environment. Instead, the leaders in this consortium who successfully navigated this tension (passive versus active leadership) were the ones who practiced purposeful engagement with all interested persons involved in the particular issue, decision, or controversy (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002, p. 137).

Although their work was philosophical (as opposed to empirical), Furman and Starratt (2002) posited that democratic leadership is “processual,” meaning that it “attends to the creation and maintenance of democratic structures that encourage thinking aloud together” (p. 123). It may prove important to take a specific look at whether the school leader in this dissertation proposal in fact operates in a “processual” manner, or even subscribes to this notion at all. At the outset, though, it appears that he does. This may indicate that one of the practices employed by democratic school leaders is to pay close attention to adhering to the processes that make democratic participation possible—to ensure communication, deliberation, and time for participants to consider controversial decisions. In this sense, democratic school leaders are responsible for creating fertile ground for democracy to grow. However, this does not specifically address the navigation of tensions, other than to perhaps simply accept that they will occur. This particular research theme on democratic school leaders seems to connect the two ideas in Figure 1.1 of decision-making and perhaps voice in decision-making relatively well.
Democratic School Leaders’ Beliefs

Considering Daniel Greenberg as an example, it might be interesting to ask where he developed his concept of leading in a school like Sudbury, and how he developed his leadership style. Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken (2009) addressed these questions in their study of eight different democratic school leaders in Vermont, and described how those leaders navigate democratic leadership in an age of standards and accountability. Using narrative inquiry from leader’s personal lives, Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken uncovered where leaders developed their beliefs and values oriented toward democracy and democratic leadership. Every participant identified personal stories from their upbringing that formed their beliefs about democracy that they could in turn connect to their current practice as a school leader. Naturally, each personal narrative was distinct. However, the common themes centered around community, participation and inclusion, and the idea that education and the school experience were powerful forces in shaping them.

Rusch’s (1998) work also briefly explained the sources of the democratic leaders’ belief systems. While less in-depth (on this theme) than Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken’s (2009) work, Rusch’s (1998) participants simply indicated a deep-seated moral belief in creating and sustaining democratic schools and communities. These deep-seated moral and ethical beliefs also surfaced in Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken’s (2009) study. The leaders’ values were more evident than any of their specific leadership practices—in other words, how they voiced their values to others within the school was important because it caused “mutual influence” among participants in the school (Rusch, 1998, p. 219). While this study may address some of the principal’s personal narrative, it will seek to also move in new
directions and understand his conception of leadership through the four themes of leadership I have chosen.

Opportunities Offered

Despite the challenges and tensions that some research observed, and that Meier (2003) recognized as essential to democracy, not all the work of leadership in a democratic school is fraught with tension. Many of the same studies cited here also highlight the theme that there are unique opportunities for democratic schools and their leaders. Reitzung & O’Hair (2002) discussed the idea that democratic leadership in school provides fertile ground for emergent teacher leadership—and the opportunity for increased teacher ownership of the school community. This observed opportunity confirms the work of Apple and Beane (2007) and Matthews (2014), along with the notion that democratic leadership in democratic schools also presents the opportunity for increased instructional collaboration (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002). Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken (2009) noted that democratic schools and their leaders have the “opportunity to serve others and specifically the community” (p. 415). While this phrase may seem glib and applicable to most public schools, it is truly unique to most democratic schools because they often operate autonomously, or at least outside of traditional hierarchies (Apple & Beane, 2007). It is also especially true for the research site in this study because it operates as a public magnet school. Relatedly, stakeholders (parents, students, teachers, and other community members) have the opportunity for input and management of a democratic school—which the school leader can often facilitate (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009). While it may be easier to focus on tensions and struggles, Fullan’s (1993) work on
school change reminded us that tension and struggle are not present at the same time without opportunity. In other words, the existence of tension and struggle in schools often also creates opportunities.

In a case study of a small democratic school, Wallin (2003) found that the particular school that was studied created opportunities for student leadership. These opportunities included student leadership in school climate, daily academic agendas, after-school extracurricular initiatives, and improved relationships between teachers and students (Wallin, 2003). While Wallin’s work did not specifically mention how school leaders created these opportunities, there was at least an inference that these opportunities for student leadership could not exist without the school leader’s implied agreement. This study can add significantly to this theme in research on leadership in democratic schools.

**Effective Practices of Democratic School Leaders**

In the midst of their own beliefs about leadership, navigating tensions in the school, and capitalizing upon unique opportunities, what does research observe democratic school leaders doing that is most effective? This theme in the literature does not recommend overt, specific leadership actions so much as broad ways of acting within a democratic school community. In their work with democratic school leaders, Reitzung and O’Hair (2002) noted that building and maintain a democratic community is best practiced simultaneously from the “bottom-up” and the “top-down” (p. 136). As a leader, engaging and investing stakeholders in a democratic community is best done in a facilitative manner, as opposed to a directive manner (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002). School leaders frequently make decisions on a day-to-day basis. But, democratic school leaders seem to
work effectively when they “do not share all decisions with teachers, but rather share all critical decisions” (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002, p. 137). In part, this study will investigate which decisions are shared and which are made by the leader alone.

In their largely theoretical work on leadership in democratic schools, Furman and Starratt (2002) wrote that school leaders who take risks to allow for a curriculum that teaches democracy should generally find greater student learning due to a better connection with “real life” (p. 112). The inference here is that risk-taking for democracy’s sake can be a best practice for democratic school leaders. Echoing the same work mentioned earlier about democratic leaders being “processual” leaders, this same idea is also discussed as a best practice for democratic school leaders (Furman & Starratt, 2002). The more leaders can commit to processes that encourage deliberation and discussion, the more the participants will potentially experience investment in the school.

Rusch’s (1998) work also has relevance for effective practices of democratic school leaders. This research would seem to suggest that the most effective democratic school leaders are those who are driven by a sense of morality in schools—a sense that “this is how schools should be”—and that leaders should be transparent about that and articulate it to school participants (Rusch, 1998).

Significance of This Work

This study adds to the research themes discussed above in new ways. I address leadership differently and in a more specific way (the four dimensions), and define democratic schools somewhat differently—in terms of Apple and Beane (2007) and Jones and Brader-Araje’s (1999) ideas—than they have been described previously. At the same
time, the existing research on leaders in democratic schools informs my conceptual framework and drives the questions I posed to participants. In other words, my protocols were inspired not only from my originally developed conceptual framework, but also partially from existing research. For example, Rusch’s (1998) work remains important; the progressives envisioned not having administrative vetoes in schools, yet the principal in my school holds a veto over student decisions on advisory council. Is this appropriate in every given circumstance and decision? Does it abandon the democratic process in some decisions but not others? Would the principal describe his veto power or his decision to veto as a challenge or tension in leading a democratic school? Importantly, Rusch’s work—particularly her observance of specific tensions within democratic school leadership—significantly informed my research questions and partially serves as a stepping-stone for the reader to understand the next chapter, which initially sets forth the tensions experienced at Springboard specifically.

Similarly, Mullen and Johnson’s (2006) work connects to the leadership dimension of vision—how does the principal’s vision for a democratic school community interact with federal and state instructional mandates? Does this arise as a tension? If so, how does the principal navigate this tension? Additionally, can the leader’s vision or collective community’s vision satisfactorily arrive at a definition of democracy, so that the struggles Reitzung and O’Hair (2002) noticed in Oklahoma are avoided? Is this potentially a unique opportunity for democratic school leaders to educate and make democracy a touchstone of schoolwork, as Apple and Beane (2007) suggested with respect to curriculum?
Perhaps Matthews’ (2014) notion of “leaderfulness” can explain emergent leadership at this school (p. 123), and therefore the connection between Jones and Brader-Araje’s (1999) idea of community in democratic schools and the principal’s relational approach to leadership. Are his relationships with staff such that he encourages “leaderfulness” in others? To guide future research, is relationship building a key aspect to democratic school leadership? If so, what does this research have to say about the nature of relational leadership in this context? What specific practices are used? This particular aspect to this project will add to the literature on democratic school leadership in ways that do not currently exist.

Although some of the research has touched upon the source of democratic school leaders’ beliefs, this work will focus on how Jim, the school leader of focus, conceptualizes leadership—and will largely concern his collective views of the four dimensions of leadership. Using these leadership dimensions to explain, in a more concrete way, how democratic school leaders approach their work will also present new directions for research. In Chapter 5, I revisit the conceptual framework imagined in Figure 1.1 and address some of the questions posed here in order to help spur questions for future research.

It is also important to consider that few studies, if any, have approached studying leadership in democratic schools from a participant-observer stance, which is the format for this research. In the following section, I explain the methodology for this dissertation.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Design of This Study: A Case of School Leadership in a Democratic School

The data collection in this study is entirely qualitative, and seeks to answer several questions: How does a democratic school leader conceptualize the work of leadership? What challenges and tensions emerge for that leader? How do they navigate those challenges and tensions? What opportunities present themselves for democratic school leaders? What are the effective methods for practitioners in given situations?

This dissertation is a case study that should be viewed significantly from a phenomenological lens, conducted by a participant observer. The phenomenological description relates to the fact that leading in a democratic school is a shared experience by everyone involved in the school community. In this sense, part of the purpose of this work is to “reduce the individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal experience” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Similarly, this research describes and explains what Jim experiences as a leader, often from his perspective (Creswell, 2007). The same descriptions and explanations apply to the teachers who experience Jim’s leadership, including myself as a participant observer.

At the same time, this work is also a case study because it takes place within an entity that has boundaries—a small democratic school. Case study research involves the examination of issues within one or more systems, and is not necessarily a methodology so much as it is a decision of what will be studied (Creswell, 2007). In this work, the school leader is studied within the case of a school.
Methodologically, this research was conducted in the participant-observer tradition. Necessarily, I am a participant in the research (collecting data on myself), but I am also an inside observer (taking notes during staff meetings and recording observations of the school leader). As Schwartz and Schwartz (1955) noted, the participant observer can be passive or active. In this dissertation, I am an active participant observer because the alternative would have required disconnecting from my work and fellow teachers in a way that seemed untenable and impractical. I am passionate about my democratic school and during this work “maximiz(ed) my participation with the observed in order to gather data and attempt to integrate [my] role with other roles in the social structure” (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955, p. 349). If there was truly a choice in this context, I chose to “experience the life of the observed so that [I could] better observe [the situation] and understand it” (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955, p. 349). Clearly, this study was conducted from an “insider” perspective (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, p. 124), and was done in this manner not only in the interests of personal learning and academic contribution, but also for what it might contribute to the Springboard school community as a whole.

**Research Context**

The landscape for this study took place in a small to mid-sized town (about 40,000 residents) in a semi-rural area where a major state university is located. The community that comprises the school district is tied to the economic health of the university and is somewhat economically sheltered. The median household income for the town in which the school district is located is just under $38,000, placing it under the United States household median income of $51,939 in 2013 (United States Census, 2015). This figure
is somewhat skewed by the disproportionate number of college students living in the town, however. When the college students are removed from that statistic, the median household income is closer to $86,000, placing the community well above most communities in the United States. The school district is medium-sized, with eight elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school—all serving the immediate town and four surrounding townships. There are approximately 7,000 total students in the school district. As an alternative to the high school and two middle schools, the district formally created a program in 1974 called Springboard.\footnote{A pseudonym.} However, Springboard had some history prior to 1974.

The idea for another school within the district was an outgrowth of dialogue among the district staff for several years. By November 1972, the school board encouraged the administration to begin a serious study of a school of choice concept. In 1973, district staff members, students, parents, and interested community members participated in a task force to study the feasibility of implementing a model school of choice for the district. The committee discovered there was considerable community support for an educational option that would include the following components: (a) the community being used as a classroom environment; (b) democratic decision-making and broad involvement from staff, students, and parents; (c) flexible curricula; (d) teachers acting as individual academic advisors for students; (e) students performing community service; and (f) students exercising some degree of self-governance.

The school board responded favorably to the committee recommendation to begin the new secondary program for the 1974–1975 school year. The board established
Springboard under its own governing structure, separate from the middle schools and high school, but in cooperation with them. The Springboard program enrolled more than 120 students in its first year, and, in 1976, the school board granted permission for Springboard to operate on a continuing basis. It has remained in operation for roughly 40 years.

Springboard has made changes over the years, including adding a required community service component for graduation in 1989, and an increased focus on experiential education in 1983, adding a full block of time for experiential learning during the week in 1996. Recently, in March of 2014, the school board expanded Springboard to include a separate but very similar program that served exclusively grades five through eight. This program, nicknamed “Springboard Middle,” is founded on identical philosophies to those articulated in 1973. Springboard Middle is the program in which I work, and it shares a building with the existing Springboard High School, which serves students grades nine through 12.

Springboard is described by district personnel and leadership as being a “school of choice.” To them, this means that the school is for students who apply and are accepted. In more popular educational parlance, Springboard might be referred to as a publicly run magnet school. There are no formal entry criteria (it is first come, first served, and then a waiting list), but if the student continually violates the program’s “covenant” of community expectations, then they may be asked to return to their home school, which is one of the larger middle schools (or the one high school) that serve the area.
While Springboard is a program that is over 40 years old, it is a program that seems to always fend off stereotypes about the students and faculty that comprise it. The longest running stigma is that Springboard is home to “problem” students—that is, students who were kicked out of their home school and had no other choice than to attend Springboard. In its early years (1974 to 1994) Springboard may have housed students who were having trouble in their home schools, but in the past 20 years, the reputation of the school has changed greatly. It is now a school of choice in the district, rather than a school of last resort. Students in the large district high school enjoy choosing to come to the small school environment and actively participate in the life of the school. When the middle school opened, the student body possessed a very similar composition to that of Springboard High School—eclectic. Students at the high school and middle school are typically very self-motivated but very independent. Their independent-mindedness is often the source of their problems, behaviorally, from their sending schools’ perspectives. Once they arrive at Springboard, however, the chronic behavioral problems from their sending schools seem to diminish. Students also disproportionately arrive with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)—nearly 20% of the school (160 students at Springboard High School and 100 students at Springboard Middle School) have specialized educational needs, including gifted plans.

In about two years, Springboard high school and middle school will be faced with a challenge and opportunity—it will essentially become one school. As a result of a local referendum, the voters approved bonds to finance a new $85 million high school to be completed in 2019. This will include a new, separate building for the Springboard
Program that will house the middle school on the second floor and the high school on the first floor. In short, Springboard will be faced with a much more integrated life. Rather than seeing itself as two separate programs, it will grapple with how to combine the two programs, yet also keep them separate for obvious reasons—not the least of which is the age range of students.

Is Springboard an Appropriate Choice for a Research Site as a Democratic School?

Depending on which criteria are used, observers of Springboard may disagree on whether it is a democratic school. Certainly, its founding tenets point it at least in the direction of a democratic school. According to Apple and Beane’s (2007) criteria, as well as Jones and Brader-Araje’s (1999) research, Springboard is, at least in part, a democratic school. This appears to be the case based on not just who is asked, but more importantly, what is observed. First, there is a significant effort from staff and administrators to encourage students, teachers, and parents’ voices, and there are long-standing structures in place to facilitate these voices. Second, in modest terms, the school values the knowledge and questions that students ask, which Apple and Beane (2007) regarded as democratizing the curriculum. Although some of the STEM fields are less democratically developed, the humanities and performing arts are almost entirely student- and teacher-generated. Finally, there is significant community emphasis at Springboard—the school creates time several times per week for community meetings, and the staff are frequently narrating the ways in which the school can better operate as an interdependent family. Therefore, while Springboard may not exceed all criteria for being a democratic school, it is at least a
struggling and aspiring democratic school doing its best to achieve that status. As such, I believe it is an appropriate site for study.

**Researcher Identity**

The motivation for this research springs from my experience as a teacher over the past eight years, and the ongoing spark is the day-to-day participation and teaching in the school that I am studying. I was hired at Springboard Middle and began teaching Social Studies, grades five through eight, in the fall of 2014. As I learn more about democratic schools and become more proficient at practicing and living democracy, I expect to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of the participants in a democratic school like Springboard—most notably, that of the school leader and teachers. The outcome and findings from this study will not only shed light on research questions that I believe will benefit and add to academic literature that is relatively thin, but also serve to deepen understanding of how school leaders make sense of their involvement in democratic schools. Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken (2009) called for this research, and I believe that as long as local systems struggle to respond to the local electorate, and as long as there are debates about national priorities versus local and regional priorities in education (see Gutmann, 1987), this small project will have relevance. Indeed, democratic schools may indeed serve as increasing sites of resistance to broad-blanketed education policy. My bias here is fairly evident: I believe that schools should operate more democratically and locally than is currently the norm, and that leaders (at every level) must be cultivated to move schools in this direction. I teach in a school model that I support philosophically. Still, there are aspects to this democratic community to which I belong that I would like
to change—and there are many people at Springboard (adults and students) who would like to change other aspects of the school. Living amidst that change and desire for change is partly the norm for living in a democratic community. The fact that I belong to a democratic community that enables personal agency from everyone involved is what is important to me. At the conclusion of this research (the end of Chapter 5), I reflect on how I experienced my identity while conducting this participant-observer research.

**Participants**

This dissertation focuses predominantly on the school leader of Springboard, Jim Donald. Sampling for this study was based on purposeful choices—the research site is where I work. While most of the data concerns Jim directly, some of the data is a result of snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). This type of sampling allowed me to focus on people who are best situated with knowledge concerning important issues that arise. For example, Jim made reference to situations involving teachers or other staff, and those teachers were interviewed and incorporated into the case study. In the participant observer tradition, I collected data on my own experiences in the school. Obviously, Jim and I work together. Additionally, I work together closely with the other teachers. The school is small, and relationships are familiar, especially professionally. Personal relationships outside of school are somewhat less familiar, but still evident from time to time. This made for bias potential—I collected data on my “boss,” although Jim does not like that term. The fact remains, though, that he is the person to whom I directly report. However, the very nature of this proposal may already suggest that Springboard operates

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2 A pseudonym.
less like a hierarchy and more like a “flattened” school (Barber, 2014). The nature of my relationship with Jim is constantly changing—we are colleagues, friends, and at times, people who have differences of opinion. The description of this relationship also applies to the teachers with whom I work.

**Data Collection**

Jim and several teachers were involved in two in-person data collection strategies over various points in time during a single school year: journaling and semi-structured individual interviews. I also collected artifact and document-based data, in addition to my own direct observations and experience. An independent student participant collected a daily sample of Jim’s time use as a principal on a random day. The purpose of these different types of data collection is to provide multiple strategies for pursuing the research questions and providing some degree of methods triangulation once the analysis began (Patton, 2002). The following data sources are my methods for collection. These approaches are noted in methodological literature as being particularly helpful when gathering information for a case study (Creswell, 2002; Yin, 2003).

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

A protocol of several open-ended questions was established in relation to the conceptual model and Figure 1.1 above. The interviews followed an informal format because of the existing relationship between the participants and interviewer (me). While there were protocols for the interviews, my colleagues’ responses elicited further unanticipated questions that emerged unexpectedly and in the moment. These opportunities created rich
data points, but also created the risk of biased questions in which I likely and inadvertently led the participant or “impose[d] interpretations” on the participant (Patton, 2007, p. 343). These biases are explicated in the data analysis.

**Journals and Logs**

Jim kept a journal over the period of several months. While this record was a log of events, it was primarily a running narrative that allowed him to record his thoughts, feelings, and reactions to some open-ended prompts that were provided to him. Jim was instructed to not only respond to the pre-determined prompts, but to also record experiences, tensions, and his reactions to situations that arose as data collection took place. These journals encouraged Jim to take a “reflective stance” with the hope that important and rich data were recorded (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 208). This same data collection strategy was extended to teachers or staff who were repeatedly or integrally involved in Jim’s journal reflections.

**Documents and Artifacts**

The teachers and Jim regularly access and edit the weekly staff meeting notes between staff and Jim. These meeting agendas and minutes—as well as my observation of the meetings—served as important data points. Also, the monthly minutes and my observations of the Springboard Advisory Council (comprised of students, staff, and parents) were equally important. Similarly, artifacts that were created or readily available, such as the behavioral covenant, or presentations made by Jim or staff, served as artifacts that supported the research goals. As with all of the sources of data listed here, these
documents and artifacts, taken by themselves, may not serve as suitable data sources on their own. Often, they may serve to provide context to interviews or journal entries (Patton, 2007).

**Participant’s Direct Observations**

This research was conducted from an insider’s perspective, and the setting lent itself well to the researcher collecting data from direct observations of interactions, and also to the researcher collecting data on myself as I experienced Springboard. In accordance with Patton’s (2007) recommendation with journals and logs, these observations were collected as “real-time” as possible in order to accurately represent data in the moment rather than relying on memory. Real-time observations were particularly important during weekly staff meetings and the monthly advisory council meetings.

**Data Analysis**

I employed an “open coding” approach for data analysis (Creswell, 2006, p. 160). Once I transcribed, re-read, and listened to the interviews, journals, minutes, and other artifacts, I developed substantive categories that were “primarily descriptive” in order to explain what the participants were saying (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97). The literature regarding phenomenological methodology calls for developing a list of significant statements, which I did by marking the transcripts, logs, minutes, and artifacts (Creswell, 2006). The descriptive categories represented an initial set of descriptive codes, which I then grouped into larger thematic units (Creswell, 2006). These thematic units, in some cases, became tensions that are explained in more detail in Chapter 4. Where there were recurrent
descriptive codes, I looked to see if they comprised significant themes that “cut across” all (or most) of the data. In the spirit of phenomenological work, I distilled what I thought were the essence of particular pieces of data in order to better inform, generally, how leadership is experienced at Springboard (Creswell, 2006). The descriptive themes (etic codes) were used to create assertive and analytic findings (emic codes), which address the research questions as well as the degree to which the predictive connections in Figure 1.1 bear any degree of accuracy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In Chapter 4, the emic codes appear as “tensions” that are experience at Springboard, and build upon Rusch’s (1998) work.

In the second stage of data analysis, I used the analyzed data, themes, and vignettes to develop assertions, and check for confirming and disconfirming evidence. These themes helped me to develop vignettes of important aspects (e.g., important events, decisions, and controversies) of the data I anticipated reconnecting to leadership styles or democratic school ideas that were already developed. These vignettes also provided some context and specific examples in response to the research questions and connections from Figure 1.1. Vignettes that are particularly illustrative of specific relationships proposed in Figure 1.1 or to the exact research questions themselves are included as part of the larger case study. For example, there is the initial “marijuana” vignette in Chapter 4 that sets up the tension about how community is experienced in democratic schools and whether termination should ever be considered in this type of school setting.

In addition to a phenomenological perspective, this research is primarily a case study. I looked for regular patterns in the data that helped tell the story of how Jim leads
at Springboard. The patterns that coalesced across several pieces of data in this small school setting helped develop generalizations that in turn developed into an overall bounded case study. The coding scheme was open, and therefore represents—partially—a grounded theory analysis (Creswell, 2006).

Validity

Member Checks

At several points in the data collection and during the analysis process, I paused to ask whether the participants viewed with “credibility . . . the findings and interpretations” I was making along the way (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). I conducted these member checks not only to ensure that the data were accurately collected, but also to be sure my interpretation of the data was within the bounds of what the participants recalled and what was intended for me to hear. For example, I provided copies of transcripts and drafts so that Jim and the participating teachers could verify that the data were accurate. The themes that emerged from the data were presented to the participants, providing an opportunity for them to respond to the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Their reactions and corrections were included in my data and assisted me in sharpening the themes and conclusions. There were two occasions in which participants suggested I change some of the material in the final product. Their suggestions were not borne from concern or discomfort with what was written, but rather out of an ongoing dialogue with me that suggested to me there were more accurate ways to portray the events or stories contained herein.
It is important to mention that as a new researcher, I experienced some degree of vulnerability in the process of member checking. I likely experienced this because I felt a great sense of wanting to “get it right” and ensure that what I was seeing was in fact what the participants were seeing as well. Although it is not guaranteed that both researcher and participants see and experience the same things, it is worth mentioning that I experienced this feeling of vulnerability because my intention at every turn was to accurately represent Springboard. All participants read this dissertation in its final form and made suggestions for edits, deletions, and additions to the manuscript. So, while the process may have made me feel vulnerable, it incorporated their voices so that the final product reflects their input as much as any other person involved.

External Checks
As a member of a doctoral student writing group, I solicited “debriefing” and feedback on the data as well as the themes in order to critically question my analysis (Creswell, 2006, p. 208). In addition, numerous drafts of this research were read by my committee members, for which I am eternally grateful.

Generalizability
This dissertation is a small case study conducted by an insider participant observer. Its generalizability is very limited due to its small size and relative degree of researcher bias. On the other hand, participant observer research conducted by an insider (despite its bias) also may be more reliable as compared to larger data sets. The data represented in this work may better capture the story of a democratic school leader as opposed to an
outsider’s research conducted in only a few days’ time. This work may be used as a teaching device for aspiring democratic school leaders, or perhaps even instructive for those who wish to start their own democratic school.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS BY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Introduction

This dissertation is largely a case study of the leadership of one person: Jim. In order that readers may better understand Jim and his work, I begin by situating his work in the context of his life, family, and career trajectory. I also provide a sample day in the life of Jim at Springboard.

After providing background on Jim and situating his work in his biography, I lay out Jim’s understanding of leadership, and the tensions that arise for a leader in his situation, as well as how he navigates his way through those specific tensions. From there, the chapter uncovers how the uniqueness of Jim’s position often translates into unique situations at Springboard. Finally, the chapter explains how Jim’s practice of leadership is instructive for leaders in similar situations.

More About Jim and His Journey in Leadership

A native of upstate New York, Jim has lived in the community for over 12 years and has led Springboard for about a decade. He and his wife both completed their doctoral degrees (his PhD is in school counseling) at a major university in the southern United States and moved to the area when his wife accepted a faculty position at the state university in town. It was then that Jim completed his dissertation long-distance while working as an admissions counselor at a local community college. That work was short-lived, though, when the opportunity became available for him to work as a school counselor in a neighboring school district. He worked for two years in the neighboring school district until a parallel opening became available in the local district’s main high
school. He was one of the school counselors at the main high school until the job opening at Springboard became available. All told, he was a community college admissions counselor and high school counselor for about five years before he became a principal. He and his wife are both in their early forties and have three young kids, all of whom attend school in the district.

Jim knew he wanted to work in a school environment since the time he was in college—he said that he always appreciated and enjoyed the “energy” that occurs in a school. To him, schools are places of constant activity and are natural spaces toward which “helping and nurturing” personalities are attracted. This is how Jim explains getting involved in counseling—he knew his passion was not on the teaching side of education, but rather the ancillary and support side from a counseling perspective. He saw himself as a helper and servant long before he conceptualized his own leadership style as being mostly about servant leadership. He enjoyed the role of counselor in a school because it was more of an independent and autonomous position—less scheduled and more “going to where the needs were.” Jim has a very independent streak to his personality and recognized this early when identifying his passions for service within a school.

Prior to becoming a leader at Springboard, Jim did not have any experience as a titular leader within an organization. Instead, Jim took distributed leadership roles internally as a counselor—roles in which he spearheaded projects or completed tasks necessary for the school. When we talked about his history of leadership and his leadership role now, he shied away from being called a leader; it is not a term he
appreciates or likes. He feels strongly that he is “just another person on the team” who “has a role to play.” Certainly, he understands that his particular role on the Springboard team is one that carries with it more authority and power at times, but he is not fond of hierarchies. Indeed, hierarchies (and positioning himself within them) are not what brought Jim into education in the first place. As is discussed below, Springboard has had a major role in shaping Jim as a leader, especially a formal titular leader. Jim believes he has learned to lead most by simply “taking his lumps” and making mistakes along the way as a school leader. He believes he has brought his skills from counseling into his leadership style, particularly by listening to others’ perspectives and moving conversations forward toward resolutions or decisions—much in the same way a counselor might lead someone during a one-on-one conversation. These skills help him at times, but can also frustrate his followers at other times because they occasionally want decisions made fast and without all the democratic input. Jim’s role requires him to be a “jack of all trades” because he oversees five different programs: (a) Springboard middle program; (b) Springboard high school program; (c) the district’s online school; (d) the district’s small quasi-adjudicative program; and (e) the district’s quasi-hospitalization program for special needs students. The latter two programs may only include 20 or 30 students, but they nonetheless fall under “his” purview. The district’s online program has increasingly garnered more of his daily attention in the past five years and includes an estimated 1,000 students (most of whom are taking one course). These students are often students who cannot fit an additional class in their already busy high school schedule and turn to the district’s online program as an answer. Roughly 20% are students who are
taking multiple courses or an entire middle or high school curriculum exclusively online. While Springboard occupies the majority of his time, the online learning program is an increasing load on his daily schedule. However, the smaller programs (adjudicative and hospitalization) are relatively small and do not need as much of his attention unless there is a crisis—which can happen from time to time.

Certainly, the biggest change in Jim’s work in the past ten years was the addition of the Springboard Middle Program in 2014. The community was looking to expand Springboard and there was increasing interest in a semi-separate middle school program that operated similar to Springboard High School. When Jim took on this endeavor, his workload became much more spread out among student ages (now it is grades five through 12) and teachers (nearly doubling the total Springboard teaching workforce to 40). The growth of not only Springboard Middle, but also the district online program has placed new demands on his time.

Jim is a leader among the principals in the district as the designated person who negotiates contracts and mediates disputes between central office and the principals in the district. Although the principals in the district do not have a bargaining unit, they consult together as a group. This leadership responsibility is infrequently assumed, but when it is, it consumes a great deal of his time. Although Jim may be expected to be an instructional leader under state law (he is the designated reviewer and observer of teachers), he really dislikes that term and other popular terms like “lead learner.” He is most uncomfortable with the hierarchy that he believes those terms create. It is his belief that learning can be more organic with teacher leadership playing a key role—it is not necessarily all about
his leadership, in his mind. He has learned (and continues to learn) to be a leader by inviting feedback and starting formal feedback loops for himself and his employees. In the past two years, at Jim’s behest, Springboard has independently started a 360-degree feedback program in which every teacher provides every other teacher with constructive and positive feedback on their teaching and talents. This includes Jim and his leadership—he actively participates each year. It is a voluntary program, but nearly every teacher participated this year and last. The first year, Jim received some constructive feedback, including taking more time for himself, delegating more, being more efficient with his daily schedule, and balancing his time better across programs.

Although Jim is aware of notable leadership literature, he does not read much about leadership, nor does he take much from state-mandated principal development workshops. He has had the opportunity to move his principal certification to the next “level,” but has elected not to do so yet. In our conversations, Jim said he learns the most about leadership from people who challenge him and are willing to disagree with him. But, independent of literature or specific training, Jim told me that he has learned from his peers that trust and relationships are the most important aspects in leading a school. Without these attributes in a leader (or in a school, generally) the school is at a major disadvantage. Jim is most challenged by teachers and parents (from whom he learns the most) and also somewhat by the assistant superintendent for secondary instruction (his direct report, with whom he has the occasional constructive conversation). Jim said that mindset is also important in learning to lead. Similar to teaching, he said, there is no
“point of arrival” when it comes to leading others—“the moment you stop learning to lead is the moment you start failing,” he said.

**A Day in the Life of Jim**

On a random day of the year, a student who was willing to “shadow” Jim’s every movement collected data on Jim’s day. He tracked him for an entire day, making a record of his activities in five-minute increments. The following is a narrative account of that student’s extensive note taking about Jim’s day as school leader. The narrative may provide some further context about Jim’s work as a leader in a democratic school.

Jim’s day starts when he arrives at the school building about 7:45 a.m. Some days there are earlier starts when he needs to be present at an IEP meeting, but most days he arrives prior to 8 a.m. and parks in the teacher’s lot adjacent to the school.

On this particular day in May, Jim arrived prior to 8 a.m. and mingled with students as they arrived by bus and car. He walked back and forth between the curb and the lobby to the school—socializing with arriving teachers, custodians, paraprofessionals, and parents walking their kids to school. Soon after classes started, Jim was off to a dentist appointment that lasted about an hour. When he got out of the dentist’s chair, he had three voicemails from parents about various concerns or problems that (they believed) required his attention. During his return to school, he began returning those calls. Upon his return to school at about 9:30 a.m., he had a meeting with a parent and a student; the student had violated the covenant of expectations at Springboard—she or he was repeatedly arriving late—and the conversation was about whether the student should return the following academic year. This meeting lasted about 20 minutes until his
secretary informed Jim that he needed to make another call to parents who dropped their student off at the incorrect time.

Following this short call, Jim had a meeting with the district supervisor for Special Education—her office is down the hallway from his. (Springboard has a higher proportion of special education students than the rest of the district comparatively, about 20%). This meeting lasted for about ten minutes until Jim was called back to his office because a substitute teacher had not yet arrived for a teacher who was out sick. Once he arranged for this coverage, he checked in with some high school students who were beginning SATs and some online students who had to show up in person to complete final exams in the office adjacent to his. Just after 10 a.m., Jim was on his daily rounds of checking in on classrooms throughout the school. He usually steps into each class for about a minute or two, just to observe what is happening and say hello—these are non-evaluative visits, just simply “face time” visits, so to speak. Jim then made his way upstairs to a meeting with the head teacher of the quasi-hospitalization program, which lasted about ten minutes. Following that, it was back to his office to meet with a student who was applying to Springboard for ninth grade the next year. This student was not familiar with the program and wanted more information, as well as an opportunity to sit in on classes. Jim dropped her off with a trusted student who would show her around, and then checked in with the substitute who had finally arrived.

After this whirlwind of activity, Jim was back in his office and monitored his emails (he gets in excess of 100 messages most days). From 10:30 to about 11:10 a.m., Jim was in a meeting with an online student who was having some problems scheduling
their day, and was requesting a unique arrangement with performing arts—the coordinator for performing arts was part of this meeting as well. This meeting ended and Jim made his way to the small cafeteria and kitchen that serves the century-old school building. Each day, Jim helps the cafeteria staff prepare the lunch and then serves the lunch (some days, but not every day) for over an hour—the high school gets lunch from 11:15 to 11:45 a.m. and the middle school gets lunch from 11:45 to 12:10 p.m. Jim talked about how important this time is for him when he gets a chance to do it because it allows him interaction (albeit brief) with nearly every student. During this day of recorded activity, I was not aware of any time when Jim actually sat down to eat, himself!

Following lunch, Jim found the spot where all of the teachers typically eat—there is no teacher’s lounge per se. He stopped and talked with the teachers socially for about five minutes before he was on to his next task. His next meeting was with the school’s Resource Officer (a municipal police officer) who is stationed at the school five days per week during school hours. Upon walking back to his office, he noticed a student not wearing his shoes during gym class—he asked this student to put his shoes back on and clarified expectations for students’ footwear during the school day while inside the building. Back at his desk, he checked his emails and met with a student who wanted to enroll online. Another meeting then lasted for about 20 minutes, which involved a student who wanted to return to school and work on their diploma, despite being over 18 years old. Jim then crossed the street to the head district offices to meet with the superintendent for secondary instruction, who is his direct report. This meeting was private and the topics were not disclosed, and it lasted for about an hour.
By this time, it was about 2:15 p.m., and Jim crossed the road back to his office, and was back on the phone with the secretary for the assistant superintendent because there was a problem with grade reporting that they had possibly just been discussing. Once this problem was solved, Jim was out and about in the school again, this time observing graduation projects of seniors. The projects are annually on display in May in the gymnasium and the school community as a whole is invited in to see them and ask questions of the project creators. The annual event is similar to a science fair. These interactions took him to about 2:45 p.m., at which time he made his way to the middle school to see kids off and on to their busses. Jim spent some time chatting with parents who come to pick up their kids in person. At 3:05 p.m., Jim was back over to the other side of the building for dismissal of the high school. At this point, the school day was over—but not necessarily for Jim. On Tuesdays, the high school has their staff meeting, which lasts until about 4:15 p.m. On Thursdays, the middle school has their staff meeting, which also lasts until about 4:15. Some days Jim is out the door by 4 p.m., and some days he stays and talks with teachers. Other days, the entire staff meets at a local restaurant (usually Fridays) to relax and share stories from their lives or their week at school.

Aspects of this sample day are typical for Jim, while other aspects of this day are atypical. Jim, for example, does not serve lunch for an hour every day. In general, however, much of his time is spent in direct contact with students and teachers. Thus, he is rarely in his office and has very little time built into his schedule for professional reflection. While this may be common for some school leaders, it is nonetheless important to understand about Jim: He sees himself as a servant. Another aspect to his
daily schedule is that Jim may sometimes move from situations outside of Springboard that are less deliberative to situations inside Springboard that are perhaps overly deliberative. With some background about Jim and a sample “day in the life,” the research questions now have some context with which to view his work.

**Research Question: How Does Jim, as a Democratic School Leader, Conceptualize the Work of Leadership?**

When talking about how he conceptualizes his leadership, Jim uses many different frameworks to arrive at his description. Perhaps first and foremost, Jim talks about himself as a servant leader. As a PhD in School Counseling, Jim is no stranger to research lingo and understands many different leadership paradigms. He believes that his job as a leader is to serve those, as he puts it, “who he works for.” Jim was clear in his interviews that he works for the teachers, parents, and students. In casual encounters, Jim especially dislikes teachers calling him their “boss,” or saying that they “work for him.” He believes those descriptions are inaccurate and run counter to notions of servant leadership. He is especially confused when parents conclude a meeting in his office by saying, “Sorry for taking up your time.” As he views it, meetings with parents are part of serving them on behalf of the school; it is not about them taking valuable time from him—his time is about serving them. Jim describes his practice as a school counselor as being part of servant leadership. The qualities that a counselor must exhibit are similar to what Jim believes a leader must exhibit: listening, mediating, caring, and deciding. But, servant leadership, to Jim, also just is “who he is.” He cannot see himself leading in any different way—he just describes it briefly and bluntly, “this is who I am.” Jim literally serves
lunch to students every day—and he describes this action as being part and parcel of being a servant leader. Whenever Jim sees the opportunity to help any staff in the school, he “loves doing it, because it helps the kids.” It is Jim’s hope that by modeling servant leadership at Springboard, he helps cultivate it in the staff. He believes that teachers should exhibit servant leadership in classrooms, as well.

Beyond seeing himself as a servant leader, though, Jim conceptualizes the work of leadership as being the facilitation of student voice and teacher voice. Jim defines democratic schools as being schools that must encourage student voice. For Jim, leadership is about working to ensure decisions are always made with student input. Teachers reported that they often have conversations with Jim about pending decisions for the school, and that before Jim allows everyone to move forward with a decision, he often says, “We need to hear from the kids on this [issue].” But, beyond student voice, Jim describes his leadership style as being one in which teachers’ voices are elevated, as well. Incorporating student and teacher voice is perhaps synonymous with Jim being a listener—he doesn’t see leadership as being something that he does without the voices of others.

At times, Jim views leadership as being an act that necessitates encouraging people to go where they don’t want to go. Although this is somewhat rare at Springboard, Jim described a few instances in which he listened to teachers or students, but still used his authority to push an idea or an initiative of his that, at the outset, was mostly unpopular.
For example, about a year after Jim first arrived at Springboard, he realized that classroom time was significantly shorter than other high school classes outside of the Springboard experience. From Jim’s perspective, this didn’t seem right. And, although the staff was initially resistant to extending classroom learning time, Jim continually pressed for more classroom time so that the credits being offered at Springboard more accurately reflected the larger high school’s. Staff were mostly not in favor of this, but Jim viewed it as his job as a school leader to push them in a direction they did not want to go. That change remains in place today.

Jim repeatedly described being a democratic school leader as fundamentally about being a “listener.” When I talked with one of the Springboard teachers named Dan, it was evident that Dan believed Jim’s listening qualities were high on the list of leadership qualities. As Dan put it, “Jim may want to go in a different direction, but he will always listen—even if he disagrees.” Dan expressed this during our interviews, as did I in my independent reflections. Dan especially felt that Jim was good at listening to teachers’ concerns. When beginning his role at Springboard in 2007, he said that his goal was to start and sustain relationships with everyone in the school—teachers, parents, maintenance and cafeteria staff—and he said that he wanted to do this by listening to people. In the long run, Jim believes that his leadership today is partly built on trust, which he believes he builds by placing listening and relationships as a priority. During our interviews, Jim talked at length about relationships, listening, and serving others, but he also often said that leading a democratic school in this way slowly flows into the concept of trust, in his mind. Jim has interacted with fellow leaders who bring an idea to

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3 A pseudonym.
their school with little or no “buy-in” from staff or students. Jim recalls, for himself, the lack of investment he has felt in those situations. He points to those situations as a reason for why he repeatedly returns to listening as a leadership concept that is important to him. Jim said that caring about leadership and caring about being a leader is also what drives him to listen and build relationships of trust. He cares about what kind of leader he is because he cares about the school community he leads—and he invites feedback on his leadership.

**Research Question: What Challenges and Tensions Emerge for the Leader of a Democratic School?**

In the process of leading a school like Springboard on a day-to-day basis, Jim (like most school leaders) necessarily encounters tensions in his work. Uncovering those tensions is part of explaining the work of a leader who is constantly working to maintain a small democratic community. This section discusses those tensions as they emerged from various data sources and explains how those tensions were gleaned from the data.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 below show the open coding approach I employed as I worked through the data. More specifically, they show the substantive descriptions that I believed “clustered” together to create a case—or type—of tension. In this sense, I began to move the data from being primarily descriptive to becoming more assertive and analytical, which, in this case, seemed to indicate several stories that exemplified tensions and challenges in the context of Jim’s leadership in a democratic school. As an observer-participant, this is where some biases may have occurred—in the process of describing tensions and then deciding the “clump” in which they belonged. Regardless of this
possible and inevitable bias, the analysis process is explained here so that the data are better understood.

In the following three sections, I describe the three primary types of tensions listed in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Clusters of Types of Tensions at Springboard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Possible Tension</th>
<th>Types of Tension</th>
<th>Data Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The marijuana allegory (as told by Jim)</td>
<td>&quot;Terminating Students&quot;</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The marijuana allegory (as told by Dan)</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan's perspective on Restorative Justice</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering termination for students currently enrolled</td>
<td>Staff meeting minutes, author's journal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff disagreement over termination of students</td>
<td>Staff meeting minutes, author's journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing disagreement regarding terminations</td>
<td>Interviews, staff meeting minutes, author's journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy as described by Dan</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Teachers as artists,&quot; as described by Jim</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater room for freedom of teaching beliefs (Dan)</td>
<td>Interviews, journals, author's journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling isolated as a teacher previously (Dan, Author)</td>
<td>Interviews, journals, author's journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Springboard's scores not disaggregated (Jim)</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff beliefs about democracy in schools</td>
<td>Staff meeting minutes, author's journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim's belief about democracy in schools</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Springboard's existing culture and momentum (Jim)</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community-based hiring and student voice</td>
<td>Interviews, journals, author's journal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Using school structure as teaching tool (Author)</td>
<td>Author's journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in leading a democratic school (Jim)</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delgating power to teachers to make decisions</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flattened school hierarchies (Jim)</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensing of loss of power in the classroom (Dan, Author)</td>
<td>Author's journal, interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting to external community at Springboard</td>
<td>Interviews, journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of decision making at Springboard</td>
<td>Staff meeting minutes archive</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2 below shows some of the types of tensions that did not cluster together as easily, or that do not necessarily (in my opinion) constitute a tension worthy of explanation in this chapter. However, several of the descriptions that touch upon the tensions mentioned in Figure 4.2 are embedded in this chapter as well as Chapter 5.
Terminating Students—A Recurring Tension at Springboard

Termination at Springboard is a case of a tension that is recurrent and rife with disagreement among parents, teachers, and likely within Jim’s own mind. Although staff termination is rarely discussed as a community, student termination is a topic of discussion at the weekly staff meetings. While it is not on the agenda every week, when it does come up, tension is evident. Should students be terminated over grades? Conduct? What about extenuating circumstances? As Dan has suggested, perhaps no student should ever be terminated in their first year of enrollment due to the fact that relationships often take a full year to build, and therefore adults never truly know a student until they have an opportunity to grow and change.

Both Dan and Jim specifically and independently mentioned the “marijuana story” as being one that created tension in their work. During school several years ago, Jim discovered that four or five of his students were smoking marijuana (illegal in the state in which Springboard is located) during school hours in a student’s parent’s house not far from the Springboard school building. On a tip from other Springboard students, Jim walked to the house himself and told the students to leave the house and attend class. The issue of terminating the students’ enrollment then became an agenda item at the
weekly teachers’ meeting. Termination at Springboard means that the students in question return to their home school, which in this case is the lone district high school. Staff were somewhat divided, but Jim was more confident in what should be done: He felt the students should be dis-enrolled and sent back to the high school. A few staff members were against this decision, but the majority were in agreement with Jim. Jim conducted meetings with all of the students and their parents, and informed them of the staff’s (and his) decision. As Jim retold the story, he said those conversations impacted him the most as the leader of a democratic school. Most of the affected students’ parents agreed with his decision. But a few said that the school’s decision ran counter to Springboard’s values. They said that because Springboard is a community (and thinks of itself as such), and a community is like a family, terminating a member of family is really never an option. Jim said this was a powerful argument to him—and Dan echoed this also. If democratic schools are partly defined as being a community, and Springboard holds itself out as “community first, and a school second,” then the parents’ argument seems to be a strong one—indeed, termination of a student could potentially never happen. Ostensibly, the parents who disagreed were proposing some sort of restorative justice program for Springboard. However, Jim presented an interesting counter-argument. He said that the students who were caught that day were, as a group, an ongoing problem for the school community as a whole, and that the marijuana event was simply another instance of them conducting themselves in ways that were negatively impacting school culture and climate, as a whole. To Jim and a majority of the teachers, this argument was more powerful than any other in terminating the students’ enrollment.
at Springboard. The tensions and challenges elucidated by this story are numerous. Should a democratic school leader lead an effort to dis-enroll students? More broadly, should any democratic school concern itself with asking students to leave?

Teachers at Springboard tend to stay at Springboard and do not move to other schools in the district. But it is worth considering termination in terms of teachers, not just students. In the time I have been involved at Springboard, no teachers have been “fired,” per se. However, one teacher was struggling with being new to their position and openly questioned whether their placement was the correct one for them. This teacher acknowledged as much in their annual peer review conversations. This teacher even talked personally (outside of the peer review process) with everyone and did their best to troubleshoot their learning difficulties with the job. This continued for two years until Jim, the teacher involved, and another district-wide level administrator, agreed that Springboard was not the right school for this teacher. The teacher agreed to be transferred to another position in the district that was deemed to be more supportive and structured rather than autonomous. The autonomy in the position at Springboard was particularly problematic for this teacher, who appeared to struggle taking on individual leadership roles. Jim was guarded about this decision—not being entirely his decision to make—and it was certainly not a decision that the staff was involved in making mostly because there was some consideration given to teachers’ union processes. This particular story is indicative of the fact that Springboard operates as its own semi-democratic culture with respect to student enrollment decisions, but much less so with respect to decisions regarding adults’ employment. As Jim said to me in our conversations, “We are
still in a public school district, so we are as flexible as we can be.” This situation is one in which Jim had very little room to involve others in the process of deciding the fate of a teacher’s employment. And, even if it were entirely a “Springboard-only decision,” it is not apparent if the staff, students, and Jim would have been ready to make a consensus decision on this teacher—or any teacher’s employment status, for that matter.

The termination tension is a case of everyone in the school having someone or something’s best interests in mind. When a person advocates that a student or staff member not be terminated, that person likely believes that the individual’s best interests are at stake, because the loss of an education or ongoing experience at Springboard is important for them. Conversely, when a person advocates that a student or staff member leave the school, that person likely believes that the school community’s best interests are not well served by having that person continue in the community. Whatever the belief on either side of the tension, this is a case in which a controversial question (for any school) is considered by a larger group of individuals (teachers and school leader) than is likely typical. Jim shares this decision with everyone. When controversial decisions are shared, tension is expected. But when they are shared against the backdrop of an array of differing understandings about democratic schools, the tensions become more complicated and begin to drive fundamental questions about the principles underlying Springboard.

**Teachers on Autonomous Islands**

The next type of tension that surfaced from the data arose from the idea that many of the teachers operate autonomously from one another. With this type of tension, Springboard’s
teachers’ autonomy is one in which there is significant organizational momentum and tradition, but very little agreement or conversation about how democracy plays into that tradition.

In a curricular sense, Springboard operates somewhat differently than other schools in the district, and, for that matter, many other schools with which I have been familiar in the past. Part of how Springboard defines itself as a democratic school is to incorporate student voice into the presentation of course offerings each semester (similar to a college setting, Springboard mostly has semester courses as opposed to yearlong courses). In other words, Springboard is very concerned that it teach content in which students are interested. With the exception of the mathematics curriculum (which tends to be quite traditional, sequential, and homogeneously grouped) nearly all of the program’s courses are first vetted for student interest, while at the same time balanced with teacher interest and expertise. As a result, course offerings are a combination of the passions of both teachers and students. As perhaps a secondary result, also, teachers often find themselves in great positions of autonomy and what might be called “curricular islands”; in other words, they are the only teacher teaching that particular content in that manner in the school, if not school district. Although he was never a teacher in the traditional sense himself, Jim talks passionately about teachers acting as “artists” in their own classrooms. He sees teaching as more an art than a science, and he believes that teachers need to teach content that is close to their heart. When I asked him about the characteristics of truly democratic school, he answered by essentially saying that democratic curriculum is the
marriage of student and teacher passions with lots of student choice, voice, and management built in.

But, how do you lead a school that operates this way? At one end of the spectrum, there is a school philosophy which might state that all teachers should be teaching content coordinated with other teachers, aligned to the state standards, and in compliance with curricular expectations of the district. This end of the spectrum might also dictate the days during which content is taught and how much time is spent on each task. The advantage to this approach is some semblance of order, but the drawback and risk can be student disconnect from content (not to mention teacher disconnect). The opposite end of the spectrum might state that all teachers should be teaching content that is relevant to students’ lives and their interests, as well as teacher interests. Because every person is different and unique, classrooms and schools that subscribe to this latter vision might seem to be more chaotic and appear to be far less aligned, content-wise. The challenge in these schools—and at Springboard—is that teachers have to understand their own passions and be willing to construct most curricula from “scratch.” It also seems to create a series of seemingly impenetrable islands of teaching, and very little vertical alignment for sequential grade levels.

But Jim sensed that this teacher and student individuality and autonomy was part of the cultural momentum Springboard possessed long prior to his arrival. In the interview process, Jim was asked about autonomy for teachers and students and he sensed that it was part of what made the school model successful. Indeed, for Dan as well, autonomy of classroom philosophy and curriculum was something that attracted him to
Springboard as an 18-year “veteran” teacher. He feels he is (happily) on an island and that, at the same time, he is more aligned with his fellow teachers because they share similar desires for autonomy and creativity in their work. Jim describes teachers as “artists,” who need to be given the freedom to create and develop their own styles, independent of top-down mandates. To Jim, the challenge in leading a staff who are all on autonomous islands is in selecting the “right people,” who have shared educational philosophies so that they are largely ready to hit the ground running as soon as they are hired. At the same time, however, there is a constant push or pull from nearly everyone at different times between the appearance of “order” in aligned teaching and the seeming “chaos” of autonomy. Jim, Dan, and I mentioned, at one time or another, the struggle with wanting predictable situations with curriculum and management of school policies, while at the same time desiring the professionalism to decide for ourselves in our own classrooms or when specific case-by-case situations arise. Jim wondered aloud if allowing autonomous classrooms necessarily means the school is acting democratically. After all, as he rhetorically asked, what if a specific teacher is not allowing for student voice in their classroom? Is it okay to allow autonomy in that situation? The discussion of autonomy seemed to open up into a larger conversation about just what exactly democracy meant. Both Dan and Jim said they were unsure that the staff, as a whole, was working with a collectively agreed upon definition of the term.

This type of tension is a case of constantly assessing what is best for teachers and students simultaneously. Is it better for staff to exercise independent professional judgment when it comes to class procedures, rules, and curriculum? Or is it better for
staff to create streamlined rules, procedures, and curricula that govern the entire school?

Through Jim’s facilitation, this constant assessment by teachers and students together can result in moments of confusion where not everyone is sure what is going on. At times, it can appear chaotic. Again, similar to the termination tension, this is a situation in which the school community is striving to achieve a positive experience for as many people as possible—most notably the teachers who have experienced the lack of independent professional judgment in the past.

**Sharing Power**

The third and final type of tension that I believe clustered well is the notion of power sharing. The descriptions grouped around the idea that Jim, myself, Dan, and much of the staff experience tension when it comes to sharing power. In this case, the tension partially centers on situations in which students have misconceptions about what power and authority means and situations in which adults share those same misconceptions.

Both Jim and Dan spoke about power sharing structures at Springboard as part of being at a democratic school, but also as part of the challenges experienced at a democratic school. As a Social Studies and Government teacher, I am constantly using the school’s power structures as teaching tools so that students can understand how power and authority are shared at Springboard. During our interviews, Jim described how he thought that one of the challenges for a democratic school is the act of “conceiving and sharing power.” Jim feels strongly that putting choice and input in the hands of students for course selection, scheduling, policies and procedures, and school culture is part of the power sharing model upon which Springboard is built. This extends, according
to Jim, to individual classrooms. Not only should power be shared in large decisions that affect the entire school, but it should also be shared in more “micro” decisions at the classroom level, according to Jim. However, given the previous challenge of teachers and their autonomous islands, it can be difficult for Jim to give some teachers more room to have the freedom to decide about these micro-decisions, when really what he might instruct that teacher to do is entirely opposed to his wishes for power sharing in the classroom.

Dan admitted that power sharing on a micro level is relatively new for him, but an experience he is thoroughly enjoying. To him, it has been a way to practice teaching that he has hoped for and tried to apply, but only at Springboard has it been affirmed and encouraged. For Dan, there is a sense of a loss of power when students suggest class topics, themes, and content, because how will he know if he is also passionate about what they are passionate about? I also personally have felt Dan’s sense of a loss of control of what is seemingly “my classroom.” However, when I reacquaint my thinking with the idea that the classroom also belongs to my students, I often find that I can become passionate and interested in the same topics in which my students are interested. For example, I did not anticipate teaching a class with the performing arts teacher about the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, until the students suggested this was a viable class and I actually learned about the musical’s content and how perfect it would be to blend into a combined social studies and performing arts class. The marriage of teacher and student interest and passion in the form of classroom content seems to be a hallmark of Springboard—in most content areas. It may also be a touchstone, to some extent, of
democratic schools. In his journal writings, Dan was careful to mention, however, that students do not always have the same power and authority that teachers have at Springboard. Indeed, when it comes to issues of safety, problematic student interactions, and school-wide climate and culture issues that are concerning for adults, the teachers at Springboard will often claim more power and authority and put these items on the agenda for students to discuss and work out. Jim will often follow the lead of the teaching staff and support these moments of adult intervention.

At other times, Jim will often enter situations of conflict at Springboard with the same questions that other people have. Dan said that Jim does a wonderful job of “relinquishing power,” which he believes few of Jim’s peers put into practice. In doing so, Jim tends to comfortably share an idea, question, or problem with a group of teachers or parents, and allow that topic to be tossed around and discussed, sometimes for weeks or months. Dan said this is a completely new model of leading and operating in a school compared to his past 18 years of teaching. Dan feels that the democratic process is at work, and although it may be frustrating as a process, he does not recall witnessing the relinquishment of power (by a school leader) or the commitment to a deliberative democratic process at the schools in which he has taught in the past.

While there is some semblance of distributed leadership at Springboard, there is not always a clear understanding among staff about which decisions deserve group consideration and which are made by Jim alone. Some of Jim’s decisions are small and simple and are made solely for administrative expedience. For example, at staff meetings there are discussions about events involving parents, like picnics or parent–teacher
meeting events. The content of these events is often discussed and decided by staff, but the formal communication is often decided and executed by Jim—staff will decide something about these events independently of Jim and then he will say, “OK, so I will email parents about this?” The staff nod in agreement and send him on his task. There are exceptions to this, however, and it seems to be split along lines of experience—older, more experienced teachers tend to feel more comfortable taking on larger decisions and communications (with the faculty’s collective blessing) whereas younger, less experienced teachers naturally need more time getting accustomed to these situations.

Recently, I have personally been leading the school’s collective desire to have a Parent Teacher Student Organization (PTSO). I have made much of the decision-making on my own with very little input from Jim, other than to consult with him on the school district rules regarding independent bank accounts for PTSOs. (Springboard has always had a great deal of parent involvement, but it has not had a formalized PTSO with a fundraising mechanism for about twenty years—which is of particular interest to the faculty.) As a somewhat older and more experienced teacher, Jim has given me a “longer leash,” perhaps, in making this initiative a reality.

In a documentary sense, the official decision-making bodies (and their roles) of Springboard were formalized on March 14, 1990, when the school named five entities and their responsibilities: the Springboard Advisory Council (SAC), the All School Gathering (ASG), the Staff (weekly staff meetings), the Committees (student-generated committees), and the Director (since 2007, Jim). Jim occasionally references this document when there is some confusion about what decisions need to be made and by
whom. The SAC is an “advisory body to the director for school policy and major decisions, e.g. expectations, schedule, calendar, and facilities. It may take topics to ASG or homerooms for feedback.” The ASG “makes decisions on the day to day operation of Springboard. ASG should be used for input into SAC and Staff in their decision-making process. ASG should meet weekly and may ask staff or SAC to reconsider a decision.” Staff meetings are for “all decisions regarding curriculum; staff may take topics to ASG, SAC, or homerooms for feedback.” Committees “may be created by any of the decision making bodies and give input to the body that created the committee; they may make decisions if given the power to do so from the creating body.” Finally, the Director “makes all personnel decisions and district policy decisions, and ultimately is responsible for input and support of all decisions—including making decisions on what bodies may decide topics.” Figure 4.3 below illustrates Springboard’s various decision-making bodies.

Figure 4.3: The Decision-Making Bodies at The Springboard Program
This is a case of a tension that, to be addressed, must be clearly articulated, modeled, and narrated for all involved. The tension of sharing power is likely experienced in many schools, especially those in which the leader is seeking to delegate power and distribute it among the staff. Those delegations must be explicitly created and understood. From a student learning perspective, power sharing is a case of a prime opportunity to narrate and teach the purpose of democratic education and schooling. Still, the push and pull of these situations stem from misunderstandings about how much power exists and how much can be shared with students who are still learning to wield that power responsibly and appropriately.

**Research Question: How Does the Leader Navigate Those Challenges and Tensions?**

This section takes the tensions discussed in the previous section and explains how Jim and the staff work with those tensions. Each of the three major types of tension are addressed from the perspectives of Jim and the Springboard staff, based on their interviews and responses to journal questions.

**Navigating Terminations and Differences of Opinion**

Jim advocates for what he wants for Springboard, because he, too, is a community member who experiences the life of the school every day. However, he has an outsized role at times—meaning, he is no ordinary community member. He has a veto on the school leadership council and he is (right or wrong) *seen* as the de facto decision maker. Just as teachers, students, and parents, Jim seems to be constantly evaluating what kind of community the school is becoming and experiencing. Despite the fact that Jim said the
situation was the most challenging of his leadership career, he spoke with great certainty about the decision to terminate the “marijuana” students. He believes he was being a servant leader because he was listening to the voices of the school community, which seemed to say that the students were harmful to the school community. He acknowledged that he is often the target of criticism (especially from students)—that he appears to be a dictator and lone decision-maker, which is to some extent true and not true. The decision to terminate a student is a collective decision by the faculty, but ultimately Jim has to approve the decision and is usually the one to communicate that to parents, as well as coordinate their re-enrollment at their home school. In rare cases, teachers do this by themselves with Jim’s blessing, but more often than not, Jim is the person communicating to a family that Springboard is not the right fit for the student. Therefore, when these situations and decisions occur, Jim navigates them and often executes those decisions directly. As Jim said, it would have been easier for him to “ignore the situation” and pretend as if it were not a problem, in which case he would be ignoring what a significant portion of the school community was voicing. If democracy is simply defined as the proverbial “majority rules,” then the decision in this case seems to be democratic. But of course, democracy is more complicated than the “majority rules” maxim, and often involves the protection of minority rights, not to mention the idea of community. It seems that most of Springboard’s decisions to terminate students (which are not made all that often) do not usually consider the consequences for the terminated student and how termination, as a decision, affects the community as a whole afterwards.
With respect to teachers’ employment decisions, I had conversations with my colleagues about the teacher in question. I also had a friendship with this teacher, as we all did (and still do). I felt that the teacher should probably be given more time to grow into their position with the appropriate supports and opportunities to learn more autonomy and leadership. While I made this known (not very vocally or broadly), I also sensed this was a not a decision in which we were all going to take part. It is an interesting situation considering the idea that everyone is considered a part of the Springboard community (and can have a voice in decision-making), yet the ultimate decision did not completely rest with the community in this case.

Navigating terminations and differences of opinion is part of the job when it comes to leading Springboard, or any democratic school for that matter. This is a case of Jim understanding that fact and not squelching dissent or discomfort within the school community. It is important that leaders in this context understand that not all people, including adults, will feel comfortable or be able to thrive in a democratic school. Understanding that fact is also important in Jim’s work and is likely important for leaders who are similarly situated.

**Navigating Teachers on Autonomous Islands**

Jim acknowledges his lack of experience and discomfort with instructional leadership. He is not the biggest fan of teacher observation and evaluation paradigms, such as the Danielson (2002) Framework. So, his observation and feedback is often generated by emergent and ethnographic methods of what he sees in a particular observation period—and he allows these observations to guide follow-up conversations with teachers (Lytle,
Therefore, Jim’s approach is not necessarily an effort to standardize or align anything at Springboard, but rather to simply encourage teacher reflection and encourage action upon that reflection. But apart from managing autonomy (or not managing autonomy), Jim encourages cross-content teacher collaboration during teachers’ prep periods. To encourage this, teachers are often scheduled (by Jim) with similar prep periods so that they can meet and discuss their practice. But even more fundamentally, Jim has encouraged and led the effort for 360-degree feedback among and between the entire staff (including Jim). This effort involves all staff participating in giving one another anonymous feedback on where they can improve their practices in school and areas in which they excel. For several years, staff have participated in this practice and dedicated a full day of conversation about the feedback they receive. The sessions are often intense and promote a collective sense of community among the adults, therefore often encouraging better relationships of trust—both between one another and with Jim. So, although Jim does not directly try to manage the teachers being autonomous, he does try to encourage practices that promote reflection and action, as well as promote conversations that bring about greater trust. In Jim’s opinion, greater relationships of trust then lay the foundation for conversations between teachers that may have more impact on practice. For example, if a teacher is not promoting power sharing (or other democratic practices) in their classroom, not only do the teacher’s peers have the opportunity to observe their practices, but they may also have built relationships of trust that help them feel more comfortable to engage colleagues in meaningful conversations that grow their practice. The same is true for relationships with Jim—he states that those same
conversations, born from feedback, help him grow his practice of being a leader. Dan said that he has built this type of relationship with Jim and challenges him on some of his decisions. This particular dyadic relationship seems to have fairly even peer-based feedback. However, other relationships with younger and less experienced teachers may not have the same level of comfort or trust with Jim. Personally, I feel a relatively high degree of trust with Jim; we seem to ascribe the best of intentions to one another’s actions at all times. But I probably do not have the same level of trust with Jim that Dan does, simply because Jim and Dan have known each other outside of school for much longer than I have been teaching at Springboard.

Jim may be inadvertently minimizing some of the autonomy—but encouraging the sustainment of school culture at Springboard—by encouraging a school-based evaluation about the quality of student–teacher relationships and student-student relationships. Although Springboard does not typically evaluate itself as a program by any type of external measure (graduation rates, graduates’ life satisfaction, etc.), Jim is encouraging using data to evaluate year-to-year culture based on how connected students feel to their teachers, and how respected students feel by one another in day to day life at Springboard. These mutually agreed upon measures have encouraged the staff to start thinking about and developing strategies to better connect with their students (interpersonally) and encourage listening and respect within student relationships.

As Apple and Beane (2007) pointed out, democratic schools are about freedom—which includes freedom in curricular matters. Naturally, this can cause conflict or create autonomous islands like Springboard’s. But Jim should also be free to lead on his own,
just as teachers and students need the freedom to be who they are. Perhaps this section is
mislabeled—there should be no management of the autonomous islands, Apple and
Beane might say. Rather, it is the ongoing dialogue and tension about the autonomy that
is part of living the life of a democratic school each day. So long as Jim fosters that
ongoing dialogue and allows for tension, he is effectively “managing” it.

Navigating Power Sharing

The major group that contributes to school-wide decisions is the Springboard Advisory
Council. The SAC is comprised of ten students, two parents, two teachers, and Jim. The
ten students represent all eight of the “homerooms” in the school, plus two more students
who are randomly selected as “at large” representatives. Two parents volunteer to sit on
the SAC, as do two teachers. Jim does not have a vote on the council, but has a veto—
which he has never exercised, in his recollection. So, structurally speaking, the students
have a lot of voice in this legislative body, and are permitted to address any issue they
choose. In the past, they addressed issues such as: re-arranging their school day;
technology in the classroom; the Pledge of Allegiance; school artwork; appropriate dress
in school; and emergent issues around school climate and culture. The SAC meets every
three weeks, but occasionally meets more often if matters arise that necessitate a
decision. In my nearly three years at the school, I have not seen Jim veto any initiative by
the SAC.

The structure of the SAC implies a power sharing structure to some extent,
although in practice, Jim uses it in a way that the name denotes: as an advisory council.
Therefore, even if the students, staff, and parents vote in favor of something, Jim may be
permitted to veto that initiative (however unlikely). As Jim said, if an initiative is something agreed upon by adults and kids together, the decision is usually very good for the school, and therefore not something he would even consider vetoing.

During my data collection, the students in middle school wanted to emulate their high school peers regarding cell phone usage in school. The high school students have a rule that phones are not permitted to be out during class, but they may be carried in students’ pockets. Naturally, in between classes at Springboard high school, the phones come out (to some extent). Some middle school students who take classes in the high school wing wanted to change the rules at the middle school to resemble that of the high school. The rules at the middle school regarding cell phones were (and still are) more restrictive; cell phones are to be placed in student lockers for the entire day and should not be out during the day at all. So, when some students brought a desire to change the rules about cell phones to the SAC, there was a long-running conversation for two or more successive meetings over the course of two months. The deliberation and decision took about three months. About four or five of the students were in favor of changing the rule to resemble the high school’s. Neither parent on the SAC liked the proposed rule change, nor did the two teachers. It was evident Jim was nervous about the idea, also. The remaining student representatives were neutral about the issue, not favoring or disfavoring the idea, but simply listening and watching to see which way the decision went.

The parent representatives surveyed their constituency (all of Springboard’s middle school parents), and the teachers brought the issue to their weekly staff meeting.
Both groups confirmed what had already been suspected: the rule should probably be kept the same for the middle school. Yet, the students still had this pending issue before the SAC, and it had to be further deliberated until, finally, votes had to be cast. When the students who had been so energetic about the rule change heard the responses from the parent community and teacher community, I was surprised to see those students change their mind in the meeting. They understood their idea was probably out of line with what everyone else wanted, and they (most of whom were eighth-graders) said that they could wait one more year until those privileges were granted to them.

When I talked to Jim about this vote, he expressed his anxiety over needing to potentially cast a veto. What would he have done if parents and teachers had been comfortable with the students’ rule change? His own feelings and perspective were on display—he did not want middle school students walking around the school with their phones out. While he had anxiety, he also had placed a lot of trust in the power sharing process of the SAC and with students who attend Springboard. “If you are going to share power,” Jim said, “you are going to have moments like that.” Presumably, he meant that democratic school leaders are going to have moments where they are not really sure of the outcomes of shared decisions—and, in fact, some of the outcomes may not be what the school leader personally prefers. But, as Jim also said, when you share decisions and get everyone involved, “you can’t really make a bad decision.” That is potentially true, but what happens in the event a collective, agreed upon decision is made that truly runs counter to democratic principles?
Navigating power sharing in a democratic school operated by a public school district has its limitations. It is important to recognize that students, by law, have to attend school and that teachers are bound professionally to follow community expectations. Therefore some limits are naturally placed upon the students, which they inherently recognize when adults speak at the SAC or other forums. So, although students are empowered at Springboard, the balance of power is not completely even or equal.

**Research Question: What Unique Opportunities Present Themselves for Democratic School Leaders?**

Does being a leader in a democratic school look dramatically different from being a school leader in any other school model? This section considers the novel opportunities that Jim may have compared to some of his colleagues throughout the school district. It is important to note that some of the unique opportunities are available to most *any* school leader—that person just has to decide to begin refashioning their school according to democratic norms.

**Power Sharing as Distributed Leadership**

Power sharing can be viewed from another perspective: it might also include the concept of sharing administrative and leadership responsibilities throughout the entire staff, in much the same way that distributed leadership literature imagines (Spillane, 2004). Jim describes Springboard as a flattened hierarchy and an organization in which he (as leader) works *with* other people, as noted earlier. Jim’s title is not really principal of Springboard—officially, he is the district’s “Director of Educational Alternatives.”
Therefore, he has many diverse tasks and responsibilities on his plate. He has at least four separate programs to oversee, including the district’s ever-burgeoning online education program, which Jim single-handedly administers. A day in the life of Jim is an interesting one—as one might imagine, much of his day is filled with administrative tasks: meeting with parents; meeting with individual students; impromptu check-ins with teachers and their classrooms; ongoing scheduled meetings with assistant superintendents; and direct service to students (serving lunch takes a big portion of nearly every day).

Few principals can accomplish all of their leadership tasks by themselves, and Jim is no exception. Especially in a democratic school in which leadership is shared, teachers and parents need to step up and take on significant leadership tasks. This is built into both the Springboard teacher culture and the student culture. If a person has an idea, Jim usually wants that person to “run” with the idea and work toward making it a reality. Rarely will he stand in the way of teachers or students’ initiatives. Distributed leadership appears to be welcomed and expected, at least as Dan and I experience the school and understand the concept. At the beginning of the school year, it is custom that teachers must sign up for one job within the four tiers of responsibilities: tier one is “major time consuming” responsibilities (like PTO); tier two is “minor time consuming” responsibilities (like library coordinator or special events coordinator); tier three is committee chairperson (these are run cooperatively with students); and the fourth tier is weekly staff meeting responsibilities (meeting facilitator, secretary, etc.). In other schools, perhaps, these tasks and responsibilities fall directly on administrators, assistant
administrators, or preferred faculty. At Springboard, they are distributed evenly across the faculty. So, what opportunity does this present?

For Jim, it might mean he can have a somewhat more sustainable job—and perhaps equally as important, it may mean that his staff are more invested in the total life of the school, because they will all have some sort of quasi-administrative function at some point during the school year. At the same time, simply because a school leader’s time is “freed up” does not mean that their days are filled with fewer tasks, allowing them to use their time more effectively. Leaders have to affirmatively choose to restructure their time in more effective ways. But it does create the space for staff to take the initiative to do something on their own, and perhaps feel as if they have the freedom to do so. This is especially true for experienced teachers like Dan, who feel like they don’t have to ask Jim to approve every little independent administrative decision they make. And, teachers like Dan recognize that Jim trusts them to make decisions autonomously and also to check about certain decisions that need or do not need Jim’s involvement or approval. In this sense, Jim (and really, the Springboard culture) has created a leadership structure that seems to be fairly distributed, and somewhat completely independent of Jim. The opportunity for democratic school leaders, if they can facilitate such an atmosphere, is that their school can be a place where teachers feel the freedom and belonging to a school that Apple and Beane (2007) discussed as being one the hallmarks of a democratic school.
Being Shaped by the School as a Leader

Jim talked about how he came to be the leader of alternative education for the district, and the director of Springboard. He said he and another candidate were given choices about where they wanted to go, and Jim knew very little about Springboard, but he ultimately chose that program (along with the others) to lead, simply because he was looking for something different. He did not affirmatively choose Springboard because of its democratic history, nor did he consider his counseling background as being congruent with a leadership style that might fit best at Springboard. But, Jim had a sense that it was certainly the most independent program in the district, and that seemed to fit his personal style of independence. In his first year, Jim took very few initiatives, but instead spent a great deal of time observing and listening to the culture he had entered. But, as Jim pointed out in interviews, there are leadership styles that can work at Springboard, and there are leadership styles that would not work at Springboard. The hiring committee who examined Jim was comprised of one parent, one student, and one teacher—in addition to a group of superintendents and school board members. All of these groups, but especially the Springboard teachers, students, and parents, knew what kind of leader would work best at their school. And it is likely that the hiring committee heard or saw something in Jim that they knew would work well at Springboard. Still, Jim was unprepared for how much the decision-making process would involve the democratic process, as well as student and teacher voice. Systems were already in place that facilitated this type of school culture long before Jim became involved. So, any leader who entered Springboard was either bound to be shaped by the cultural inertia of the school, or perhaps struggle to
shape the school in the way they wanted. But, perhaps this is not so different from any new school leader entering any new situation.

The way Jim talks about being shaped by the school is particularly interesting. He framed the school community as being a place in which people need the school more than the school needs individual people. What I think Jim means here is that his leadership style (and he, personally) needs a place to belong, and he likely would not fit in as well in any other school environment. In fact, Jim said this about himself—he thinks he needs the school more than it needs him. Sure, Jim is important in the life of the school—but as he put it, “I can walk away from this thing and the school will continue to run just as it is.” Presumably, Jim is saying that the culture is not only relatively well defined, but also long established. Moreover, Jim believes that the school culture and way of operating (long prior to his arrival) has had an impact on how he leads. In other words, but for the introduction of the Springboard culture into his life, would he see himself as an independent-minded servant leader? In his estimation, perhaps not.

At Springboard, the distributed power structure may not be unique, but it creates teachers who are more invested and therefore prefer to stay teaching in this specific environment longer than their counterparts throughout the district. (Consider that few, if any, teachers leave Springboard voluntarily—which may indicate happiness with the work environment.) Likewise, in Jim’s case, it may also help him to feel more invested in and appreciated by the school community. Jim’s investment in the school and his commitment to it might not have occurred but for Springboard. As it turns out, he is an accidental democratic school leader—he did not purposely intend to lead a democratic
school. This school has shaped him as a result, he reports. But, for school leaders who intend to end up in democratic schools the result may be the same so long as they are open to hearing students, teachers, and parents’ voices, and, therefore, be shaped by them.

**Research Question: What Are the Effective Practices of a Democratic School Leader in a Given Situation?**

This research question uncovers what other democratic school leaders (and perhaps teachers) can glean from Jim’s experiences at Springboard.

Calling to mind the cell phone issue discussed in the Springboard Advisory Council, it seems that one of Jim’s most effective practices is trusting the democratic process and constantly returning to that process in the midst of uncertainty, doubt, and disagreement.

There is a “five finger” voting process that staff use during staff meetings and the SAC uses when considering initiatives. When a person votes with all five fingers, that means that they are willing to take leadership of the initiative because they support it. When someone votes with four fingers, they are indicating that they simply support the initiative. When voting with three fingers, a person is saying that they are neutral about the motion—they are non-committal. Voting with two fingers means that person is against the initiative and will not support it as it is proposed. Voting with one finger freezes the process and stops the initiative altogether for a period of time. The person voting with one finger is then required to come back after a period of time (a deliberation period) and try to persuade the rest of the group that their perspective is more
beneficial—or perhaps introduce a newly worded proposal. If this still fails (or their new proposal fails), the original initiative can still pass, but it must pass with 80% of the group voting three fingers or above. Most of the time, because there is significant deliberation among staff, students, and parents (such as with the students’ cell phone initiative) the vote tends to be primarily three finger votes and up; but when it is not, the process is respected and the initiative wording can be changed to reflect minority opinion. Rarely, but sometimes, the process is frozen indefinitely because the minority “one finger votes” have essentially filibustered the initiative, preventing the majority of three, four, or five finger voters from getting to 80%.

This latter situation can lead to frustration among participants—and that frustration is often directed at Jim. The complaint, he says, often comes in the form of comments or feedback: “Can’t Jim just make a decision?!” Those are the moments when Jim has to remind people that there is a process and that the process should be trusted. In our interviews, Jim asked me, “What good does it do if I just make a decision for the majority, knowing that a significant number of people don’t want to implement the decision?” Jim believes that no decision in that situation is often best, even if it means frustration with the process. He said that although he is the decision-maker, the people with whom he works are often the implementers—the teachers, students, and parents. If he makes a decision that does not have the full support of the implementers, then, in his opinion, no progress has been made. Jim expressed that he does not like the idea of non-supportive implementers (teachers) trying to enforce initiatives to which they were originally opposed. He does not feel comfortable, most of the time, enforcing a
community-generated initiative without the overwhelming support of the community. But this is not completely avoidable. It occurred to me personally, when I voted to allow my homeroom to listen to music with headphones while working on their homework in study hall. The rest of the staff felt this was only distracting to students and sought—in staff meetings—to develop a rule to disallow earphones and music during study hall. I alone voted with two fingers to pause the motion, and expressed my comfort with the rule as it was. The staff heard me and allowed me to modify the motion, effectively allowing me to operate with different rules in my study hall compared to the rest of them. This was seemingly fine for a while, until the SAC took up the decision and several students expressed that students listening to music was distracting to them. At this point, the SAC voted to disallow headphones and music during study hall—effectively canceling out my wishes for my study hall. Although I did not like being on the “losing side” of the debate, I had to smile when Jim looked at me and said, “This is the process.” I have voiced to my students that I disagree with the decision, but that I respect the collective will of the school—and students seem to understand that. In this case, Jim did not say much as a leader. He does not have to enforce (or not enforce) the headphones “rule,” but he knows that the vast majority of the school (parents included) is comfortable not having headphones during study hall. One teacher (me) did not want the decision, and Jim narrated that for me by reminding me that the collective will was contrary to my wishes. As minor as this might seem, it is a leadership move that was effective, at least as far as I experienced it. It is also an equally effective teaching tool for students to learn how a democracy operates.
There is a type of “democratic fatigue” that occurs when staff, students, and parents engage in long-running deliberation of ideas and initiatives within their school. I have seen this fatigue, and I have even felt it myself. One of Jim’s practices as a leader of a democratic school is to teach the process of decision-making and encourage those around him that, sometimes, these decisions simply take time. So, not only does Jim serve as a guardian of the process (as all participants can and do), but also as an “encourager-in-chief” when democratic fatigue sets in. From my perspective as a teacher, this cannot be underestimated as an effective practice within the democratic school context.

School leaders in similar democratic models should understand that they may be the final backstop for their particular school’s commitment to democratic practices. In other words, when controversial decisions are considered or the leader feels pushed to “just decide” and rush deliberation, there may be few, if any, who challenge them to commit to the process. Remaining committed to the democratic process may be one of the best practices Jim exhibits and from which other leaders can learn.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Beliefs and Conceptualization of Leadership

Jim is not entirely comfortable with the title “leader.” He acknowledges that he is, in fact the leader, but he is uncomfortable with what that title connotes. He likes to think of himself as “part of the team,” which is nearly identical to the statement that Rusch (1998) gathered from seven democratically oriented principals in her work. This research, along with Rusch’s, indicates that principals in democratic schools may shy away from accepting the perception of being a leader, and move toward being their coworkers’ equal in some way—even if it is not necessarily grounded in reality all the time.

Jim’s conception of leadership falls in line with Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken’s (2009) idea that democratic school leaders’ life experiences and aspirations are what help them personally define leadership—Jim knew that he wanted to serve in a school in some way, most likely as a counselor. As early as college, Jim knew he was not interested in teaching and wanted to be independent of the teaching profession—but he has always wanted to be involved in the atmosphere of a school because of the sense of community and constant activity he senses within schools. These aspirations have both positive and negative implications. While Jim does not like to assume the role of instructional leader or “lead learner,” he does grant his teachers tremendous creative license and encourages creativity in their profession. The teacher independence and autonomy at Springboard, it seems, may come from Jim’s arm’s-length relationship with teaching, and distaste for playing a hierarchical role as “the top teacher.” It might be said that he is more of an accidental school leader, or a school counselor operating officially as a school leader.
However, Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken (2009) uncovered the fact that nearly all of the democratically minded superintendents, district-wide administrators, and principals they interviewed saw themselves as “servant leaders.” This is how Jim described his role as a leader, as well, confirming Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken’s work. However, it should be distinguished that in their work, Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken saw a split in service orientation; leaders either stated that they were there to serve others in the school (children, teachers, etc.), or they were there to serve the idea of democracy. Of the two, Jim is more of the former. He sees leadership as serving the students, teachers, parents, counselors, maintenance workers, and anyone else affiliated with Springboard. The latter orientation (serving democracy) is not necessarily how Jim conceptualizes leadership. When we talked about his vision of democracy, he struggled to define it—which is not necessarily a shortcoming so much as a confirmation that this is not primarily in his mind when he defines and describes his leadership.

It is clear to see that Jim and the staff (myself included) are foundering with what it means to be a democracy—or even what the word means, at all. Rusch (1998) cited Follet (1924) by saying that “democracy does not register various opinions, rather it is an attempt to create unity” (p. 201). While Springboard experiences great unity around the idea of “school community,” there is very little mutual understanding and unity on what the school is doing when it comes to operating democratically. This confusion seems to include Jim, who also struggles with what it means to be a democratic school and acknowledges that he did not arrive at Springboard necessarily for that reason. This does not mean, however, that Jim is not driven by beliefs.
Student voice is important to Jim, likely due to his background in counseling, but also likely due to the effect that Springboard has had upon him. Indeed, incorporating not only student voice but teacher and parent voice was very much a part of the structure of Springboard long before Jim’s arrival (Figure 2.1). This has impacted him, and many of his leadership moves involve using the decision-making bodies around him before he makes a final decision (Mitra & McCormick, 2017). Beyond the idea of voice, however, Jim is likely experiencing and witnessing purpose in his work in a multitude of ways—so much so that he has not been able to coalesce his relatively short leadership career into a framework of his own that he can express (yet).

Jim also talked about leading people where they “don’t necessarily want to go” as part of his role at Springboard. This is one aspect of how he conceptualizes leadership, in addition to his statement, “the moment you stop learning to lead is the moment you start failing.” The latter statement emphasizes Jim’s belief in learning and growing on the job and from the job. He believes his staff should be learning and growing, also. So, when Jim pushed for more academic classroom time early in his tenure as leader, he was acting on these sets of beliefs. The notion of being a leader who pushes people to new areas is not new, but it did not appear in the literature about democratic school leaders. While this may be splitting hairs, the distinction remains. This research simply adds the fact that democratic school leaders do lead in this way and encounter opposition along the way. Leading in this way, as Jim occasionally does, brings to mind Heifetz and Linsky’s (2002) observation that “changing how people see and do things is a challenge to how they define themselves” (p. 27). Jim’s concept of leadership, in this sense, evokes aspects
of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 2009; Northouse, 2013) in which leaders take into account people’s capacity for change. Jim did not mention assessing teachers’ capacity for change, but rather trusted that the democratic process would perhaps make that personal change an eventual reality.

The reality here for Jim is that he, too, is in need of growth. He has been pushed somewhat by the district to grow as an instructional leader, but has plenty of more room to do so. He is reticent to get his feet wet when it comes to instructional leadership—for good reason; he does not have a background in teaching. Yet, he witnesses teaching every day and has built a decade of experience in seeing effective and ineffective methods. Ostensibly, people around Jim have not led him in the direction he is hesitant to go: toward instructional leadership. This is possibly a situation where growing professionally may represent some challenges to how Jim defines himself; but it is what he encourages others to do. Practicing instructional leadership does not need to undermine staff autonomy or creativity, but rather can coexist within the customs and traditions of a democratically oriented school like Springboard.

**Tensions Experienced**

Democratic schools (and all schools, for that matter), by their nature, are places of conflict—and leaders should expect conflict. Prior research like Rusch’s (1998) shows how school leaders encounter and approach conflict. Rusch observed democratic school leaders inviting and allowing conflict and disagreement as part of the process of reaching unity and consensus. Based on my observation of the decision-making bodies at Springboard, as well as my conversations with Jim and Dan, this is certainly evident.
Students experience and witness healthy conflict in the ASG and the SAC, as do parents and teachers, especially in weekly staff meetings. Jim allows disagreements to sit for a while, as was the case with the cellphone issue in the SAC. I personally experienced disagreement with the “music in homeroom” issue. Jim does not allow the school community to avoid conflict, which Rusch observed as a possibility with some school leaders—they either allow for conflict or they avoid it. In this case, Jim brings a leadership style that allows for conflict and makes it a norm for the school community as a whole. On the other hand, the adults in the school community seem to shy away from a conversation about “philosophical disagreements” (Rusch, 1998, p. 239) that could include much-needed conversation about the meaning of democracy. This issue has already been mentioned, but is worth underscoring again as a possible tension on the horizon for Springboard. Jim’s leadership style suggests that conflict will be welcomed in this conversation, and the teachers’ confusion indicates that the conversation likely needs to occur.

When Rusch (1998) talked about the “cacophony” that occurs within schools (p. 5), she returned to the Progressives’ notions on how to navigate that cacophony. Many of the Progressives’ principles are largely observable at Springboard, including a “dynamic and functional curriculum,” and an “organization broad enough to guarantee flexibility”; but there are some principles that highlight tensions for the school. For example, there is the possibility of Jim vetoing initiatives from the SAC, which is documented as permissible in Springboard processes (Figure 2.1). However, progressive principles called for the removal of “administrative vetoes and prerogatives” (Rusch, 1998, p. 219).
In order for Springboard to become more democratic, should it remove Jim’s ability to veto initiatives in the SAC? Within that answer lie a few tensions—how much does Jim participate in the life of the school as a community member and how much does he undermine democracy by simply holding the possibility of a veto over school decisions? And, how much would the removal of his veto option move Springboard toward a Summerhill or Sudbury model within a public school model? If untenable, can such a model (free school) exist within a public school district, at all?

The school leaders in Rusch’s (1998) study were willing to be out of step with their peers and other schools around them. This is true for Jim and his leadership at Springboard, as well. He spoke about often being an afterthought in district-wide administrative meetings, frequently because most of the other school leaders in the district do not really know how Springboard operates. There is a stereotypical viewpoint from many in the community that Springboard is a school where “troubled students go” or a place that accepts “students who can’t make it anywhere else.” So long as these attitudes persist in the community, very few will inquire further about what makes Springboard different or successful. Moreover, this only encourages Jim and his independent personality to try and persist with new and different initiatives like 360-degree peer review, frequent parent conferences, and student and parent hiring committees (to name a few)—all of which are out of step with the norms of the school district at large. In short, if the district community is not interested in paying attention to Springboard, it seems to implicitly permit Springboard to conduct more independently
minded initiatives. It is worth mentioning that, historically, Springboard has always seemed to be out of the norm within the district, and the district accepts this.

Understandably, one of the greatest recurring tensions at Springboard is the termination of students. In any school context, both legally and morally, the termination of a student represents the termination of their opportunities at least in that school context. So, although terminated students at Springboard frequently end up succeeding in the larger “main” high school or “main” middle schools, the decision itself is fraught with sharp emotions and opinions from all interested stakeholders. While there is ample literature on student expulsions, there was a dearth of research on expulsions within democratic schools—perhaps because it is rare (Morrison, D'Incau, Couto, & Loose, 1997).

Terminating students’ enrollment is a controversial issue within Springboard, as evidenced by the marijuana incident and resulting decision. While discontinuing any student’s enrollment in a public school is met with controversy, it is met with special controversy when that school claims to be democratic. It seems fair to partially frame this issue as one that involves equity, especially the equity of access to democratic school models. Tensions regarding equity in schools become a conversation piece for leaders when termination is involved (Mullen & Johnson, 2006). But this incident is also partially about school community insofar as I have chosen to define democratic schools in this context as being about community (Hopkins, 2004; Jones & Brader-Araje, 1999). As the parents of the terminated students questioned, aren’t democratic schools founded on the notion of community? If so, how can termination be an option in this school? The
argument is compelling, and opens up some uncomfortable questions of equity within the sphere of democratic schools as a family. Seth Andrew started the Democracy Prep network of schools in the United States and writes about how these schools have a vision for civic education for the underserved communities in which they reside. As Andrew (2011) noted, “Public schools remain duty bound to teach civic awareness in particular. When they (democratic schools) fail, they commit educational and civic malpractice” (p. 107). Thinking about this in terms of equity is interesting—while I do not know Democracy Prep’s specific attitude about terminating students’ enrollment, it would seem that if they did terminate students, these schools would be committing the malpractice Andrew mentioned. Presumably, the same equity issues are present at Springboard; terminating students, regardless of the reason, might appear to be civic malpractice—should not those students be given the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and re-enter the community? While this attitude reflects the Just schools movement’s attitude toward enrollment and restorative practices (Hopkins, 2004; Power et al., 1989), it does not deal with Jim’s argument that there are occasionally behaviors that exceedingly violate and interrupt community norms and that those behaviors cannot be tolerated within the school. The two arguments are kind of like two ships passing in the night—they miss each other completely. Jim’s perspective misses the idea that restorative practices in a community can exemplify civic learning and help answer questions (and educate the school community) about what to do as a community when someone violates the norms. But, Andrew and the Just schools’ argument is silent when it comes to egregious behaviors—what should be done with students in these cases? Even A. S. Neill
had boundaries for acceptable behaviors at Summerhill. While marijuana possession might not rise to the level of an egregious behavior, surely Andrew and the Just schools movement could agree with Jim that some behaviors are particularly problematic.

Therefore, the tension is set up quite clearly: how school leaders navigate this tension can set the tone for how the school responds. Terminating students in a democratic school reflects broader societal issues of incarceration, rehabilitation, and civic engagement. Moreover, it shows the split in the communities democratic schools serve—in Springboard’s case, it serves a relatively privileged local community with an eclectic group of students; civic education is not necessarily a major touchstone because participation in the economy and democracy is a likely outcome following graduation. In Democracy Prep’s case, it serves relatively underprivileged communities where the hopes are that civic education is a catapult out of poverty and a catalyst for change within the students’ home communities. Access for all students in these communities is of utmost importance (Andrew, 2011). Regardless of how democratic school leaders feel about the conflict surrounding termination, this research simply provides more data about the ongoing tension that is experienced in this context, and different attitudes about enrollment in democratic schools in relatively privileged communities.

The tension that lies within the autonomy in schools, classrooms, and curriculum is not new and is a struggle that many schools—especially democratic ones—commonly encounter (Apple & Beane, 2007). Springboard’s curriculum (with perhaps the exception of mathematics) seems to be in concert with Apple and Beane’s (2007) idea that “young people shed the passive role of knowledge consumers and assume the active role of
meaning makers” (p. 17). Likewise, external mandates at Springboard are largely without control over teachers’ work, which has made Dan and myself feel empowered and largely removed from the sense of being “deskilled” in our work (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 18). Quite to the contrary, we both feel a great deal of latitude to make independent and professional judgments in our work as teachers. In essence, this situation has created a building full of autonomous teachers with the resulting tension of some degree of professional disconnect from one another. Jim expressed some concern about this and openly explored if this was good for a democratic school to experience. Jim’s hope is that by creating feedback pathways between teachers, there will be trust built in order to create dialogue about best practices. This tension and disconnect due to autonomy is not new in democratic schools. Reitzung and O’Hair (2002) observed it when they distinguished between ungrounded change and grounded democratic change. The former is when a teacher changes their practice because of an idea they get from a colleague that seems to be beneficial for their classroom. The latter is when this change is connected to “an individual’s or school’s values and beliefs and explicitly linked to democratic ideals” (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002, p. 133). The aspiring democratic schools in Reitzung and O’Hair’s research network struggled with this tension, as does Springboard: Are people changing for random reasons? Or, are they changing for the sake of advancing democratic ideals? One of those possible democratic ideals is the idea of sharing power—specifically, sharing decisions.

The tension of how to share power in a democratic school and who should share it is documented in studies like Reitzung and O’Hair’s (2002) work in which principals and
teachers began to slowly delegate critical school decisions. The tensions arose when school leaders appeared “unwilling to let go of critical decisions” even after agreeing to delegate (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002, p. 128). The authors ultimately posited that democratic school leaders “do not need to share all decisions . . . but do need to share all critical decisions” (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002, p. 136). The tensions in the research are the same tensions that arise at Springboard, but without Jim’s “unwillingness” to share decisions. On the contrary, he shares many consequential decisions, but there is not a framework for determining which decisions are critical. In my experience as well as Dan’s, we have both made critical decisions on the school’s behalf several times—decisions that Jim might otherwise make in the same situation. The dividing line here, as indicated earlier in this work, is teacher experience. Not all teachers at Springboard feel comfortable taking on critical decisions by themselves. With the recent retirement of teachers with 20 and 30 years of experience at Springboard high school, and the recent addition of Springboard Middle program (including the hiring of about five teachers with less than four years of experience), the influx of younger teachers has been noticeable. Jim is often placed in situations in which younger teachers come to him and essentially ask, “Will you make this critical decision?” which is a request borne of discomfort not with Jim’s unwillingness to relinquish power but rather with their lack of experience. Often, what happens in these situations is that younger teachers give the critical decision to Jim to make on his own, such as contacting parents about problematic students, curricular decisions that require taking a risk, or coordinating out-of-school events. Jim does his best to place the decision squarely in the teacher’s lap, but this does not happen
as often as perhaps it should in a truly distributed leadership environment. As Tichy and Cohen (1997) pointed out, teaching others how to lead is really at the heart of leading—and Jim needs to teach his younger teachers how to handle complex situations on their own. The problem that may exist within Jim internally is that he does not necessarily see himself as a teacher because of his lack of experience as a “teacher.” Yet, in order to create the school environment he wants, he needs to learn to teach others to become the autonomous and independent teammates he likely desires. By developing the “teaching” aspect to his leadership style, Jim will be helping his classroom teachers (and others) manage problems on their own without repeatedly turning to him.

Another tension evident in leading a democratic school in this case is the decision Jim faces about whether to speak up and direct certain initiatives or whether to step back and allow others to lead. Teacher voice and initiative are empowered within the democratic school context (Apple & Beane, 2007). While the “hanging back” might be expected in a democratic school leader who truly practices distributed leadership (Rusch, 1998; Spillane, 2004), the leaders in Reitzung and O’Hair’s (2002) work occasionally needed to make decisions on their own. As one principal in a fledgling democratic school in Reitzung and O’Hair’s research put it, “there are some decisions principals just need to make. After all, if the wrong decisions are made in those areas, we will be the ones who lose our jobs” (p. 128). The same tension about making decisions seems to exist at Springboard, but as Dan’s situation (and mine) seem to point out, trust is a major factor in avoiding situations in which a leader “might lose their job.” In other words, if the teacher who is empowered to make independent administrative decisions is trusted, then the
school leader need not worry; the teacher will touch base at critical points in the decision-making process. As explained earlier, this tension seems to cut along staff experience lines—those with more experience are given more trust and feel more confident to make independent decisions. Those with less experience feel less confident in doing so, and often ask Jim for more assistance or for him to make the decisions altogether. Not surprisingly, the notion of relational trust came up in Reitzung and O’Hair’s work and is integral to understanding the tension at Springboard. Relational trust is the action of “discerning others’ intentions” and is a vital element to creating positive relationships inside an organization (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 22; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, et al., 2010). As a democratic school, Springboard has relatively positive relationships, but there likely needs to be greater relational trust between Jim and his younger, inexperienced staff—in order for truer distributed leadership to take place. As was discussed earlier, this is where Jim can begin working to transform and develop the “teaching” side of his leadership so that younger staff can experience greater independence and proficiency with more complex teaching tasks (like having difficult conversations with parents). In developing his “teaching” side, Jim will likely create greater relationships of trust with his less experienced staff. Without this, Jim will be faced with more situations in which he has to undemocratically take decisions and tasks from teachers who should, ostensibly, be making them more independently. Moreover, a framework for what constitutes a critical decision likely needs to be co-constructed by Jim and his staff at Springboard.
Jim and Dan both mentioned the idea that the school leader is just as much a part of the community as any other person. These comments came about when discussing Jim’s role within the deliberative dialogue that occurs in the SAC, ASG, or even staff meetings. When Jim speaks up, his voice is certainly part of the school, and few people would dispute that. At the same time, however, when he speaks up, his opinion or input carries weight that others’ input does not. And while I cannot say for sure, I believe his input moves the consensus more toward him. This does not happen every time he speaks—there are occasionally times when the consensus opinion is against him. However, more often than not, Jim’s opinion is influential—naturally. I did not see existing research that explicates this tension in democratic schools specifically. But, I am sure it is a delicate dance most school leaders in this context navigate. On one hand, if Jim speaks up, he risks potentially silencing others with his influential opinion. On the other hand, if he does not speak up, he takes the risk of not participating in a community to which he belongs and has a right to speak.

Navigating Tensions

Dan and I both noticed that Jim is frequently asking, “Who have we not heard from on this issue?” In other words, he is constantly seeking more input from any interested party on an issue, conversation, or initiative. Often, Jim does not want to move forward on anything without student input and, hopefully, student buy-in. From his perspective (as well as mine and Dan’s), not every issue is one that must gain students’ approval, but Jim does not want to do anything without a conversation involving students first. This aspect to Jim’s leadership sounds very close to Matthews’ (2014) notion of leaderfulness.
Matthews (2014) defined the concept as being an act in which leaders are repeatedly looking for more voices and in which “anyone can participate” (p. 124). While Jim and Springboard, as a whole, often struggle to pull in outside diverse voices into these conversations and controversies, the attitude of leaderfulness as Matthews described it seems to be at work in Jim’s practice.

The act of being leaderful appears to dovetail with Jim’s practice of being a processual leader—and these leadership actions, when combined together, often become a way for Jim to navigate the tensions of being a democratic school leader. In short, Jim’s actions become a way of diffusing tension and conflict by inviting in more voices to the process. Furman and Starrat’s (2002) philosophical work about democratic school leadership contains several ideas that are directly observable in Jim’s approach at Springboard. As anticipated, Jim commits to the democratic notion of process and a way of life, which Apple and Beane (2007) cited as being:

1. The open flow of ideas regardless of their popularity;
2. The use of critical reflection to analyze these ideas;
3. The concern for the common good;
4. The concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities. (pp. 6–7)

During the cell phone discussion in the SAC, Jim (as well as the procedures that the SAC has required for more than 40 years) ensured that all ideas were aired and that adequate time was given to talk and think critically about those ideas. Everyone’s perspective regarding the school’s common welfare was considered—parents, teachers, and students. And when the eighth-grade students realized their opinion was mostly likely the minority,
Jim and I both followed up with them to be sure they felt that the process had been followed with fidelity. Being a processual leader, according to Furman and Starrat (2002), is about continually inviting democratic deliberation into all decisions in the life of a school. Jim does not include the community in all decisions, but he includes the community in most decisions, particularly when it comes to issues of school culture and scheduling. Curriculum is either a collective or individual teacher decision and therefore may or may not have diverse voices involved. In this sense, Springboard is not as democratic as it could be, nor is Jim as democratic a leader as he could be—there is ample space for more critical decisions to be tossed into the arena of democratic deliberation. However, it is evident that without Jim modeling the democratic processes as he does, Springboard would not operate as it does. In other words, in this case, a democratic school leader sets the tone for democratic processes and inclusion by not only his or her words, but also especially through his or her actions. And, Jim does the best he can to facilitate these processes within a traditional public school district model. While this does not necessarily forge new ground research-wise, it is worth noting that these actions are valuable within this context.

Navigating tensions in a democratic context is not simple or formulaic, and neither is leading. In this case, Jim often addresses tension and conflict directly, but it is important for leaders to understand that some degree of endurance is required when persisting through the natural democratic tensions of competing interests.
Opportunities Offered

Democratic school leaders have a large impact on the life of their schools, including the unique opportunities that are experienced (Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002). As indicated earlier, research supports the idea that democratic schools can be places of emergent teacher leadership and greater teacher ownership over school processes and structures (Apple & Beane, 2007; Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002). Jim’s leadership approach has certainly allowed for greater teacher leadership, especially with older and more experienced teachers. But it has also created a great feeling of investment in the school, especially between Dan and me, as was evident in both of our journal entries. Jim talks about teacher leadership in terms of what I called power sharing—but more specifically he wants Springboard to operate as a flattened hierarchy. This “flattening” is congruent with how Jim describes himself as “part of the team.” It is also congruent with how some schools are starting to think about equalizing roles within a school or even flip traditional hierarchies completely upside down (Barber, 2014; Education Evolving, 2014). This research suggests that the opportunities that are offered include increased collaboration, creativity, initiative, and enhanced teamwork. Jim’s desire is to see these qualities amplified at Springboard—but will they happen organically without a nudge from Jim, and simply an organizational flattening? The answer remains to be seen. All of these qualities exist to some extent at Springboard, but need further support—likely from teachers—to gain momentum. For example, teacher collaboration is difficult to navigate and foster when not all teachers’ prep periods are in common. That is essentially something that teachers have to decide for themselves: How collaborative will we be, and
when will we create the time and space to do this? If Jim pushes the idea of collaboration too hard, the result may seem contrived and hollow. But, from another perspective, the window for these opportunities is wide open due to Jim’s leadership and Springboard’s structure.

Some democratic schools have the opportunity to operate autonomously (Apple & Beane, 2007). While this is internally true for Springboard and Jim to some degree, it is not as true when Springboard is viewed as a small program within a medium-sized, traditionally operated public school district. True autonomy would mean that Springboard (as a program), as well as Jim, its teachers, and its parents, could create initiatives that would truly be divergent from district norms (for example, the mathematics curriculum), and be willing to stand out as a completely different hierarchy within the district—one that is almost not at all impacted by larger district decisions. While Springboard is its own culture and is distinct from any other school in the district, it does not operate with the autonomy that Apple and Beane (2007) wrote about. As Jim and Dan said in their interviews and journals, Springboard must adhere to the testing schedules of the district at large, as well as state graduation requirements, and many other “top-down” mandates from the district, state, and federal governments.

The research also suggests that democratic schools, combined with effective leadership, can conduct greater community outreach and service learning with the surrounding community (Gerstl-Pepin and Aiken, 2009). While any school can be connected with its community in this way, Dewey’s (1902) vision and his Chicago lab school model gives democratic schools a special mission to use their communities as
learning opportunities (Mayhew & Edwards, 1965). Jim often calls upon the teaching staff to help create more learning opportunities through service in the community, and both Dan and I discussed that this was essentially part of the mission of Springboard upon its founding in 1974. However, more and more, the requirements of externally imposed curriculum, testing, and standards have crept in and occupied spaces that community learning previously occupied, at least according to Jim and Dan. This does not mean that Springboard is divorced from community service and learning in the community. In fact, the high school students cannot graduate from Springboard unless they have completed 120 hours of community service. In addition, the eighth-graders are likely going to be required to complete a smaller, proportional amount of community service, as well. Moreover, the performing arts teacher is extremely connected with the local university and downtown theatres. Her social capital has enabled the performing arts program at Springboard to thrive and become a staple for downtown theatre performances in the winter and spring. This is an example of an opportunity for community learning and connection that has been leveraged. Students involved in the Springboard community are often also given the opportunity for leadership roles.

Democratic schools, through their leaders, can be places of increased student leadership (Wallin, 2003). While this sub-topic was not specifically explored (nor within the bounds of my research questions, necessarily), it is worth mentioning, through personal experience, that many students at Springboard find themselves in positions of leadership. Students are called upon to lead the SAC, facilitate democratic discussions as delegates to the SAC, lead service committees, and participate and facilitate in weekly
community meetings. These student roles have been part of the Springboard tradition for decades, according to Jim and Dan—both of whom have more long-term institutional memory than me. In a more much anecdotal sense, Wallin’s (2003) research seems to be evident at Springboard, because I witness examples of student leadership on a regular basis. This opportunity goes hand in hand with adults being willing to share power not just with each other, but with students also. The adults at Springboard are often willing to take a back seat and allow students to experience the learning of leadership roles on their own, along with some mentorship from adults, at times.

Wallin (2003) also found that democratically oriented schools created the environment for improved relationships not only among students and staff, but also between students. Springboard experiences very positive relationships that are marked by respect and listening—a recent internal survey of students found that nearly 86% of students felt that they were heard and respected by their peers. While it is possible that this is because of Jim’s leadership and the staff’s work, Dan repeatedly pointed out that he felt it was due to Springboard’s size. There are 100 students at Springboard middle school (compared to roughly 800 at the other middle schools) and 160 students at Springboard high school (compared to roughly 2,000 at the main high school). Without a doubt, Springboard is a small school. Dan believes strongly (and I tend to agree) that the small number of students at Springboard allows for more meaningful relationships between teachers and students. There are simply fewer relationships to be built—and when Springboard teachers detect that students are not known, they can create situations that help certain students “come out of their shells” and at least become acquainted
individually with a teacher or peer. Raywid (1998) wrote about small schools and what makes them successful, and stated that “the more human scale of such schools . . . [and a] heightened responsiveness to their constituents and better school–family [relationships]” are among the reasons why they tend to be tighter communities and more successful in their mission (p. 36). Indeed Raywid’s (1998) descriptors fit Springboard quite well, and Dan is likely correct that, even if Springboard did not imagine itself as “democratic,” the simple fact that it is small helps relationships and student leadership opportunities more than anything else. Therefore, it is important to note that democratic schools that are small are often afforded opportunities that their larger counterparts are not—just like all schools similarly sized or situated, regardless of their democratic orientation. This case study simply extends the small-school research to the democratic context.

**Effective Practices**

The effective practices of school leaders in Jim’s position are numerous, and it would help the relevant literature tremendously to expand case studies of democratic school leaders. However, there are several instructive situations for leaders who are considering making their schools more democratic or who are looking to maintain democratic practices within their schools.

As Reitzung and O’Hair (2002) noted, it is important for democratic school leaders to be clear about which decisions they are going to share, and particularly which *critical* decisions they are going to share with the school community. As was already mentioned, Jim and Springboard would be well served in a co-construction of this framework; it would greatly clarify expectations for decision-making.
But Reitzung and O’Hair (2002) went a bit further in concluding that “leadership, decision-making, power, and authority should be shared with all members” (p. 139). Certainly this is an ideal for which to strive, but I would like to expand their conclusion and invite school leaders to consider more than simply “sharing” decisions. Instead of the word “share,” school leaders should think critically about the level of genuine involvement stakeholders have in decision-making.

At times at Springboard, I have some concern that parent and student involvement in decision-making is less genuine. Arnstein’s (1969) theoretical research regarding community involvement addressed some of these concerns that I have, and I think some leaders may want to consider these concerns when they are searching for best practices. Arnstein (1969) created a typology, which she called “a ladder of citizen participation,” that is intended to enrich the conversation around the quality of the power that is shared among marginalized populations who are interested and invested in having their voices elevated and heard (p. 216). As the analogy goes, the higher up the ladder one goes, the more genuine and powerful the citizens’ participation becomes. At the lower end of the ladders are “rungs” like “manipulation” and “therapy,” which are simply ways of involving people by manipulating them into thinking that they are truly involved in decision-making (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). Midway up the ladder are rungs like “informing, consultation, and placation,” which Arnstein referred to as “tokenism,” that serve to involve stakeholders’ voices much more, but leave them with no follow-through from powerful decision makers (p. 217). At the top of the ladder are concepts like “partnership, delegation, and citizen control,” which are referred to as the greatest
degrees of citizen power (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). When Springboard invites broad participation into decision-making, and when Jim operates—quite effectively—as a “processual” leader, he and all leaders similarly situated must also consider power structures and follow-through that are as high on Arnstein’s “ladder” as possible. Students, parents, and teachers in a democratic school setting should expect that they are fully participating in a genuine manner, and not simply being given token participation or even being manipulated in their participation. While Jim does not bear full responsibility for this, and I do not see it occur in a purposeful fashion, I am concerned that students actually experience situations—when appropriate—that have as much power as possible.

If we are educating students on leading and participating in a democratic life, then tokenism or manipulation prepares them for a democratic life that is disingenuous and, in turn, actually undermines their confidence in sharing power and trusting organizations they enter into or in which they participate. Leaders in democratic schools must consider this and think about best practices as ones that promote partnership, delegation of power, and teacher, parent, and student control.

Encouraging this truer partnership may actually serve to remedy the problem that Springboard and other democratic schools occasionally experience, which came up in the interviews and which I called “democratic fatigue,” mostly from staying true to the democratic process. Democratic fatigue occurs when participants desire a quick decision and the process of listening and discerning is seen as an untimely obstacle. Teachers will occasionally approach Jim and request that he “just make a decision,” which seems to be a request born of frustration and impatience, and perhaps a difficulty recognizing that
there are other stakeholders around the school community. While it is an imperfect remedy, inviting the school to operate as high as possible on Arnstein’s (1969) ladder (coupled with Jim’s effective narration of the democratic process) may encourage teachers to see themselves as partners in decision-making with students, parents, and other stakeholders.

Of course, this invites the question that most school leaders in this setting might ask: How do I hire people who can effectively partner in a democratic manner? Jim’s practice has been to invite teachers to be autonomous artists who are independently driven. His approach reflects Yvon Chouinard’s (2005) approach to leadership philosophy:

> We don’t hire the kind of people you can order around, like the foot soldiers in an army who charge from their foxholes without question . . . we don’t want drones who will simply follow directions. We want the kind of employee who will question the wisdom of something they regard as a bad decision. We want people who, once they buy into a decision and believe in what they’re doing, will work like demons to produce something of the highest possible quality. How you get these highly individualistic people to align and work for a common cause is the art of management at Patagonia. (p. 177)

Chouinard’s dilemma is Jim’s dilemma, and possibly many school leaders’ dilemmas inside and outside of democratic contexts. In this case, the democratic setting can serve to educate new teachers so that they can begin to see the mission of the school and learn a democratic way of being, hopefully while maintaining their independence. The task for Jim and other school leaders is to effectively search for people who believe in the democratic process, so that despite their independence and autonomy, they will still work to advance the school’s mission in their own way. This is certainly a complicated needle for leaders to thread, but if practiced, it seems to create an inviting and inspiring
community in which to participate. Similar to Chouinard, Jim speaks from his heart when he talks about teachers being independent-minded artists, which is why the vast majority of his staff admires him and enjoys having him as their leader. But there is room for Jim to continue articulating (to his staff, and others) what brought him to a school like Springboard. And, there is ample room to add to the search process questions that invite applicants to explicate their beliefs about democratic schools.

It remains incumbent upon democratic school leaders to search for and talk about why they do what they do (Rusch, 1998). Indeed, for leaders in general, it is important to answer the following questions for themselves as well as for their followers: Who am I? Who are we? Where are we going? (Lytle, 2010; Tichy & Cohen, 1997). Jim does well at talking about the latter two questions, but tends to shy away from the first question. For democratic school leaders in particular—many of whom may be perceived to be on a mission—articulating their answers to all three questions is helpful for teachers and parents to hear where leaders’ beliefs originate.

**Revisiting My Conceptual Framework**

Using Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2, I introduced a possible framework for representing how the work of leadership exists within Springboard. With the benefit of analyzing the data (Chapter 4) and turning back to the literature (Chapter 5), it is worth revisiting that conceptual framework to consider the extent to which these questions align with the reality at Springboard. Figure 5.1 below takes the same leadership themes and democratic school characteristics and reimagines *solid* lines (and one dashed line) that describe Jim’s leadership at Springboard, specifically.
The first aspect that is evident is the number of leadership qualities Jim exhibits when it comes to the democratic school characteristics of voice in decision-making and community. Jim exhibits these leadership actions in overt ways, and in subtler and less evident ways. The questions that were anticipated for these connections are reconsidered below, as is the relative absence of leadership when it comes to the characteristic of curriculum. The explanations and revisiting of the questions in Chapter 2 are organized by the three democratic characteristics: Curriculum, Community, and Voice.

Figure 5.1: Revisiting The Conceptual Map With Jim And Springboard

Curriculum

A notable, observable difference between the two maps is that the latter one (Figure 5.1 above) does not have any solid lines connecting leadership to curriculum. This is purposeful, and perhaps expected after one begins to understand just how decentralized
the curriculum is at Springboard. Although curriculum is a key component to what makes
Springboard democratic, that aspect is not actively led by Jim. Instead, it is led by the
teachers and the students, and is therefore led by relationships. The relationships are
fostered and encouraged by Jim, but not directly within his control—hence the dashed
line to indicate that relationships partly explain how leadership affects curriculum at
Springboard. This is understandable, given Jim’s favorite aphorism about Springboard:
“We are a community first, and a school second.” When one combines that statement
with Jim’s lack of interest in instructional leadership (and teachers’ desires to develop
students’ curricular interests), it makes sense that Springboard has decentralized
leadership when it comes to curriculum. The interesting question is whether other
similarly situated democratic schools (or at least schools within the larger democratic
family) share this common trait of decentralized leadership when it comes to curriculum.

Community
Keeping with Jim’s aphorism about community and school, this statement exemplifies
part of his vision for the Springboard community. This means that Jim believes it is
important to address community issues first and academic issues second. It functions as
his vision, whether he knows it or not. At parent meetings, I have repeated this phrase to
describe “who we are.” I have heard other teachers, including Dan, repeat it in a similar
effort—to answer the question “What kind of school are you?” Jim has set this aphorism
as part of the vision for Springboard in a subtle way, but an effective way. As a vision,
though, it lacks specificity because it does not explain what community means to
Springboard, nor does it explain what “school” means. It is, however, effective in
focusing teachers, students, and parents’ focus on community concerns first, as opposed to academic concerns.

In imagining the original conceptual map, I asked whether the community shapes the leader, and how much Jim drives an ongoing conversation about democracy. The revisited conceptual map still connects the leadership quality of relationships and community, but answers in a different way than I anticipated. As mentioned earlier, Jim is shaped by Springboard—perhaps in ways he did not expect as an “accidental” democratic leader. But in a different way than anticipated, Jim leads the school to experience relationships that challenge people. For example, Jim expects to learn from his colleagues who challenge him on his shortcomings. He also expects, through the 360-degree feedback process, for staff to challenge one another through relationships of trust. He encourages every student to know every other student’s name; this is practiced regularly when he “quizzes” students on some basic facts about their peers. This goes hand in hand with his vision that Springboard is a community first, and a school second.

Throughout this research, however, it is evident that the community is in need of leadership that challenges and teaches the community about the meaning of democracy. This was an initial question I pondered when I imagined the first conceptual map, but it remains not only a question for me, but appears to be a need for the community. While this may not fit perfectly within the leadership theme of relationships, it does seem to fit well within the democratic school characteristic of community because it fundamentally asks the community to learn how to define itself.
Connecting decision-making and community originally prompted me to ask whether it is problematic for Jim to lead decisions in the community due to his disproportionate authority role in the school. This continues to be a concern, but what I learned is that any adult (myself included) is subject to this risk. That risk is that all adults have disproportionate power at Springboard, and any proposed decision for which we advocate will appear more authoritative than a student-proposed decision. This is evident in the design of Springboard, but perhaps not that of all schools in the democratic family (like Summerhill, for example). I learned that my wondering about the original concept map also applied to me—and therefore applies to Jim, as well. To me, this means that I need to be very cautious of advocating or proposing certain community decisions in front of students because the power structure will not be evenly balanced. Ideally, my role (and perhaps Jim’s) should be to empower students to independently tackle difficult community decisions without adult interference.

Some of these data also went a bit beyond the literature when I reconsidered the connection between decision-making and community. I learned that leaders in this context do need to be processual, as Furman & Starratt (2002) pointed out, but I also learned that Jim practices this processual democratic leadership by being the “encourager-in-chief” when it comes to difficult community decisions. When I experience being on the “losing” side of a decision, or when the community of teachers (or parents) makes a decision fraught with tension, Jim narrates the importance of the decision and empathizes with those who are adversely affected by the outcome. In this
way, he goes beyond being simply processual and also takes on the role of being an encourager of participants in an occasionally frustrating democratic process.

**Voice in Decision-Making**

Originally, I asked if Jim possessed too much power in his position as director of Springboard. I felt that it was possible that Jim did possess too much power, but after examining all of the different bodies that have a voice in the decision-making process at Springboard (Figure 4.3), I realized my concern is not supported by the facts. While Jim holds a veto over the SAC, there are few other structures or practices that allow him to unilaterally make decisions. Moreover, his repeated practice that both Dan and I independently observed of asking for student input on most decisions is part of how he exercises his power and authority. This is why I have connected power and authority to voice in decision-making in Figure 5.1. But I have also connected vision and voice in decision-making because I believe that Jim’s repeated requests to hear students’ voice operates—in a subtle way—as his vision. While he might not affirmatively state it as his vision, he believes that if schools do not have students participate in decision-making, then a key constituency is lost.

Jim described his style of leadership as servant leadership, and following my first conceptual map, I raised several questions about how he goes about serving the Springboard community as its leader. Jim is correct that he does serve the teachers, students, and parents—but it may be possible that he over-serves at times. This means that he may have created so many situations where he has to be the one to serve (and he alone) that he has not effectively delegated his authority out to his staff enough. As such,
he has created a high demand on his service. All school leaders are busy, but Jim could likely stand to serve less and create more servant leaders around him. This connects to the notion of voice in decision-making because by creating servants around him, he could actually multiply the voices that are participating in community decisions.

**Conclusion and Reflections**

When I revisited my motivation for conducting this research, I reflected on the communities in which schools like Springboard exist. It occurs to me that when I lived and taught in relatively underserved areas (rural or urban) there were very few, if any, schools modeled like Springboard. For example, in the communities in which Teach for America exists, most school models in which I participated or visited were focused on academic achievement, strong behavioral management, and little day-to-day (or long-term) staff investment. This was virtually the same for the residential school that was managed on a corporate model in a relatively rural area. When I moved to the “college town” in which Springboard is located, I wondered if more affluent communities tend to have more progressive schooling models like Springboard. While democratic school models (as defined in this research) are not ubiquitous in the United States, my estimation is that the communities in which they do exist are often relatively affluent. This led me to an unproven and potentially problematic anecdotal reflection based on experience. My belief is that the communities that need democratic school models the most are often the communities that have the fewest of them. And conversely, the communities in which they are present are often the ones that already experience the advantages and opportunities of democracy. As I mentioned at the outset, several of the underserved
communities in which I taught had no local voice to control their school district. If local voice is not honored, then school models based on teacher or student voice are less likely. On the other hand, it is hopeful to consider that schools like Springboard can pop up anywhere. And, existing schools can create more opportunities for democratic practices—therefore creating schools that are agents of change in the communities most in need of transformational change. It is also important for me to mention that part of my journey in teaching has been to find a school in which my personal conception of schooling matches that of the school. Therefore, some of the perspective in this reflection is merely articulating the journey of one teacher searching for his place to belong.

My personal search for belonging was touched on earlier in Chapter 2, when I discussed researcher identity. In that same chapter, I mentioned that I expected this research to provide me with a deeper understanding of the perspectives of the participants in a democratic school like Springboard. I learned that most of the staff at Springboard are agreeable with the school being called democratic, but that adjective was not what attracted them. Most of the staff are “accidental” democratic educators, just as Jim is an accidental democratic school principal. Dan is essentially the only staff teacher (in addition to me) who purposely chose Springboard because he believed he belonged there. My understanding of others’ conceptions has somewhat deepened because I have learned that most of them are on a journey of understanding what democracy means in a small school setting. This learning process is on display in the weekly staff meetings, and often I am the one who is referred to as “resident expert” simply because I am researching and writing about the school. At times I feel awkward about this because I want their learning
to be their own journey—not necessarily one that I facilitate and instruct them through. I am happy to play that role, but it was not expected when I started at Springboard over three years ago.

Some of the aspects of this dissertation brought me full circle in thinking about democratic schools, in general. When I first started imagining this research, a member of my committee encouraged me to conduct some “informational interviewing” at nearby schools that belong in the democratic family. The purpose of these visits was to hone my research questions and develop my interests more specifically. One of my first visits was to a local city “free” school (ostensibly modeled after Summerhill and Sudbury). A conversation with the schools’ assistant director remained in my mind throughout the writing process and during my time (thus far) at Springboard. She asked me about the democratic school to which I was headed (Springboard) and I told her it was operated by the local public school system. Upon hearing that it was a publicly supported program she insisted that it was not truly a democratic school. I was initially taken aback—what could she mean? Did she simply mean that it was not a “free” school like hers? Did she mean there is a lack of freedom that the label of “democratic school” is given when placed inside of a publicly operated school district? If so, Jim said this, too, essentially echoing her statement. As I have gone through this research, I can agree somewhat and disagree as well with this belief. I believe that public school districts function only as well as they practice democracy. And, socio-economic status factors greatly into citizens’ ability to participate in a democracy. So, if her comment was meant to imply that democratic schools should exist in greater numbers in socio-economically disadvantaged
areas, then I wholeheartedly agree. But if she meant that democratic models are restrained by public districts, I would tend to disagree, mostly because I see a democratic model work quite effectively each day in a public district context. Although my public district is mostly disconnected from the work at Springboard and is relatively uneducated on what a democratic model looks like, it (the district) respects the will of the local electorate by keeping a school like Springboard open for over 40 years. In short, democracy is working in a macro-sense and a micro-sense: the district remains committed to its small democratic school because the citizens demand it, and the small democratic school conducts the daily work of managing student voice, community, and curriculum, which are in line with its principles.

Throughout this research, I continually reflected on the idea that qualitative research transforms the (seemingly) simple into something more complex. When I entered this research as a participant observer, I expected to see certain results as I collected data on the research questions. For example, I expected that my conversations with Jim and the teachers and recordings of staff meetings would lead me to believe that Jim should be leading more democratically more frequently. In essence, I had my doubts that he was being as democratic as necessary within a school model that seemingly demanded it. Surprisingly, the data seemed to indicate that Jim is perhaps leading too democratically at times—meaning, he allows for long periods of deliberation that can lead to the democratic fatigue I mentioned earlier. Moreover, the structures of decision-making at Springboard are highly layered (Figure 4.3) and already allow for a great degree of voice from teachers, parents, and students alike. It is true that Jim has some
final decision-making power, but I expected those situations to be more numerous than they actually are. The problem that Jim faces (and perhaps other leaders in similar schools) is that there is a perception that democracy means that there is no central, singular decision-maker at the school. While some democratic school models may operate this way, it is not necessary that this is absolutely the case. This was my belief when the research started, but it is not my belief now. How democratic a school leader acts highly depends on the model of the school he or she is leading. In a “free” school model, perhaps there are fewer instances of singular decision-making. Certainly, in a Friends School model, this would be the case. But in progressive schools or other democratic models like Springboard, I think it is entirely appropriate for the leader to save some singular decision-making.

Most research on democratic school leadership consists of a small cohort of principals or is entirely theoretical work (Furman & Starrat, 2002; Reitzung & O’Hair, 2002; Rusch, 1998). This work adds to this body of research by creating a smaller case study of a single democratic school leader in a uniquely positioned school within a distinct public school community. This research borrows from some ubiquitous work on democratic schools, but also uses research to define these schools in a more unique manner, which I felt was more applicable to the study site (Apple & Beane, 2007; Dewey, 1902; 1916; Jones & Brader-Araje, 1999; Mayhew & Edwards, 1965) While the findings here are not necessarily generalizable, they are instructive for practitioners in similarly situated democratic schools today and in the future.
Leaders in these schools need to know that they will be caught in the push versus pull of needing to lead at some times and step back at others. Knowing when to make these leadership moves depends on the school’s mission and leader’s vision with respect to the definition of democracy and notions of democratic leadership. It is also important for leaders in these schools to have a sense of why they are there; in almost any leadership context, the leader should be able to answer the question, “Who am I?” in relation to the school’s mission. In this case study, Jim may have inadvertently landed in a school leadership position that fits him extremely well—one that is shaping his conception of leadership as he leads. But all leaders must be learners, and Jim likely has some learning to do regarding how to teach as he leads.

Democratic schools need a common community definition of their mission and meaning of democracy, despite the difficulty of that conversation. Reitzung and O’Hair (2002) noted this struggle in studying numerous democratic schools, and the same difficulties arose in this small case study. With a common community definition, schools that claim to operate democratically can then use that as a touchstone for addressing tensions like termination, or seemingly non-democratic leadership moves. But as many authors have noted, deciding on what the school community means when it says “democracy” is a conversation fraught with difficulties (Furman & Starratt, 2002). However, the process of problematizing this definition is valuable and educational for all involved in the life of the school.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


