

# Leadership for Adult and Continuing Education

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**Abstract:** *This paper reviews findings from a study of the perceptions of adult educators of leadership for the field of adult and continuing education. Findings are ultimately organized according to the contexts and dimensions of leadership.*

## Theoretical Framework and Purpose

Adult and continuing education needs to be concerned with leadership as understood from the perspective of adult and continuing educators. Donaldson (1992) asserts the adult education literature draws heavily from the management literature base and thus fails to look at the "particular realities of continuing education practice. . . [thus] we are guided as much or more by generic management and leadership concepts as by those that are particular to our practice" (p. 18). Rose (1992) also suggests that although we can learn from and build on models of leadership from other fields, this approach is insufficient for understanding issues peculiar to adult education, such as continuing marginality and lack of governmental support.

### *Studies in Leadership*

For over 50 years organizational theorists, and in recent decades social scientists, have prescribed numerous approaches to understanding organizations and to developing and providing organizational leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Attempts have included trait theory, behavioral theory, contingency, transactional, transformational, and cultural theory (Apps, 1994; Huber, 1998; Rose, 1992). Currently, perspectives on leadership are being broadened incrementally by studies that focus on women and minorities in leadership positions (Rose, 1992). Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum (1989) place leadership models and theories into six categories. Trait theories seek to identify personal characteristics of effective leaders. Power and influence theories include a social power approach that considers how leaders influence followers, as well as a social exchange approach (including transactional and transformational leadership) that considers "the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers through which leaders are themselves influenced as they try to influence others" (p.

8). Behavioral theories focus on what leaders actually do, while contingency theories emphasize situational factors and suggest that effective leadership depends upon influences of the external environment and the task at hand. Cultural and symbolic theories have arisen from a shift in perspective that "organizational structures and processes are invented, not discovered" (p. 21). Thus, how leaders interpret events and processes becomes important, particularly in terms of how they shape meaning and culture within their organizations. Finally, cognitive theories build on this concept of leadership as a social construct; leadership exists as a result of the expectations of followers and effectiveness is related "more to perceptions of followers of the degree to which the leader appears to do leaderlike things" (p. 24). These latter categories are compatible with the view expressed by Duke (1998) of a normative perspective of organizational leadership that "is a way of making sense of leadership that regards leadership as a function, in part, of organization members' beliefs, expectations, and values" (p. 184).

Emerging perspectives focus on the need to reconceptualize leadership in various ways: as compatible with our "emerging age" of disconcerting and discontinuous change (Apps, 1994); as a socially bound, relational construct (Donaldson, 1998; Donaldson, personal communication, February 22, 2000); and as a function of organizations and their members (Duke, 1998). There remains a focus on moral and ethical leadership, grounded in socially responsible beliefs and values. "What is important for the emerging age is that leaders have a foundation, an examined core of beliefs and values, that guides them during times of paradox, ambiguity, and chaotic change" (Apps, 1994, p. 36).

### *Leadership in Adult Education*

In his review of administration literature in adult

education from 1936-1989, Courtney (1990) found leadership as the administrative function that appeared most often (62%) throughout all the references analyzed, noting, unsurprisingly, leadership “is often referred to as the most critical administrative function” (p. 67). Leadership has been a concern for adult educators, particularly from the post WWII era (Rose, 1992). Its study, however, is limited and has perhaps been complicated as a result of our tendency to view leadership broadly. Historically the literature has referred to all adult educators as leaders; for example, Beal and Brody (1941) who viewed “persons directly engaged in some form of communication--teachers, writers, readers’ advisers, docents--who, for want of a better term, we call ‘leaders’” (p. 101). Similarly, Overstreet and Overstreet (1941) conceive of leaders as adult education practitioners, the teachers, program coordinators, and community developers who are doing the work of adult education. In addition, a resistance to leadership itself can be sensed in adult education, perhaps as a result of sensitivities to potentially hierarchical and oppressive practices and democratic traditions.

Thus, leadership in adult education is an ambiguous concept. In contrast to adult education’s historically broad conceptualization, Rose (1992) more recently concludes narrow definitions from other fields have limited our research on leadership and that in reality, leadership is still constrained by calls for greater productivity and effectiveness. “We need to question more closely the assumption that this model is helpful in developing a vision of adult and continuing education for the twenty-first century” (p. 93). Edelson (1992) further maintains “we need to constantly assess the ways in which we lead so that the field of adult education continues to fulfill its mandate of providing opportunity and choice in the decades ahead” (p. 14). Adult educators even debate the appropriate source of leadership for the field, from within it or from outside (Griffith, 1992; Jarvis, 1992). Currently, the need for examining the concept anew is apparent. Apps (1994) has made the most significant contributions to reconceptualizing adult education leadership: a “new perspective on adult education leadership is shifting from a mechanistic attitude marked by objectivity, control predictability, competition, efficiency, and single views of knowledge to an attitude that values context, shared power, multiple relationships, and varied knowledge sources in which predictability is

often impossible” (p. 18).

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to examine leadership within and for adult education through the eyes of adult educators themselves. The goal is to contribute to the literature a perspective that speaks specifically to leadership for adult education. Ultimately, by capturing the perspectives and understandings of adult educators about leaders and leadership for adult education, the potential is increased for their critical re-examination in light of current sensitivities to contextual influences, and social foundations of the field. Although the intent is to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, study findings certainly echo adult educators’ perceptions of what leadership needs to be.

### **Research Design**

This study is a qualitative inquiry into the phenomenon of leadership for adult education. This approach allowed an emergent research design, enabling the researchers to build on, and within, each proposed phase of the study. Three broad research questions guide this study: (1) How do adult educators perceive leaders and leadership in their field? (2) What role does/can leadership play in the continuation and growth of adult education? (3) How should individuals be prepared who wish to assume leadership roles or responsibilities for adult education?

The study has been divided into two phases: (a) survey distribution to a purposeful sample of leaders in adult education, and (b) in-depth interviews with key informants from the adult education field. This second phase of the study is continuing; additional interviews are planned. Survey respondents were formal leaders in three groups drawn from two international professional associations, The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), the Commission of Professors of Adult Education of AAACE, and the Learning Resources Network (LERN). Survey responses yielded insights into the first and third research questions. Response rates were 71%, 80%, and 33% for each group respectively. After the narrative responses for each question were analyzed, the resulting data chunks were compared across respondent groups. Resulting data clusters and categories were then compared and collapsed into 11 themes that cut across all groups and questions. Each researcher

followed this process independently at first. They then compared interpretations which served to check the analysis process and facilitated the discovery of themes and surprises.

Interviews are providing limited additional data addressing the second research question as well as expanding on the other two. The initial key informants were chosen because of their breadth of perspective on the field based on their years of experience and on the contexts in which they currently work or have worked. Two additional interviewees were suggested by key informants in response to a request by the researchers. Interview questions focused on: (a) conceptualizations of leadership for the field, and (b) leadership development. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Resulting data chunks were compared and placed into clusters that were then collapsed into categories; these categories indicated three themes. Finally, two frames were identified from a review of both survey and interview responses—dimensions of leadership and contexts of leadership—that served as the basis for integrating findings in the ongoing analysis of data.

### **Findings, Conclusions, and Discussion**

From survey responses the researchers identified and organized themes according to four frames: types of leadership, characteristics of leaders, actions of leaders, and beliefs and values of leaders. *Types of Leadership* included: (a) informal/formal, (b) organizational, (c) association, and (d) intellectual. *Characteristics of Leaders* encompassed four themes: (a) collaborative and caring with effective human relations abilities, (b) energetic and committed, (c) ethical and consistent, and (d) intellectually active and capable. Six themes were considered to be *Actions of Leaders*: (a) provide visibility for the field; (b) understand the “big picture”, shape and communicate vision; (c) engage in advocacy and social action based on democratic ideals; (d) serve as teachers, mentors, facilitators, and role models; (e) perform managerial functions skillfully; and (f) communicate effectively. Finally, *Beliefs and Characteristics of Leaders* held a diversity of responses. Only one theme was identified: Leaders are perceived to hold strong, positive beliefs on the necessity and benefits of lifelong learning. Five conclusions were derived from these findings: (a) leadership in adult education is both visible and hidden; (b) intellectual ability, scholarly production

and teaching/mentoring are key elements of leadership in adult education, (c) adult education leaders provide visibility and advocacy for the field; (d) patterns of beliefs and values of leaders in adult education are unclear; and (e) adult educators confirm characteristics and behaviors of leaders as described in the literature. There seems to be, however, a tendency for adult educators to place a greater emphasis on managerial activities for their leaders than commonly cited in organizational theory.

Interview data yielded greater insight into adult educators’ perceptions of: (a) what leadership is for the field of adult education, (b) qualities /attributes of leaders, and (c) leadership development. The second research question has not, in the opinion of the researchers, been adequately addressed. First, conceptualizations of leadership again suggested similar types of leadership found in survey responses, although purpose became an increasingly more useful term: intellectual/scholarly, organizational, association, practitioner, and community. Included here as well was the perspective of leadership as a social construct. Second, attributes/qualities of leaders overlapped survey responses. Leaders are perceived as needing to be skilled, critically reflective, visionary, ethical, advocates of the field, and able to initiate and support movement. Third, leadership development assumed “teachable things” yet also recognized intangible qualities, “that difficult-to-describe ‘something extra’” (Apps, 1994, p. 57). Development was clearly related to purposes and qualities of leaders. Critical reflection, mentoring, getting “back to the heart and soul of people,” and personal transformation were cited. Graduate programs—configured differently according to different perspectives on academic programs—were consistently considered as bearing responsibility. Three conclusions were derived from these findings: (a) leaders are perceived in a diversity of contexts and serving varied purposes; (b) adult educators perceive leaders to possess multiple attributes, not all of which may equally cross all purposes; and (c) components of and responsibility for leadership development are shaped by the broad purposes and personal qualities ascribed to leadership.

Two frames were identified from survey and interview findings that suggest a preliminary organizational approach for continued examinations of leadership: (a) contexts of leadership, and (b) d-

mensions of leadership. *Contexts of leadership* attempts to capture five different purposes of leadership. Those viewed as intellectual leaders are perceived to “be asking hard questions and looking at things others don’t.” They are constantly challenging existing ideas--their own and others’--and “contributing to the intellectual development of the field” through constructing and disseminating knowledge. Intellectual activity and ability were also noted as critical facets of practitioner leadership. Organizational leadership refers to formal administrative positions; the concept becomes more complex when understood as “socially constructed and conferred” by and among leaders and organizational members (Duke, 1998, p. 182). Association leaders are formal positions within professional associations of the field who, historically, “have taken strong positions [and] fought vigorously for things,” and who should be “pushing us in new directions.” Practitioner leadership embodies the perspective that everyone is a leader; recognition is given to “hidden” and informal leaders who are actually doing the work of adult education, as well as to those individuals providing leadership within their own specific contexts. The commonality here is the relative lack of visibility; adult educators feel the degree of visibility, although noteworthy, has no bearing on whether an individual is or is not considered a leader. Community leadership switches the perspective from adult educators as leaders of other adult educators, to “adult educators as leaders in their social context.” In this sense, adult educators serve as “resource persons to those communities in which [they] are interacting.” This sets leadership and its social responsibilities in a much broader context, not unlike what Knox (1993) suggests. Rose (1992) asserts “only lately, in the writing on women and minorities, have researchers returned to questions about social change as the key aspect of leadership, rather than organizational reform” (pp. 92-93). An emerging perspective is of leadership as a social construct, encompassing views on leadership as interactive (Apps, 1994), and as “socially bound and relational” (Donaldson, personal communication, February 22, 2000). From this perspective, relationships of power and the representation of interests come into focus. Issues of gender and ethnicity, for example, are recognized as shaping why some individuals are labeled as leaders and why others are overlooked. In addition, leadership from a normative perspective is seen as deter-

mined by organizational needs and expectations of organizational members (Duke, 1998). Interestingly, into this discussion can also be placed the perspective that those whom we regard as leaders has “to do with the collective consciousness of the field.”

Intertwined within contexts of leadership are *dimensions of leadership*. Each may vary in degree dependent upon the contexts and purposes of leaders. Based on our findings, leaders are, however, consistently called upon to be: skilled, ethical, reflective, active advocates of the field, and able to define, inspire and support movement. Leadership skills include those associated with management such as planning and organizational skills, effective communication and human relations skills. Included here as well are teaching, mentoring, facilitation and role modeling. Ethical leadership mandates that leaders be aware of purposes and consequences, and grounded in knowledge of their own beliefs and values. The reflection dimension holds both a critically reflective perspective that asks, for example, “why something is being done, not just the best way of doing it,” as well as an interest in contemplative, introspective leadership. The dimension of active advocacy speaks to leaders being willing to be visible, to stand firm, and to remind us in public policy, organizational structure, and interpersonal relationships how “incredibly integral” learning is to being an adult, “to realizing our humanity both individually and collectively.” Interviewees also noted the need for leaders who have “an appreciation of where we have been and where we are. . . [of] the breadth of who we are.” The fifth and final dimension suggests leaders have the ability to provide movement, to move people toward visionary goals. Consistently, leaders were seen as individuals who: (a) challenged ideas and assumptions, (b) understood the “larger picture,” (c) were visionary, (d) were passionate, and (e) provided direction. For example, leadership was seen as “the ability to visualize a variety of possible futures, the ability to marshal resources to achieve those goals, the absolute political cunning it takes to make it happen, but [with] really deep-seated ethical guidelines.” Or, similarly, “leaders need to be spark plugs, they need to really mobilize energy, enthusiasm and interest, and curiosity, and desire. . . . And they need to be able to get out of the way. And they need to know themselves well enough to be able to do that.”

### Implications for Research and Practice

These conclusions suggest at least two directions for developing leadership theory for adult education. First, we can likely build on the understanding that adult educators have diverse perspectives of leadership, although a fairly consistent view is that leadership is pervasive and not limited to formal designation or high visibility. As one interviewee expressed it, "any framework must be broad and deep enough to account for all the different forms of leadership that go on in the field." Secondly, we must pursue an examination of leadership as a contextually bound, social construct. We would agree with Duke (1998), for example, who maintains that additional attention and research needs to be paid to the beliefs and values of those subject to leadership, rather than continuing to focus on the beliefs and actions of leaders themselves. "Leadership cannot be detached from those who perceive and are subject to it" (p. 193). In addition, at least two concerns should guide an examination of leadership development: (a) the relationship of personal dimensions of leadership to broad purposes and contexts of leadership, and (b) the responsible development of ethical and critically reflective leaders. These directions suggest the potential for discovering the role of leadership in the development, growth, or perhaps transformation of the field, thus yielding a more complete response to our second research question. A critical look at leadership requires questioning the purposes of leadership, to ask as one interviewee did, "How have we been leaders to anyone other than ourselves?" Additional examination should focus not only on what lenses have shaped how we have come to perceive past and present leadership, but also on our role in shaping expectations of leadership for, in Apps' (1994) words, "the emerging age."

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