

# Chapter 10

## New Mindsets: The Promise of Employing Adult Learning and Development for Educational Leaders' Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*The authors situate this chapter within the context of contemporary educational leadership where leaders face technical and adaptive challenges that are increasing in complexity and quantity. In many cases, these are challenges for which they could not have been prepared (e.g., new accountability measures). While adult learning and adult developmental theories have been employed widely to support adults' learning and development in other sectors, they are only recently being employed to inform the practice and preparation of school leaders. Therefore, the authors describe seminal theories of adult learning and development as a promising foundation to improve curriculum and learning spaces for aspiring and practicing leaders. These theoretical lenses are helpful for curriculum design and content in Pre-K-20 learning centers and also higher education. Put simply, research establishes that employing these will more fully equip leaders to support other adults' learning and development in their communities in order to meet complex educational challenges.*

### INTRODUCTION

To frame and emphasize the urgency of the need to prepare school leaders and teacher-leaders better both on-the-ground and in leadership preparation programs, in this chapter we first offer a glimpse of the complexity of leading in today's high stakes

and increasing accountability atmosphere. While we are focusing on the leaders—principals and headmasters or headmistresses—here in this chapter, we like others, know that leaders' efforts have essential implications for teachers and their growth in schools.

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Contemporary leaders encounter *both* technical and adaptive challenges every day in their work. Compounding this is the reality that these challenges are mounting in complexity and quantity. In many cases these are challenges for which they could not have been prepared (e.g., new teacher evaluation systems and accountability measures, Common Core Curriculum and standards, and the intractable problems associated with preventing dropouts). Some of these kinds of challenges cannot be predicted and there is no formal preparation for them (Barber, 2006; Byrne-Jiménez & Orr, 2007; Peterson, 2002). In addition, scholars and practitioners alike, point to the pressure *leaders feel* from new testing-and-sanctions policies (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). In essence, leaders need support in order to learn how to tackle such challenges—whether technical or adaptive (Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, Hoffman, & Barbaro, 2013; Maslin-Ostrowski, & Drago-Severson, 2013; Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

Leadership scholar Ronald Heifetz (1994) from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government defines “adaptive challenges” (p. 8) as the kinds of problems that are difficult to identify, and for which there are no known solutions. Importantly, these require not only the capacity to learn in-the-midst of managing them, but also necessitate leaders have the developmental (internal) capacity to handle the complexity and ambiguity inherent in such challenges (Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Wagner et al., 2006; Wagner, 2007). In contrast, *technical* challenges are problems that are identifiable and for which solutions exist even if one needs to seek outside expertise in order to resolve them (Heifetz, 1994). Developing a deeper understanding of how to help leaders who must address these challenges in the *practice of school leadership* and those who work to prepare them (i.e., education leadership faculty) has important policy implications and practical lessons for curriculum and learning in educational leadership preparation programs as well as in designing professional learning experiences on-the-job (Learning Forward, 2011).

Around the world, aspiring and practicing Pre-K—20 educational leaders as well as education leadership faculty would benefit from understanding how adult learning and developmental theories can be utilized to strengthen pedagogy and andragogy, including curriculum and the design of learning environments. This chapter and our description of different theoretical frameworks can also be beneficial in considering progressive and effective teaching techniques (Drago-Severson, 2012; Drago-Severson et al., 2013; Kegan et al., 2001). In case helpful, pedagogy is a term historically employed to refer to practices aimed at helping children learn. Whereas, andragogy, a term coined by Malcolm Knowles (1980), is “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). Although the primary purpose of Pre-K-20 education is pedagogy, that is teaching and learning with young students, our focus in this chapter is andragogy—the adults who are responsible for teaching children and youth.

While adult learning and adult developmental theories have been employed widely to support adults’ learning and development in other sectors (e.g., business, adult education, and community programs), they are only recently being employed to inform the practice and preparation of school leaders. Therefore, in this chapter we describe seminal theories of adult learning and development and their central principles as a promising foundation for considering how to improve curriculum and learning spaces for aspiring and practicing leaders. These theoretical lenses are not only helpful for curriculum design and content in Pre-K-20 learning centers but also in the higher education arena. Put simply, research clearly establishes that doing so will more fully equip leaders to support other adults’ learning and development in their communities in order to meet complex educational challenges.

Scholars and practitioners alike stress the urgency of helping leaders learn how to support their own and other adults’ learning and growth by attending to the developmental and social-emotional

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