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Toward Democratic Education:

The Importance of Culturally Responsive Leadership in 21st Century Schools

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The author defines culturally responsive leadership as “essentially a process” by which communities create systems that support democratic education. The author explores relevant education scholarship and literary texts to better define “democratic freedom,” and the essay examines issues related to democratic education and the role of educators and community members in creating democratic schools. The author argues that humanistic, child-centered, democratic schools are not only essential for the development of the sense of self that enables one to experience true freedom, but democratic schools are also necessary to the goal of changing the conditions that create inequities. Davis outlines barriers to the development of culturally responsive leadership. These include education administration priorities; faculty-driven not student-driven curricula in departments of education; K-12 curricula which fail to see the students themselves as important educational resources and which fail to respond to and support student culture; and political agendas surrounding the creation and flow of curriculum and knowledge.

When we talk about culturally responsive leadership, we are really acknowledging the need for educational leaders to value unconditionally the students they serve. This stems from a fundamental belief in the idea that students bring a wealth of prior knowledge about their world from which educators can create and support meaningful educational experiences. Further, if we are to begin to create school systems that can enrich the lives of poor and minority children, we must develop a philosophy of leadership that is mindful of the importance and significance of culture. Indeed, the goal of culturally responsive leadership is to devise mechanisms and environments for others to experience the freedom to become their best selves. It makes sense, then, that if our purpose is to ignite this kind of freedom, then only

culturally responsive leaders, who are in tune with the specific needs of their students, can best provide them with the tools necessary for their success. In looking even more fundamentally at the underlying goal of culturally responsive leadership, we see that it essentially is a *process* by which we can create systems that support democratic education. The immediate task for educators, therefore, is to examine the many issues related to democratic education and freedom and thus illuminate the importance of fostering culturally responsive leadership.

The Nature of Democratic Education

In first defining education, Lawrence Cremin states that it is the “deliberate, systemic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities, as well as any learning that results from the effort direct or indirect, intended or unintended (xiii). N. Ray Hiner goes a step further and provides a definition of education that is more comprehensive in nature and key to our understanding and acceptance of responsive leadership. He states that education is “the entire process by which human beings develop a sense of self and formulate their identities; learn the ways of society so that they may function within it; and define and transmit their culture from one generation to the next. He further states that “persons or groups who seek to reproduce their class or culture depend ultimately on the process of education to accomplish their goal...culture cannot transmit itself.” Hiner’s definition recognizes the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of education but does not ignore the role that individuals may play in their own education.¹ Using Hiner’s definition, then, we must consider our significant role in the educational processes of others, that is to say, our role in shaping how others develop a sense of self, formulate an identity, learn the ways of society, and define and transmit their culture. It is this kind of reflection that is necessary for culturally responsive leadership to thrive and for individuals within organizations to experience true freedom. Both Cremin and Hiner’s broad definitions of education require an acceptance of the individual that is necessary for democratic education to thrive. In thinking about the notion of democratic education, there is of course a broad base of research from which we may discover relevant definitions that support our goals. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey states:

*...education is
the entire
process by
which human
beings develop
a sense of
self...*

Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a particular social ideal. The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups...A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have the type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder (99).

Dewey's views on the ideal society and its implications for education have influenced current thinking and provided the foundation for a discourse that is relevant to the ideas related to cultural responsiveness. Moreover, his thoughts on what constitutes a democratic way of life can assist educators with conceptualizing and implementing democratic systems of education. Indeed, Michael Apple and James Beane note that "democracy has a powerful meaning, that it can work, and that it is necessary if we are to maintain freedom and human dignity in our social affairs." While they are careful to remind us that democracy has had "multiple meanings in the larger society [and requires] continuous examination in light of changing times," they nonetheless argue that there are several "conditions" on which democracy depends — the foundations of the democratic way of life. The authors state that it is these conditions and their extension through education that are the central concerns of democratic schools. Among such conditions are the following:

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.
4. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good."
5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people.
7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.

Apple and Beane further argue that the creation of democratic schools "does not happen by chance." First, "democratic structures and processes [must be created] by which life in the school is carried out."

And second, the “curriculum [created must] give young people democratic experiences.” Ultimately, they argue, democratic schools, which are humanistic and child-centered, “seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them” (11). Democratic education, then, or our quest to foster it, seems essential to the goal of changing the conditions that create inequities and providing individuals with the means to develop their senses of selves that can ultimately allow them to experience true freedom.

The Nature of Individual Freedom

While it is clear that one goal of developing culturally responsive leaders is to create democratic schools, we also must acknowledge that this kind of democracy demands an examination of the nature of individual freedom. In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey states:

The commonest mistake made about freedom is...to identify it with freedom of movement, or with the external or physical side of activity. The fact still remains that an increased measure of freedom of outer movement is a means, not an end. The educational problem is not solved when this aspect of freedom is obtained. Everything then depends, so far as education is concerned, upon what is done with this added liberty? What end does it serve? What consequences flow from it?(61)

Dewey argues, “the only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while”(61). For educators interested in culturally responsive leadership, Dewey provides a definition of freedom that, paradoxically, provides students with the ability to question their environment, what is being taught, and ultimately the very leadership that created the system.

Maxine Greene analyzes the nature of freedom and specifically outlines the tragedy that can occur when democratic structures such as those Dewey suggests are not in place. She provides several examples of individuals-from the downtrodden immigrant to the dehumanized slave-and their quests for the ideal. Greene states that blacks, “because they did not choose to come to this country and became deprived of their freedom...have given expression to the archetypal predicament of the

outsider more eloquently than have those of many others.” She uses as one example Langston Hughes’ “As I Grew Older,” in which Hughes relies on the metaphor of a “wall” to represent the racism that precludes his attaining his dream. The wall rises “between [him] and his dream,” and ultimately dims the light of it. Greene says, “we may find that the search for freedom, in personal and shared lives, almost inevitably [leads] to an engagement with that wall”(88). She believes though, that educators can expand their perspectives on the meanings of freedom through an examination of those who sought to attain it amidst unspeakable hardship and pain.

Greene relies on other examples from literature to reveal the nature and quest for freedom. She points to Richard Wright’s tragic character Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and says that he is “the rejected and frustrated black American who is propelled into murderous violence by conditions he cannot control.” Bigger, she says, “presents the issues of freedom in one of the starkest ways we know.” Bigger’s life spirals out of control as the result of his murdering his employer’s daughter, Mary. But it is Greene’s examination of Bigger’s Marxist lawyer that is central to her analysis of freedom, and she states, “People like Bigger, the lawyer claims, have the same capacity to live and act as anyone else, but they are not permitted opportunities to express their capabilities. Some starve from the lack of self-realization; others murder because of it”(97).

Greene also recalls Ralph Ellison’s protagonist from *Invisible Man* and his quest to discover his identity and to be recognized as an individual. She says the “narrator is on a journey, not unfamiliar in the United States. It is evocative of the early settlers’, of the pioneers’, of Huck Finn’s, of Jay Gatsby’s.” The “wall” the Invisible Man encounters, according to Greene, is the “racism of society, along with its manipulations and labelings.” She notes:

Each time he has tried to define a self by means of a project, he has been subsumed under other people’s definitions; his invisibility has been intensified. We are reminded once more that neither the loss nor the achievement of freedom is attributable to the objective world around or to the person in his/her subjectivity (97).

Ultimately, Greene argues that freedom requires an “exchange” between situations and individuals. It cannot occur in a vacuum. And most importantly, no one group can attain true freedom while any other group remains oppressed. She asks the fundamental questions, “How, in a society like ours, a society of contesting interests and submerged voices,

an individualist society...can we educate for freedom? And, in educating for freedom, how can we create and maintain a common world?" (116)

Paulo Freire provides part of the answer to these questions as he reminds us that "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift," and that "it must be pursued constantly and responsibly". It is, he says, the "indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (29). As educators, we have it within our power to engage in such a conquest as we assist others with their quest for completion. It is our task to understand the nature of freedom in order to confront barriers that undermine the quest, and responsive leadership is vital to this process.

Barriers to Culturally Responsive Leadership: Meeting the Challenge

To return to Greene's use of Hughes' "wall" metaphor, our efforts to effect culturally responsive leadership quite often are met with many obstacles or "walls." Indeed, as institutions of higher education work to develop partnerships with organizations charged with creating democratic education, several barriers present themselves. However, it is the duty of higher education institutions and particularly schools of education to work directly with public school partners and help them become more adept at understanding cultural issues and how they relate to overall organizational sensibilities and structures. Deborah Meier notes, "If the primary public responsibility and justification for tax-supported schooling is raising a generation of fellow citizens, then the school – of necessity – must be a place where students learn the habits of mind, work, and heart that lie at the core of...democracy" (28).

Linda Lambert's notion of constructivism as it relates to leadership seems appropriate in thinking about democratic schools. She states that constructivist leadership is "viewed as a reciprocal process among the adults in the school and proposes individual and shared experiences."

The school functions as a community that is self-motivating and that views the growth of its members as fundamental. There is an emphasis on language as a means for shaping the school culture, conveying a commonality of experience, and articulating a joint vision. Shared inquiry is an important activity in problem identification and resolution; participants conduct action research and share findings as a way of improving practice (9).

She further notes that anyone involved in the educational community—teachers, parents, administrators, or students—can engage in leadership activities, and she ultimately notes that, "constructivist leadership enables human growth that was previously reserved for the few. Others were

followers, relegated to second-class citizenship and second-class growth. [With this kind of leadership] interdependence and reciprocity require equal partners” (29).

With this in mind, one clear barrier that exists is in the lack of awareness and understanding among educational leaders in K-12 schools about the cultures from which their students come. In addition, many leaders demonstrate an unwillingness to change as their communities display profound demographic shifts. This is a result of education administration programs not adequately addressing the need for cultural responsiveness. This need is particularly intense in light of recent desegregation issues. Indeed, Gary Orfield and Susan Eaton remark that “for the first time since 1954, school segregation is actually increasing for African-Americans” (xix). Their work profiles specific districts across the country that have addressed the issue of desegregation with varying degrees of success. Orfield and Eaton’s conclusion, however, is that, “slowly, quietly, and without the nation’s comprehension, political and legal forces have converged to dismantle one of our greatest constitutional victories.” They argue that *Brown’s* true intent has been neutralized as a result of conservative Supreme Court decisions and an ideological shift in the political climate. “More than forty years after *Brown*,” they state, “racial separation both between and within school districts is an ordinary, unnoticed fixture in K-12 education. And there is a great deal of evidence to support *Brown’s* basic premise that in American society, separate schools are inherently unequal” (xix). We cannot ignore the reality that educational leaders in the new millennium must address the issue of what it means to lead a school that is, for whatever reason, segregated. What new duties and instructional needs present themselves? What new strategies must we employ to ensure a democratic education? What obligation do we have to address this obvious demographic reality? What will the curriculum look like? Who will teach it? Do we celebrate this separateness? Bemoan it? Fight against it? How do we prepare students to be members of a larger, global community in light of this reality? And most importantly, how can we ensure that all students will experience intellectual freedom? These are the kinds of questions that culturally responsive individuals and leaders must address. And, it is the charge of higher education institutions to ensure that they do. Honest dialogue about the significance of race in this country must be central to and infused in the coursework required by education administration candidates.

*...what
constitutes a
democratic
way of life?*

Frederick Dembowksi states that all too often, “many departments of education administration have political realities that result in an

inappropriate mix of coursework required of their students...The curriculum...is often faculty-need driven instead of student-need driven” (2). Indeed, if we are to begin to address the need for cultural responsiveness – a need that is clearly student-driven, then we must look carefully at what it is we are doing at the university level to ensure that students receive the kind of exposure to and exploration of issues related to diversity that we know will be vital to their success as leaders of 21st century schools.

The second barrier that public school leaders face and that schools of education must confront is that the curriculum in many K-12 programs often does not acknowledge what students already know and can do. Research in the area of urban education and the transmission of culture can be useful in thinking about strategies to align more closely the curriculum offered in public schools with what students already know and can do. Indeed, Belinda Williams’s work around the *Urban Learner Framework* and her quest to close the achievement gap for poor and minority children is relevant to discussions regarding curriculum and its absolute need to respond to and support student culture. Williams makes four assumptions:

1. Culture and cognitive development are interrelated.
2. Education must foster the full potential of every learner by appreciating group membership and individual diversity.
3. All educational systems must value and care for the learner and the community.
4. All individuals are both learners and facilitators of learning.

These assumptions stem from Dewey’s philosophy that learning is indeed a social process and that individuals must have some degree of control over how and what they learn. Williams’ democratic approach to the educational process provides a means to create a framework for educating urban children, and she calls on educators to “revise their perspective of urban youth from students at risk to learners displaying resilience.” She also states that the curriculum, staff development programs, school environment, and school management all need to be aligned with this thinking in mind (77).

The Politics of Official Knowledge

Williams offers one approach to meeting the needs of diverse students, and it is not intended to be a magic bullet. The point is that educational leaders must explore all avenues and take many approaches in responding to cultural issues. And in addition to identifying promising practices like the *Urban Learner Framework*,

educational leaders must become savvy at understanding what Apple terms, the politics of official knowledge. Indeed, Apple's thoughts on *the politics of official knowledge* are relevant to discussions about curriculum and he states:

Education is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always a part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people. The decision to define some groups' knowledge as the most legitimate knowledge, as official knowledge, while other groups' knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says something extremely important about who has power in society (Cultural Politics 22).

This power, according to Apple, determines how the official knowledge will be presented, who will teach it, and what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it. Most important, a system of dominance and subordination is created as a result (23).

In *Cultural Diversity and Education*, James Banks describes five types of knowledge: 1) *personal/cultural*; 2) *popular*; 3) *mainstream/academic*; 4) *transformative academic*; and 5) *school*. Personal/cultural knowledge consists of the concepts, explanations, and interpretations that students derive from their personal experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures. The facts, concepts, explanations, and interpretations that are institutionalized within the mass media and in other institutions that are part of the popular culture constitute popular knowledge. Mainstream academic knowledge consists of the concepts, paradigms, theories, and explanations that constitute traditional Western-centric knowledge in history and the behavioral and social sciences. ...Transformational academic knowledge consists of the facts, concepts, paradigms, theories, explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and expand and substantially revise established canons, paradigms, theories, explanations, and research methods. School knowledge consists of the facts, concepts, generalizations, and interpretations that are presented in textbooks, teachers' guides, other media forms, and lectures by teachers (197).

Banks argues that we must recognize the danger in one type of knowledge dominating an institutional approach to instruction and ultimately asserts that "the knowledge institutionalized within the schools, colleges, and universities, and within the popular culture should...empower all people to participate effectively in a democratic

society” (199). Gloria Ladson-Billings states that the curriculum we devise must be culturally *relevant*—that is, it must “make deep and meaningful connections with the lives of the students” (333). If we say we want to create democratic education and freedom of choice, culturally responsive leaders must acknowledge the political agendas surrounding the creation and flow of curriculum and knowledge in the process.

There are, of course other barriers to developing culturally responsive leadership, each creating its own research base. School district bureaucracy is one. State and national standards for students, teachers, and administrators is another. Within each barrier, however, exists opportunities to play a significant role in creating mechanisms and infrastructures to overcome it. Thus, the fundamental issue remains how institutions of higher education can create the kind of leaders we need to bring about democracy in public school systems. One clear strength in tackling this issue lies in our unique position as the trainers of these new

leaders. We, again, can expose students in our programs to the thinking necessary to effect change. We can participate at the public school level by spending time outside our offices and inside classrooms investigating and determining if democratic education is in place. We can provide staff development for teachers and leaders with democratic education and culture in mind. We can assist school systems with creating the environments necessary for individual freedom to flourish.

All educational systems must value and care for the learner and the community.

Langston Hughes so eloquently establishes the reality of the wall for us in his personal quest for freedom and in our collective struggle to achieve equity. It is important to note, however, that the poem does not end at the *raising* of the wall. Indeed, Hughes, ever the dreamer, saw a ray of hope—an amazing feat considering his place in life—and the poem ends with his “dark hands” breaking through the wall. Clearly Hughes believed he had it within himself to overcome the

¹N. Ray Hiner, “History of Education for the 1990s and Beyond: The Case for Academic Imperialism,” *History of Education Quarterly* 30. (2): 138-160. Hiner defines self as “the concept one has of his or her own person.” Identity is defined as a “sense of sameness and historical continuity of one’s self and the ability to accept or adopt a role that is provided by society.”

²For the complete poem see, Langston Hughes, “As I Grew Older,” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1994, 93.

obstacles of oppression and racism and realize his dream. There is no question that we have walls before us that can preclude the development of the kind of leaders we need. But, this is our challenge, our opportunity to do just that.

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