

## From Social Justice to Collaborative Activism: Changing the Landscape of Academic Leadership

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### **Article:**

The new millennium arrived with great economic prosperity; however, currently the United State faces a weaker economy, a depressed housing market, a costly Iraq war and all the old problems of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century; power, race, identity, violence, and ethics. Current challenges for educators: 1) the increase number of charter schools; 2) voucher programs; 3) increases in immigrant populations; 4) for profit educational organizations; 5) inadequate funding for No Child Left Behind; 6) inequities regarding accountability; 7) and the re-segregation of public schools along class/racial lines. These challenges have broad implications for higher education. According to Hopkins (1997) education is considered to be the most accessible means for achieving social, political, economic, and cultural liberation in the United States (Gause, 2008, In-press). This article speaks to transforming schools by changing the landscape of academic leadership in an educational leadership preparation program in the southeastern part of the United States. The author engages discourses situated in social justice, collaborative activism and critical theory to speak to the purpose of public schools and the role of democratic education in public life.

Public schools with high minority and poverty enrollments continue to inadequately prepare students of color and those in poverty. These schools are also continuing to show signs of resegregation. Orfield and Yun (1999) asserts "resegregation decisions of our present period may well have a similar impact on the next century since there is considerable evidence that the resegregated schools of the nineties are profoundly unequal" (p.6). As our country continues to grow and become home to people with multiple nationalities, cultures, faiths and languages the role of democratic education must be at the forefront of domestic and foreign policy because integration matters. The academic achievement divide narrowed during the 1980s but due to shifts in population, class disparities and school choice reform efforts the racial and economic composition of schools in many parts of the United States today resemble those of schools pre *Brown*. Schools with a majority of students of color and high poverty struggle to excel.

The present role of schools continues to be that of transmitting knowledge as defined by those in power. We are far away from educating a citizenry to become active participants in our democracy. Power and how it benefits those in the majority continue to define the curriculum of American public schools. Schools are on-going sites where the politics of culture unfolds. The waging battle in public school curricula and policy nationally is whether schools will serve the democratic or economic needs of our country and our flawed democracy and federalist society is currently being defined by those who have enough economic and cultural capital to speak and with a very loud voice: public schools in America will serve the economic needs of our country to further democracy. We continue to witness in this country the more economic, cultural and political resources you have the louder your voice and our ruling elite, those in congress, continue to defy the will of the people.

Unfortunately those who have limited socio-cultural and political capital rely upon the ruling elite to speak for them. They represent the voice of those who cannot speak but rarely do the ruling elite have the voiceless best interest at heart. I believe our American democracy is a social experiment and practice instituted through a hierarchal system of denial and oppression. If we look to the writings of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison and Benjamin Franklin, the American democracy we celebrate and mythologize was designed

to be neither publicly participatory nor representative. It was designed for those with educational capital who were members of the ruling class who had great wealth and opportunities for formal schooling.

As Giroux (1988) asserts, “public schooling offers limited individual mobility to members of the working class and other oppressed groups, but it is a powerful instrument for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production and the dominant legitimating ideologies of the ruling group” (p. xx). If this is to continue, people of color and those in abject poverty will suffer economic and catastrophic devastation that has yet to be witnessed by humanity unless we look to the American educational system and those who teach. Teaching is a practice that requires building engaging and inviting relationships as well as establishing communities of freedom, truth and justice. Those who are advocates of social justice enter this practice with tenacity, integrity and courage seeking to change the status quo and bring about liberation for all participants in the educative process (Roseboro & Gause, In-press, 2009). Cooper and Gause (2007) speak to the essence of being social justice educators. They offer the following:

As social justice educators, we strive to co-create, along with students, democratic classrooms where each participant feels empowered to share their perspective, engage in constructive debate, and contribute to each other’s learning. Social justice educators also work to encourage students to critique self, schools, and society. We scrutinize the prevalence of racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic practices in schools, and we also examine inequities related to ability and language. As part of our instructional practice, we push our students outside of their comfort zones with our instructional methods, materials, and assignments. We strive to inspire our students to think, speak and act critically while drawing upon courage, moral fortitude and political savvy (p. 197).

This requires transformational leadership situated within the context of collaborative activism (Cooper & Gause, 2007). Transformational leadership depends upon the development of enticing and exciting democratic learning communities where the pursuit of knowledge is the primary objective and instructors create opportunities for students to critically examine the world they inhabit. In democratic learning communities – contextual spaces in which power is shared, multiple truths are embraced, and oppressive practices are named, critiqued, and deconstructed – students and instructors speak, hear, reflect, and act in ways that pursue justice by transgressing the boundaries created by hegemonic discourses (Carlson & Apple, 1998; Gutmann, 1999; hooks, 1994 & 2003; Spring 2006).

### **Challenges of Public School Education**

The difficulty of receiving a quality public school education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is far greater than it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It requires great ability in negotiating power, politics and popular culture which influences educators, parents and particularly students in our school systems. Educational leader and scholar, C. P. Gause in *Integration Matters: Navigating Identity, Culture and Resistance* presents the climate of today’s public schools. He states, “The students who enter and walk the halls of today’s public schools are younger than MTV, have witnessed the birth and rise of Google, Yahoo, and the IPOD, were born after the fall-out of the first Gulf War, and witnessed the beginning of the second Gulf War. They believe that casting a vote for the next American Idol is a proper form of exercising their right to vote. They have witnessed the close of the War on Drugs and the beginning of the War on Terrorism, the possible impeachment of a sitting President, the fall of the energy corporation, Enron” (Gause, In-press, 2008). I am not anti-public schools. I believe they are the greatest institutions in American society, if they are lead by exceptional leaders and filled with great teachers. It is in public schools we develop the skills, dispositions and knowledge to be good neighbors and to understand how to embrace and affirm cultural and political difference. They are a necessity in transmitting the importance ideas of our democracy.

Given the atrocities occurring in public education in our nation today we should all be angered to action and express moral outrage. Shields (2004) suggests, “Educators, policymakers, and indeed, the general public are increasingly aware that despite numerous well-intentioned restructuring, reform, and curricular efforts, many

children who are in some way different from the previously dominant and traditionally most successful White, middle-class children are not achieving school success” (p. 111).

In order to transform public schools we must look to higher education and academic leadership. Faculty of educational leadership preparation programs must change the landscape of academic leadership by holding pre-service and in-service school administrators accountable by shifting them from a traditionalist view of education and democracy to one that is radical and transformative. This requires a re-radicalization of social justice that is collaborative. Students should seek out partnerships which are more interdisciplinary in nature providing the synergy for creating multiple solutions to problems in closing the academic achievement divide, providing safe schools and creating spaces for students to engage in critical inquiry.

Moving Pre-service and In-service school administrators towards developing learning communities that moves beyond the mechanistic and technocratic ways in which we conduct schools can be an arduous task. I offer my own personal experience.

### **Why Must I Be an Angry Black Man?**

While engaging a seminar with a cohort group of practicing and aspiring school administrators enrolled in a Master of School Administration program, I continued to hear side-bar conversations challenging some of the information presented. I was sharing my mission and vision, regarding educational leadership and social justice; although some students were engaged, many of them appeared to be disinterested. I thought to myself, how could a group of adults behave in such clear disrespect. I shared with them that my goal was through the language of critique and possibility, to bring a level of criticality to the dialogue and discourse surrounding leadership preparation and to do so meant challenging the present notions regarding schooling and the politics of local educational agencies. I further informed this group that I believed in developing learning communities that understood that democracy was messy, provocative, and required the participation of all voices in the dialogue. After assisting the students in understanding the power of language, I reminded them the use of language should be purposive and I was currently engaged in that practice during our seminar. I closed the seminar by challenging them to question the present hegemonic policies, procedures and practices of their school communities, especially those which continue to disenfranchise and marginalize students of color, students in poverty, and students who articulate alternative gendered identities.

This was not anything unusual for me. I presented this rhetoric often prior and during class sessions with all of my courses as an activity to deconstruct power relations in our language, actions and ideologies. I want them to understand “what they see” may not be really “what they see.” I knew my positionality and social location would contribute to some level of resistance; however, I thought the south had at least begun its great transformation, particularly after the death of Jesse Helms and Strom Thurman. I had enacted and practiced pedagogy of hope activism because I view myself as a passionate pedagogue who believes in social justice, transformational leadership and democratic education. I thought at the time these students wanted to transform schools and their communities; however, I was wrong.

The class was comprised of white and black females and males. The age representation was late 20’s to early 50’s and the group represented a spectrum of classroom teachers, district level personnel, and acting assistant principals. I knew a majority of the group had spent the majority of their academic career and personal lives in North Carolina and the southeastern part of the United States; however, I thought with the bombardment of popular culture and the dearth of educational material presented to educators through print and digital media, this group would somehow be just a little different, but they were not and I began to see several common themes from the previous classes that I taught over the past academic year emerge. At the conclusion of class as I got in my car, I overheard a group of black and white male and female students, state “he’s just an angry black man.”

As I heard a loud chorus of agreement, I knew this term angry, was not used to mean moral outrage; but one of a negative connotation. The use was rooted in racist and sexist constructs to further perpetuate the notion of a

black man who shows any emotion is bestial aggressive and animalistic. I could not believe what I was hearing. How could they misconstrue my passion for knowledge, my spirit of activism, and my love for teaching as anger? How could a seminar on resistance, spiritual renewal and transforming schools into vibrant and affirming learning communities be reduced to a stereotypical assertion?

I spoke with my colleagues regarding the cohort and what took place after class on the prior evening. I wanted as diverse a perspective as possible, so I presented the scenario to a group of colleagues that included an African American female, a Jewish female and two white males. I am the only African American male in the professoriate in the entire School of Education and my department, so I could not gain a perspective from another black male professor who has interfaced with that group. As we discussed the many issues regarding this cohort, a sense of entitlement, privilege and lack of respect for professorial authority; we discovered previous courses which addressed diversity, change, and difference, without such an uproar were taught by white male faculty members. Ultimately we realized many of our students never had an African American male as a professor in their entire academic career until I joined the department. Confronting issues surrounding racism, sexism, ageism, and gender identity when presented by a white male faculty member brought out a different response than when a female faculty member and/or a faculty member of color presented the very same issues. Gender, race, class and cultural politics were at work within this cohort and I believe in order to dismantle the master's house, I was going to utilize a different set of tools.

Academic leadership faculty must promote environments which require students to engage in collaborative thinking, motivate them to take ownership of their learning process, and provide opportunities for rigorous intellectual study and committed activism that moves beyond arriving at the "right" answers. Changing the landscape of academic leadership requires faculty to have the courage to lead students beyond systemic paradigms and business models of school reform to delve deeper into the understanding of conflict theory and civic engagement to actualize public schools designed for meeting the needs of students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

"In forging a democratic discourse on progress in American education, the most immediate and pragmatic response among progressive educational leaders may well be a politics of individual and collective resistance to the "machines" of urban schooling, including "high stakes" testing. As I have long argued, teachers represent a potentially powerful counter hegemonic power bloc in democratic educational renewal and there is much good, progressive work to be done in teachers' unions and professional organizations. At some point, however, progressives also must move beyond critique and resistance toward the forging of a countermovement for progress in America, linked to a new commonsense discourse on the renewal of public education and public life." (Carlson, 2007, p. 23)

I believe in transformative leadership. A leadership which speaks to the moral and spiritual dimensions of decision-making founded upon the principles of social justice. Education is about freedom and democracy for the betterment of our global society. As a creative educational leader who embodies education as a praxis of freedom (hooks, 1994) my perspective of democracy is evidenced in my practice. I strive to co-create learning environments where all member-voices are given the opportunity to be heard, shared and awakened. Consensus building is essential in this process. The dialogic encounter is central to (de) constructing and (re) constructing spaces for knowledge acquisition and development. Gause in Gause, Reitzug and Villaverde (2007) asserts "Because the personal is political and because I view my role as a teacher/activist within a framework that my perspective of democracy cannot be de-linked from what I do as a teacher/activist in the academic space; I envision democracy as the interconnections that lie within the quest of knowledge; the faith that our humanity exercises as we navigate the manifestations of our destinies (p. 221).

As educators we must engage in collaborative activism: a coming together and unity of our pedagogy to bring love and compassion to our communities. In order for the citizens of the United States to continue to engage in "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," democracy must exist in institutions that encourage human beings to transform our environment, communities, neighborhoods, and schools into arenas where dialogue, discourse,

and dissent are not silenced but celebrated. The aforementioned should be the foci of K-20 public and private education in the United States.

### **Academic Leadership in Higher Education**

While entering graduate programs seeking answers to reform schools, for many students in educational leadership preparation programs it becomes difficult to engage in a discourse which moves beyond school reformation. The technical aspects of schooling are of their greatest concern given the pressure to meet so many political mandates. Because schools are hegemonic reproductions of the larger society, engaging graduate students in discourse of power, knowledge, and pedagogy creates a “tension.” I find myself encouraging students to understand the culture of school, particularly as it engages in an oppressive system of sorting and selecting students, presents a barrier to resolving its many problems. However, because of the linear and hierarchical decision-making structures that are inherent in the tight coupling systems of K-12 schooling, students find courses in which social justice, liberatory practices and multi-modal learning are void of meaning to their practice. The challenges of today’s educational leaders are indeed numerous and aspiring educational administrators believe to meet those challenges they must operate out of a technical/rational model of leadership without regard to issues of equity and social justice.

According to Shields (2004):

Educational leaders are expected to develop learning communities, build the professional capacity of teachers, take advice from parents, engage in collaborative and consultative decision making, resolve conflicts, engage in effective instructional leadership, and attend respectfully, immediately, and appropriately to the needs and requests of families with diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (pg. 109).

Moving students from the language of reformation to transformation is often difficult and viewed as counter-productive; however if schools are to be sites of democracy this is the path of liberation. I encourage students to view themselves not as mere custodians of buildings of learning, but as proactive transformational leaders. Such a role involves understanding the schools culture and transforming custodial organizations into creative learning communities. This change requires transformational leadership that is creative, courageous, and visionary.

Students who enter graduate programs seeking answers to reform schools should first critically reflect upon the personal and professional practice as citizens of this democracy. If they have not done so it becomes difficult to engage in a discourse which moves beyond school reformation. If the technical aspects of schooling are of their greatest concern they must be able to navigate gain skills juxtaposed to gaining experiences in transformative leadership. I do understand the importance of gaining technical skills to operate schools given the pressure to meet so many political mandates; however, this should not supersede the purpose of schooling: to transform our humanity. As a professor in an instructional leadership preparation program I see women and men from diverse backgrounds and communities arrive at the doors of the academy, eager to learn how to lead the nation’s schools to a better place.

These educators enroll in our program, hoping someone will help them make sense of dynamic school cultures. Educators, who come to the academy, are searching for answers. Some are looking for the “quick-fixes” while others understand transforming schools into vibrant, dynamic and engaging learning communities where all students experience academic achievement and success requires time. Yet all of them struggle with how to implement local, state and federal legislation, seek efficient and effective ways to provide optimal learning experiences for all members of the learning community and strive to make sense of the dynamic cultures in which they work professionally. During this era of market competition, globalization and educational accountability the challenge of the academy is transforming those aspiring educational leaders who are concerned more with “the bottom line,” into critically consciousness democratic leaders who seek to develop free thinking members of our society. Given the call for “principal executives,” democratic education and freedom have been reduced to the ability to achieve academic standards and acquire material goods, wealth, and power without critiquing the consequences of inequity, greed, and inequality.

Teaching, learning and leading democratically requires activism that is purposive, pragmatic and transforming. The purpose of higher education and K-12 public education is to provide opportunities and spaces for the global citizenry to engage in democratic practices for the public good. Democracy is an enacted daily practice whereby people interact and relate through daily personal, social, and professional routines with a primary focus on continuing the betterment of our humanity. "Democracy is not just a form of social life among other workable forms of social life; it is the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems" (Putnam, 1991, p. 217). This is the cause of education. In order to do this higher education must prepare critical transformative leaders who are willing and able to draw upon culturally relevant, critical, and counter-normative pedagogies. I do this by infusing cultural studies in the leadership discourse of our educational leadership program (Gause, 2005a).

### **Academic Leadership through Teacher Leadership**

Critical change occurs with significant self-sacrifice, potential alienation, rejection and costly consequences. As critical transformative educators, we must do justice to the larger social/public responsibility of our positions and roles; particularly in higher education. In (re) crafting the education of critical transformative leaders, we must demystify change, courage, and risk as we (re) imagine the language and fluency of multiple discourses in the rediscovery of democracy and social justice. This occurs in the development of the democratic classroom, which should be the hallmark of higher education. I evidence this by having students reflect upon one of hooks' (1994) most powerful statements regarding vulnerability and empowerment: "any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (p. 21).

This very act affronts the pedagogical challenges of seamless learning from K-20. Critical transformative educational leaders who develop through the seamless K-20 educational system in the United States will facilitate the development of inviting, engaging and dynamic learning communities that (1) transform the human condition, (2) unearth fallow ground, (3) interrogate and rupture the status quo, (4) question multiple political spaces critically, (5) seek multiple epistemologies to re-create constructs that better serve our humanity. To further our thinking regarding the challenges of seamless learning from K-20; I call on all higher education faculty who actively serve in teacher education and/or educational leadership preparation programs around the country to (re) think the following by Gause (2005b)

We are educating in a time of expanding globalization whose impact we witness via 24-hour digitally mediated discourse. How are schools and educational leaders keeping up with this global transformation? What type of impact does this transformation of schools from sites of democracy to "bedfellows" of consumerism have upon the school and much larger global community? How are the "souls" of schools affected? In the journey of school reform are educational leaders acknowledging that the "process of schooling" is filled with "cultural politics"? How are educational leadership programs preparing future school leaders? Are educational leadership preparation programs equipping schools' leaders for the "journey of the self" or for the "journey of the soul"? (pg. 242)

The challenges we face as educators in developing and sustaining embryonic learning communities which teach young people the habits of our democracy are numerous. The competing forces of American popular culture: the desire to seek fame and fortune via the internet, the ability to access drugs, sex and rock roll virtually, and connecting with like-minded individuals for acceptance; far exceeds what Dewey had imagined. The ability to be re-educated and mis-educated while gaining a profit, respect and notoriety drives our young people. This is the "*era of idols*." Today's youth are engaged in self-worship as a form of competition. Success is about out doing one's peers, although your peers are the judge of your performance. How might the "*era of idols*," interface with today's public schools. Digital cameras are no longer tools of education, but the tools of iniquity. Students are utilizing them to record aggressive, violent, and nihilistic behavior, to include harming self and others and then up-linking the footage to social networking sites to gain notoriety, "juice," "props," and respect (Gause, 2008, In-press).

As a former teacher, K-12 school administrator, principal and current faculty member in an educational leadership preparation program in the Southeastern part of the United States, I work to co-create and decolonize democratic learning communities as a form of political activism. As a critical transformative educational leader I inspire and transform others to become more conscious of the human condition. Parker Palmer in his work, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, speaks to the importance of connectedness. He offers this, "If we want to develop and deepen the capacity for connectedness at the heart of good teaching, we must understand—and resist—the perverse but powerful draw of a "disconnected" life. How and why does academic culture discourage us from living connected lives? How, and why, does it encourage us to distance ourselves from our students and our subjects, to teach and learn at some remove from our own hearts?" (p. 35). I seek to remain connected situating my teaching and practice toward social vision and change, not simply, or only, organizational goals. My teaching is a form of protest. In conclusion, I understand that it is my duty and responsibility to encourage other human beings, particularly those who are involved in the educational process, to transform our environment, institutions, communities, neighborhoods, and schools into arenas where those in which we come in contact will become agents of democracy and social justice. Together we must face the struggle of educating our citizenry with nobility and commitment. For together in the struggle we are one.

Educators who are passionate and committed to social justice and democracy should be angered by the current state of education in the United States and seek to deconstruct the practices policies and procedures that exist in their specific district and school community. They must engage in collaborative activism. "Collaborative activism is a democratic education approach that unites educators and learners in raising consciousness and rupturing the status quo in order to socially deconstruct, politically transform, and share a sense of hope. Collaborative activism is the essence of transformative leadership." (Cooper and Gause, 2007, p. 213-214). I believe this is the primary responsibility of all members of a learning community: It is an essential part of the process of advancing knowledge for the purpose of transforming the human spirit and human condition. Collaborative activism is the involvement of interdisciplinary pragmatic activist educators acting out of moral outrage to provide spaces for equitable learning opportunities regardless of the individual's background, condition, lineage and ability. Collaborative activism is the essence of a democratic education involving citizens and educators in the empowerment of students to engage in free and open discourse, inquiry, reflection, critique, and ultimately, social transformation (Knight and Pearl, 2000; hooks, 2003; Nagda, Gurin, and Lopez, 2003). This must be done to counteract the despair that is readily visible locally and globally.

Educational leaders are "agents of change." Every member of a learning community is an educational leader. This includes, but is not limited to the paraprofessional, cafeteria staff, custodial staff, bus driver, teacher, volunteer, clerical support, and administrative team. It is the duty and responsibility of every member of the learning community to encourage other human beings, particularly those who are members of that community, to transform their environment, their institutions, their neighborhoods, and their schools into arenas whereby those in which they come in contact will become agents of democracy and social justice. The proper criterion for deliberative democracy is indeed "equality as effective social freedom, understood as equal capability for public functioning." (Bohman, 1997, p.322) How should schools prepare for conditions where this criterion could be met? Deliberative conceptions of democracy must have rigorous and relevant requirements of political equality. They must not favor any individual based upon their class nor seek to reproduce cultural hegemony. Deliberative conceptions of democracy are most concerned with a social and equitable justice. This justice can only be realized when we as educators change the landscape of academic leadership through collaborative activism.

Social and equitable justice is realized through the spirit of collaboration and no longer delineates our humanity based on markers of difference, but which calls to the oneness of our condition—the ability to love, to conquer our fears, to create stones of hope out of mountains of despair. As participants in this constitutional republic, educators must realize in order to improve our economic and social conditions we must be vigilant in the pursuit and advancement of knowledge for the sake of our democracy and it is only through public educational systems this can be achieved.

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