

## SENDING FORTH TINY RIPPLES OF HOPE THAT BUILD THE MIGHTIEST OF CURRENTS: UNDERSTANDING HOW TO PREPARE SCHOOL LEADERS TO INTERRUPT OPPRESSIVE SCHOOL PRACTICES

*Despite the dramatic shift in demographics occurring within public schools, there is scarce research connecting issues of diversity and race with the curricula guiding educational leadership preparation programs. In the field of leadership preparation, little information has been offered as to how professors facilitate social justice oriented conversations within their classrooms, particularly conversations focused specifically on race related issues. This article considers concepts the author believes should be included in leadership preparation programs seeking to develop leaders for diverse settings. In studying the outcomes of a course in “leadership for social justice” which is based on transformational learning experiences centered on issues of social justice, the author uses case studies and pattern matching to yield three emergent themes in the students’ experiences: increased critical consciousness, deepened empathic responses, and advocacy to activism. Throughout, the author focuses on the question, “how do participants in this program understand what it means to lead for social justice and equity in U.S. public schools?” The article concludes by discussing suggestions that could help contribute to the development of a transformative curriculum for leadership preparation programs.*

The purpose of this case study was to examine how three graduate students enrolled in a school leadership preparation program understood and addressed issues of social justice and equity within U.S. public schools through arts-based principles. This study contributes to the extant literature, because it explores the impact of innovative methods being used at a northeastern university to prepare aspiring school and district leaders to understand what it means to lead for social justice and equity in U.S. preK–12 public schools (see Boske & Tooms, 2010b; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Grogan, 2002; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Shields, 2003; Tillman, Brown, Campbell-Jones, & Gonzalez, 2006). Leading for social justice is a highly emotional endeavor requiring courage, integrity, imaginative possibilities and self-awareness. It is important to acknowledge the ongoing debate and tensions regarding multiple meanings for social justice, what it means to lead for social justice, and pedagogies that encourage and support school leaders to lead for social justice.

We think and learn through multi-layered lived experiences. People are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives; therefore, our ways of knowing and responding to the world are essen-

tial to understanding the ways people think and learn. This inquiry centered on those experiences as the starting point for understanding aspiring school leaders, their relation of self to others and to their school communities (e.g., Dewey, 1934, 1938, 1961). One means of deepening our ways of knowing is to engage in the creation of systemic changes within school communities. Such efforts are intended to improve the lives of those we serve. For the purpose of this study, these efforts centered the use of critical reflection—a connective process that precedes meaningful learning centered on a change of self, and ultimately, changing ways of knowing and responding to the world (Boske, 2011b). School leaders are not often prepared to engage in transformative leadership practices with an emphasis on leading for social justice (Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Tooms & Boske, 2010). Rather, they are traditionally prepared to understand their roles as managers of systems versus deepening their ways of knowing and making meaningful connections with school communities. This article seeks to push at current conceptual boundaries within the field of educational leadership to understand relationships among preparing candidates to lead for social justice, critical reflection and meaning making through the senses—ways in which school leaders perceive their lived experiences and relation to others.

The article begins with a review of the literature. Next, I describe the research method employed in this study, modes of analysis and findings. The article concludes with a discussion which centers on how these understood their roles and responsibilities as school leaders.

## **Literature Review**

Educational leadership is at the center of unprecedented attention. School leaders are often perceived as pivotal players in making systemic changes in the pursuit of equity (Bogotch, 2002; Boske & McEnery, 2011; Boske & McEnery, 2010; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Tooms & Boske, 2010). Many school leaders are ill-prepared to address the oppressive school practices impacting the educational experiences of children in 21st century schools (McKenzie et al., 2008; Marshall & Oliva, 2010). Educational administration faculty tend to promote the status quo rather than push candidates to consider the need to embrace silenced or marginalized learners (McClellan & Dominguez, 2006). School leaders within increasingly culturally diverse school communities will need the knowledge, skills and willingness to address issues facing marginalized populations in order to understand how cultural issues (i.e., race and race relations) within and between various school subcultures influence leadership practice (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007). However, for school leaders to have the capacity, willingness and courage to interrupt oppressive practices, they need to be afforded spaces for renewed discussions, critical self-reflection and experiential learning centered on broadening, deepening and enriching their school leadership identity. Such efforts have the potential to pro-

vide school leaders with spaces to make shifts in their ways of understanding and responding to those they serve, especially for those who live on the margins (Boske, 2011a; Boske & McEnery, 2011).

### **Art-Making as Sense-Making**

We think and learn through multi-layered lived experiences. Because school leaders are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives, our ways of knowing and responding to the world are essential to understanding the ways they think and learn. Their lives and how they are composed are of interest to those who prepare them. This inquiry centers on understanding learning and teaching, how it takes place, as well as undertaking different beliefs, values, and assumptions within diverse contexts in an effort to find links to learning, teaching, and leading through sense-making. From this perspective, experience is the starting point for understanding people, their relation of self to others, and to their environment (e.g., Dewey, 1934, 1938, 1961).

There is an urgency to deepen understanding regarding how to create spaces in which school leaders promote and address issues of social justice and equity in U.S. public schools (Boske, *in press*; Tooms & Boske, 2010). This increased attention is aligned with arts-based principles centered on understanding sensory ways of knowing. Critical reflection (i.e., Mezirow, 1990; Schon, 1983; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009), artmaking (Eisner, 2008; Springgay, 2008), and transformative learning (Brown, 2004, 2006) are recognized as experiential modes of inquiry that reveal insights and ways of understanding that impact our capacities for knowing (e.g., Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2008). Artmaking is recognized as an experiential mode of inquiry that reveals insights and ways of understanding that impact our capacities for knowing (e.g., Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2008). Utilizing artmaking for making sense of our lived experiences through sensory exploration creates spaces for school leaders to consider their actions and reflect upon their impact (e.g., Ellsworth, 2005; Springgay, 2008). This study is significant to furthering the extant literature by examining arts-based principles through the senses. Specifically, it does so through the use of critical reflection and artmaking in an effort to create spaces for school leaders to shift their sense-making from text to audio/visual to artmaking—a formal curricular decision grounded in the recognition of rich meanings and imaginative possibilities embedded in non-text-based, sensual understandings.

### **Context for the Study**

In the spring of 2010, a northeastern university created the “Leading for Social Justice” course in response to the call from the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA). UCEA is a national orga-

nization collaborating with professors invested in school leadership preparation programs. The organization's mission and vision in part focuses on preparing school leaders to address issues of social justice and inequities in U.S. public schools. Over the course of three years, the northeastern university's educational leadership program was revised to align with UCEA's vision and mission. Faculty revised program requirements, curriculum and pedagogy to afford candidates with transformational learning experiences centered on issues of social justice (e.g., Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Tooms & Boske, 2010). Faculty engaged in an explicit effort to understand the nuances of educational growth for aspiring school leaders, embraced the need for self-understanding, and promoted the significance of visionary work to reframe curriculum conversations and pedagogical practices (e.g., Brown, 2004, 2006; Shields, 2003).

Leading for Social Justice actively engaged students in sense-making reflective practices—a process that included increasing critical consciousness through weekly audio/video reflections (e.g., Boske, *in press*; Brown, 2006), experiential service learning (e.g., Bowden, Billig, & Holland, 2008), and artmaking (with guidance from community artist mentors) (Boske, 2009, *in press*; Shapiro, 2010). Students responded each week to 15-25 predetermined questions centered on cultural proficiency via audio and video-recorded reflections (e.g., Terrell & Lindsey, 2009), examined the lived realities of specific marginalized groups in U.S. schools (e.g., Marshall & Oliva, 2010), conducted an equity audit (e.g., Kozol, 2006; Skrla, Scheurich, & Bell McKenzie, 2009), and took a critical stance on one social justice issue. Throughout the process, students worked with a community artist mentor to translate their often emotional-laden responses into visual art that was in turn displayed at the university's gallery space at the end of the semester.

## Methodology

This study examined the overarching question: How do participants understand what it means to lead for social justice and equity in U.S. public schools? I utilized a case study approach. This methodology was particularly well-suited to this work, because case methodology affords the researcher with opportunities to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context across multiple sources of data (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Yin, 1994). Data collected for this study consisted primarily of 39 weekly audio/video reflections (three participants and 13 reflections each), field notes and course assignments (i.e., three equity audits, 27 metaphors, 15 small group written reflections, and three artmaking projects). Participants included Laura, a white female in her early thirties who worked in a suburban middle school as a math teacher in a predominantly white community; Tyrone, a black male in his mid-thirties employed as a suburban high school principal in a predominantly black

school, but white community; and Michael, a white male in his late forties who worked in a predominantly white suburban school district in a central office position.

## Analysis

Data analysis consisted of examining and categorizing data evidence to address the initial propositions of a study (Yin, 1994). To do this, I utilized a kind of pattern-matching, one of the most desirable strategies for analysis in case studies because of the ways in which this technique compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one (Trochim, 1989; Yin, 1994). Analysis yielded the following three emergent themes: (a) Increase critical consciousness ; (b) Deepened empathic responses; (c) Advocacy to activism.

## Findings

Emerging themes included the need for participants to deepen their critical consciousness, deepen empathic responses, and shift from advocacy to activism. These emergent themes center on school leaders undergoing self-transformation for meaningful systemic change. The findings suggest those interested in leading for social justice must engage in a complex process in which candidates deepen their understanding of self to lead in authentic ways to make meaningful actions aligned with the needs of the individual or community.

**Increased critical consciousness.** Tyrone, Michael and Laura understood critical reflection as central to their personal transformation. They emphasized how their artmaking afforded them spaces to problematize issues of social justice within the context of problem posing and dialogue with other learners. Michael stressed how the process afforded him with spaces to “rediscover his power and affirm that the more critically aware he became, the more he felt able to empower those he served and subsequently his own ways of knowing.

Michael titled his artmaking *Self Reflection of Educators* (see Figure 1). He created a multilayered, transparent visual piece to represent the layers of storied selves that impact an individual’s way of knowing and responding. Each sheet began with the name of the individual who documented impactful life experiences that significantly influenced their sense of self as educators and school leaders.

Educators identified three impactful life experiences that shaped their view of what it means to educate children, especially children who live on the margins. I transcribed the interviews and noted experiences each educator deemed significant, which are identified as a “storied self” on each transparent white sheet. It was to give the illusion of a journal and the ability to see within

someone's soul ... to understand them more completely ... to be present with that person ... to understand her journey and how she made meaning from her lived experiences.



Figure 1. Self Reflection of Education by Michael.

The three subjects came to believe that their artmaking was significant to understanding their aspirations in becoming educators and school leaders. They stressed a deepened critical consciousness, because they examined how their life experiences shaped their relationships of self with others. Moving from text to audio/video to artmaking afforded them with spaces to understand how their meaning-making influenced their decision-making processes. Tyrone stressed that “although people may have good intentions, good intentions are not enough to make the necessary changes we need in our schools for those who live on the margins.” Laura emphasized the need to deepen critical consciousness, “because we need to embark on building meaningful relationships with children, families and school community members...and develop an ethic of care.” Michael focused on utilizing his artmaking to uncover the need for those who serve in U.S. public schools to be more cognizant of the impact of their lived experiences and how such experiences are internalized:

My hope is this art challenges you to consider how your lived experiences have shaped who you are and decisions made along the way in addition to the need for all of us to look within through critical self-reflection and examine how our lived experiences impact how we relate to others, especially those who continue to live on the



margins. We have a tremendous amount of responsibility to look within and critically examine who we are and who we want to become in an effort to make a positive impact on our students' lives.

Participants stressed that through dialogue with self and others, they began to understand themselves as active agents. This new way of understanding enabled them to identify and create conditions for the possibility of change, which were expressed visually throughout their artmaking. Their emphasis on critical reflection was not only about deepening understanding; Tyrone, Michael and Laura stressed the need to afford themselves and those they serve with spaces to actually engage in discussions centered on issues of social justice. Such dialogue seemed to encourage curiosity, raise doubt and stimulate creativity. Within these moments of deepening their critical consciousness, their artmaking reflected on their sense making, their ways of knowing and how their ways of knowing were made and then revisited again and again.

**Deepening empathic responses.** Participants believed the critical reflections involved a critique of assumptions they often acquired during childhood, which seemed to determine their beliefs. As aspiring school leaders, such beliefs often influenced their capacity to understand the lived experiences of other people. What they determined throughout this process was which beliefs remained functional for them as leaders for social justice. Their evolving beliefs emerged throughout their critical reflection. The process increased their ability to be empathic, which included a culture of careful listening and openness to new perspectives. The validity of their initial assumptions about the lived experiences of underserved populations was challenged throughout the critical reflective process. Tyrone stressed that as he became critically aware of his assumptions about underserved populations, he “challenged how he made meaning from those experiences” and how those experiences “established habitual patterns of expectations of himself, others and those he served.” Tyrone described the significance of deepening empathic responses throughout his artmaking titled *The Struggle* (see Figure 2):

Getting teachers to step into the shoes of another is a challenging task, especially when they are White and don't acknowledge how their privilege influences the way they see the world. My artmaking integrated the same students who teachers identified as failures. The process of coming together and talking about their life experiences was incredible. What we uncovered was directly translated into our artmaking. It was authentic, accurate and fitting.

Tyrone emphasized throughout his artmaking the need to “recognize, understand and use tools to overcome hegemonic practices” in order to empower “young Black males to climb the mountain of life.” The mountain symbolized the struggles they had “undertaken as Black men who needed to be heard and understood...to be honored...to be validated.” The

pathways around the mountain represented the lived experiences of young Black males as they navigated through apartheid educational systems. At the top of the mountain, Tyrone emphasized the symbolism of the hand as “writing their own destinies.”



Figure 2. *The Struggle* by Tyrone and high school students.

Michael, Laura and Tyrone emphasized the need for school leaders to reconsider to what extent, if any, they have the capacity to understand those they serve. For these participants, they became more aware of what it meant to be empathic when they developed the capacity to enter the life of another person as well as a commitment to engage with people in the present. All of them identified the critical reflections, sense making and artmaking as critical to deepening their empathic responses, especially towards underserved populations. They realized empathy required people to have passion, understanding and interconnectedness, as well as the ability to understand that people cannot assume they see what the other sees, because of differences in lived experiences, ways of knowing, and ways of responding. Michael emphasized that “those who engage in this type of work need to reconsider their willingness and ability to understand how social, cultural, economic and political contexts influence what we do in schools.” Participants stressed that their artmaking illustrated their increased deepening of empathic responses. They noted that such responses did not require individuals to merge self with other; rather, the ability to imagine oneself as another person was considered a slow empathic immersion in which one person attempted to understand the lived experiences of others while maintaining her objectivity.



**Advocacy to activism.** Tyrone, Michael and Laura emphasized the need for aspiring school leaders to engage in leading for social justice within their school communities. The critical reflective process and artmaking required them to increase their critical consciousness. As Michael noted, “My increased consciousness encouraged me to actively engage with my school community versus merely reflecting for the sake of passivity.”

Their artmaking focused on deepening their understanding of social justice issues facing their campuses and ways in which they addressed these issues as aspiring school leaders. For example, Laura titled her artmaking *Faces of Change*. She arranged the rectangle textured and stained glass in abstract ways to represent how school leaders analyze patterns in school data and respond to school populations according to their meaning making. The bumpy textured glass symbolized paths school leaders may take when choosing to interrupt the status quo, especially when addressing issues of social justice and equity-oriented practices in schools:

Because addressing the lived realities of underserved populations (i.e. due to race, class, gender, sexual identity, religion, immigration status, native language and ability) is such a daunting task, and requires school leaders to look within, I carefully selected sections of mirrored glass so you could see your own reflection and contemplate to what extent, if any, you have committed yourself as a faces of change ... some glass pieces were left clear to represent how you can see someone’s “true self” when immersing yourself in this courageous work.



Figure 3. *Faces of Change* by Laura

Laura was “in search of genuine, caring school leaders committed to interrupting oppressive practices in schools” and Tyrone “fought hard to find solutions to the tough problems facing his community.” Michael emphasized “the need for change to begin from within and acting on that change right here and right now.”

The subjects emphasized the need to shift from advocating for underserved populations to building on community potential through empowerment. Laura met with her superintendent regarding her equity audit work. He questioned the data collected as well as the lived realities of marginalized populations within the school community. Laura emphasized the need to “walk the superintendent through the process” in order for him to understand the wider implications of choosing to perpetuate oppressive practices especially for children who identified as Black and children receiving special education services. The superintendent requested Laura to collect, analyze and present equity audit data to his central office personnel as well as principals across the district. After one year, Laura presented her findings. The superintendent sent out a message to families, the media and all school district employees regarding changes in policy and practice:

We do not offer every special education program in every building. Oftentimes, this results in students being forced to leave their home school unnecessarily when there is no legitimate reason we cannot provide the services they need in their home schools. Instead of moving children with disabilities to our great programs, when appropriate, we are going to bring our great programs to the children who need them ... We are doing this because it is the right thing to do.

Michael, Laura and Tyrone recognized this process as “transformative” and “essential” to deepening their understanding, ability and willingness to be agents of change for those they served, especially for disenfranchised populations.

## Discussion

Utilizing the senses (sight and sound) through a myriad of learning opportunities (i.e., written text, audio, video, metaphor, artmaking, and equity audits) afforded participants with spaces to experience feeling to form and form to feeling (Langer, 1953). As participants moved from text to audio to visual metaphors through artmaking to activism, they came to know and lived their inquiries, which centered on social justice and equity issues facing U.S. public schools. They responded to concerns raised about the importance of addressing issues of social justice. As they deepened their empathic responses, they increased their readiness to interrupt oppressive practices on their campuses as well as within themselves. Making connections among critical reflection, art-making and sense-making

emphasized the need for participants to imagine a better state of being (Greene, 1995). The connections stressed the significance of artmaking as a vehicle to transform an individual's consciousness, enlarge the imagination and encourage problem-solving (Eisner, 2002). The process of artmaking played a significant role in their sense-making, because the act of knowing was interconnected with their affect, intuition and imaginative thinking (Eisner, 2008; Zwicky, 2003).

For these participants, art-making was not about feelings and emotions. Rather, art-making was how each of them came to know (Langer, 1982). The inclusive experiences offered them opportunities to increase their critical consciousness and examine how their identities were constructed as well as how their identities influenced their responses, especially towards underserved populations. Artmaking became a symbolic projection of vital emotion and intellectual tensions among the mind, feeling and process (Langer, 1972). Therefore, artmaking as sense making reaffirms the significance of lived experiences and personal knowing of what it means to lead for social justice as school leaders (e.g., Land & Stovall, 2009).

The interconnectedness among the senses, lived experiences, and developing school leadership identity afforded them with spaces to create multiple meanings centering on what it meant to lead for equity and social justice (see Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006). School leaders made connections among what they saw, heard, and experienced by connecting their emotion-laden experiences through sense-making, which directly impacted their ways of knowing (Langer, 1982) and responding to those they served. This sense-making process guided them through a process in which their senses transformed their consciousness (Boske, 2011b; Eisner, 2002), deepened their understanding of their beliefs and attitudes towards power (Allen, 1995), and created spaces centered on an ethic of care through imaginative possibilities (Boske & McNery, 2011; Greene, 1995; Noddings, 1984). Utilizing these transformative curricular practices afforded participants with spaces to make sense of their lived experiences as individuals, school leaders, and activists. This sensory exploration created spaces for each of them to consider their actions, the significance of their actions in relation to others, and opportunities to reflect and act upon their impact in schools, especially for those from underserved populations (e.g., Ellsworth, 2005; Springgay, 2008). They took steps to promote and identify themselves as catalysts—activists for social justice and equity in schools and community-at-large (see Bogotch, 2002; Boske, *in press*; Boske & McNery, 2011).

### **Implications**

School leaders are faced with the challenge to eliminate long-standing academic disparities between those who are members of the cultural majority (i.e., White, middle class, English speaking, able body/mind,

U.S. citizens, Christian, and heterosexual) and those who are marginalized (i.e., race, class, ability, sexual identity, religion, immigration status, language) (Foster & Tillman, 2009; Kozol, 2006; Lopez, 2003; Marshall & Oliva, 2010). Those interested in leading for social justice must begin to understand how to interrupt oppressive school practices in an effort to improve the lives and educational experiences of all children, especially those from underserved populations (Bogotch, 2002; Boske & Tooms, 2010a, 2010b; Tooms & Boske, 2010; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Faculty preparing teachers and school leaders might play closer attention to the ways in which candidates understand how their lived experiences influence their capacity and willingness to identify themselves as catalysts for systemic change, especially for those who are underserved.

## Conclusion

There is a need for school leaders to deepen their understanding of social justice work in schools and the influence of their ways of knowing (Langer, 1953). Understanding the impact of meaning-making through critical reflection, sense making and artmaking are some of the pathways to increasing a school leader's critical consciousness regarding social justice and equity work in schools (Boske, in press; Theoharis, 2007). This article opens up possibilities to deepen understanding in how to prepare school leaders' ways of knowing through sensory experiences for the purpose of meaningful change. The findings encourage those who prepare school leaders to expand candidates' ways of knowing and responding to those they serve (e.g., Boske & Tooms, 2010a, 2010b). The intersections of critical reflection, sense making and artmaking afford tremendous possibilities for teaching and learning by placing pedagogy at the center of programmatic practices with knowledge and experience in the making (e.g., Ellsworth, 2005).

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**Christa Boske is an Associate Professor in the Department of Foundations, Leadership, and Administration at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.**