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## Inspiring Creativity in Urban School Leaders: Lessons From the Performing Arts

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents an analysis of how guided engagement with the arts can provide leadership lessons for school leaders and administrators. The study was conducted as part of two projects funded by the School Leadership Program (SLP) grants from the U.S. Department of Education. The principal interns and practicing school leaders participated in arts engagement activities (jazz ensemble, chamber orchestra, and tango dance) facilitated by teaching artists from the Maxine Green Center for Aesthetic Education and Social Imagination. Participants attended experiential workshops with teaching artists, observed the art form and then listened to the process and techniques used by the artists. Data sources for the study included observations, reflective narratives and interviews with participants. These were analyzed using grounded theory methods. The findings indicate that guided engagement with the arts provide lessons to school leaders in the form of interdisciplinary analogies and metaphors. The narratives generated by artists and participants served as a bridge: building connections between leadership and artistic practice. The experience encouraged participants to: gain new perspectives on optimal contexts for learning, develop a nuanced understanding of leadership, move from abstract to concrete understanding of relational constructs, and feel empowered through trying new experiences. Implications of the findings, including translating the lessons into actual practice and the addressing the needs of participants who did not connect with the sessions, are also discussed.

## **Background**

In the current climate of accountability, there are intense pressures on student achievement in low performing schools. Preparing effective urban principals for these low performing schools has been identified as a pressing need—a need not likely to be satisfied in the near future (Hale & Moorman, 2003; Fullan, 1985; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). In addition to the overall stress and overwhelming responsibilities of the position (McAdams, 1998; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Whitaker, 2001), there are few financial or other incentives to make the move from a teaching position to a principalship (Bowles, King, & Crow, 2000; Carrigan, Brown & Jenkins, 1999; Educational Research Service, 1998; Bouchard, Cervone, Hayden, Riggins-Newby, & Zarlengo, 2002; Whitaker, 2001). Additionally, schools that are often most in need of the best prepared leaders have a particularly difficult time recruiting and retaining such candidates (Whitaker, 2001). The impasse with the challenges of staffing and retaining competent leaders in urban schools requires creative solutions. It requires leaders who can work around and with the system and its constraints in order to make the school a successful, innovative learning environment. School leaders are often in the unenviable position of creating a climate of high achievement in schools while having few, if any options for changing the context of the instruction and professional development in the schools. The workplace of the school is constructed in response to the perceptions of threats from the external environment including low risk taking especially in the realms of learning among the teachers and staff (Pegg, 2010). Creativity is perceived as a luxury in a setting that is trying to combat criticism of inadequate instructional structures as measured by student achievement on standardized tests.

According to Greene (1994) many of the entrenched challenges of urban schools can be addressed through active engagement with the arts. She acknowledges the skepticism associated with the arts: that the arts are isolated aesthetic experiences, are intrinsically valuable, but that they do not have to lead to further goods or measurable outcomes to be justified. She counters that argument with the creative possibilities offered through the arts and says that “wide awakeness,” reflection, the sense of the unexpected associated with such experiences may be precisely what are needed to stimulate the kinds of reflective practice and reflective learning all of us hope to see. She believes that no encounters release the imagination in the way that thoughtful engagement with works of art or aesthetic enactments. Imagination is the capacity that enables us to move through the barriers of the taken-for-granted and summon up alternative possibilities for living and being in the world. It permits us to set aside (at least for a while) the stiflingly familiar and the banal; to suspend judgment and, for a time, live in wonder. It opens us to visions of the possible rather than the predictable; it permits us, if we choose to give our imaginations free play and look at things as they could be otherwise. Greene (1993) further argues for artistic inquiry and engagement as a means to achieve democratic ideals of equity and inclusion, offering us the option to think of

human beings in terms of open possibility, in terms of freedom and the power to choose. She refers to this aspect of the imagination as “social imagination.” This is especially salient in the context of the diverse populations of urban schools. The sense of possibility and hope is what the arts provide to the human imagination (Greene, 2006). Furthermore many teachers and administrators have been deprived of contact with the arts, sometimes because of the neglect of the arts during their schooling, family poverty, or because they simply were not wanted in the concert halls or in the museums' marble corridors, keeping works of art inaccessible (Greene, 2007).

Some leadership development programs in business have begun to examine the role of the arts in developing creativity among business students and managers. Reflecting on the challenges of a stressful work environment, Fraiberg (2010) examined the role of poetry in expressing some of these frustrations. Poetry and the visual arts have been applied to develop emotional intelligence in business students (Harrison & Akinc, 2000). Given the emphasis on analytical aspects of leadership development, some management schools have begun to incorporate the use of metaphors to promote creativity in students (Weick, 2003). Tierney, Farmer and Graen (1999), suggested that in the context of the workplace interaction with leadership as well as intrinsic motivation often determine whether or not innovative work is done. Thus all elements are needed: inner motivation from the employee as well as supportive leadership that recognizes and rewards creativity. Isaksen and Akkerman (2011) found that the working atmosphere within an organization has an important influence on its level of innovative productivity. Organizational leaders influence innovative productivity as well as the climate for creativity and innovation.

Given the challenges of urban schools and leadership, how might school leaders create environments for creativity, innovation and student success? Moreover, the studies that have examined the role of the arts in urban schools have focused on its impact on students (Catterall, 2005). For example, studies that focused on student achievement have found that when students have the opportunity to engage in the arts it has a profoundly positive influence on their performance in school. This is particularly true of students from high poverty backgrounds. Urban schools disproportionately represent students from under resourced and impoverished backgrounds. These studies do not however speak to how arts engagement impacts the effectiveness of principals and school leaders. Adult learners, as is now understood, require specific teaching strategies in order to maximize effective learning. It stands to reason that adults learning to be leaders and educators of other adults require even more specialized strategies. A useful way to engage adult learners is through experiential learning. Moreover, learning by doing, or “experiential learning” has been linked with a host of benefits, including increased student enthusiasm (Dabbour, 1997), increased performance on assignments (Perry et al., 1996), higher levels of self-confidence (Anderman & Young,

1994; Ramocki, 1987), enhancement of learning (Hamer, 2000; Lawson,1995), enhancement of creativity and social skills (Livingson & Lynch, 2002), and improvement in critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Abson, 1994; Gremler et al., 2000; Zoller,1987).

Most of the studies cited above that examine the role of creativity in the workplace are from the fields of business management and marketing. Although Maxine Greene offers a conceptual framework for the role of imagination and the arts in society, few studies have examined these ideas with data from participants. Such an approach to imagination and creativity has not been seen in school leadership preparation or development initiatives. Few studies have examined the role of such intentional coursework in creativity and the arts on the attitudes and actions of school leaders.

### ***Project Summary***

This paper includes data from two leadership development projects set in urban school districts in the northeastern United States. The leadership preparation projects were aimed at preparing experienced teachers from the districts to take on leadership positions (as principals or assistant principals) in the same district. The overall curriculum for the projects included instruction in various aspects of being effective urban school leaders, being mentored by exemplary leaders, assessments of leadership development and internships in the schools. A unique feature of the curriculum was the focus on developing creativity and imagination among the project participants. The projects incorporated aspects of the philosophy and the methodology supported by the Maxine Greene Center for Aesthetic Education and Social Imagination (<http://www.maxinegreene.org/>). The mission of the center is to provide opportunities for dialogue, reflection and interaction in diverse communities with a focus on works of art. Building on Dr. Greene's argument that the full range of human experience is not available to most individuals, but that it can be explored through literature and the arts, the Center seeks to form and strengthen alliances among arts and cultural organizations, educational institutions as well as individual educators, teaching artists and experts from other fields who are engaged in aesthetic education, inquiry, and social imagination. To that end, the Center works to build awareness through experiential learning and inspiring imagination to address many of the issues of social injustice in the world. The center has a cadre of teaching artists who help build educational connections between the artists and the participant spectator through experiential seminars.

The creativity and imagination experiential seminars conducted for this project were facilitated by staff and teaching artists from the Maxine Greene Center. Inspired by Eisner's (2002) ideas on what the arts teach us, the program faculty sought to use artistic performances as an instructional tool to inspire school-wide change. The goals were to focus on Eisner's (2002) lessons from the arts, e.g., the arts' position in the school curriculum symbolizes to the

children□what adults believe is important, arts help us say what cannot be said; arts help make connections and relationships, and arts encourage the celebration of multiple perspectives. The sessions were created and customized to help aspiring leaders make connections between their leadership practice and the practice of art making through analogous experiences in the arts. The seminars contained four key elements relating to aesthetic education – inquiry, art-making, contextual exploration and reflection. Three seminars are included in the analysis conducted for this study. These included a session each on tango dancing, chamber orchestra ensemble, and jazz ensemble.

The teaching artists were given a general framework by the program faculty that the arts experiences needed to reinforce ideas of collaboration, trust and learning including knowing when to lead and when to follow. Teaching artists took these guidelines and translated them into group activities involving simple rhythms, vocalizations, simple movement and sound improvisations, and dance steps. For example, in the tango workshop participants did simple movements by themselves and with a partner to learn what it is like to take turns in the dance form. Similarly in the jazz workshop participants did improvisations using vocals, tambourines and maracas to explore the dynamics of group music making. These elements helped create for the participants an experience of the art form at its most basic level. The experiential workshop component was typically an hour long and preceded the viewing of the artistic performance. After the performance, the participants/ audience engaged in a question and answer session with the performing artists about their mutual experiences and learning. Serving as educators and facilitators, teaching artists helped participants overcome resistance and get an informed and enhanced experience of the art form and the performance. These discussions and experiences then became a foundation for further discussion around leadership development in their academic curriculum.

### **Methods**

The authors of this paper include the lead faculty for the program, evaluators for the two leadership projects and a teaching artist who conducted several of the workshops preceding the performances. The manuscript was prepared jointly and represents the perspectives of all the co-authors. All data collection and analysis were conducted with the permission of the Institutional Review Board. The data for this study included interviews with participating current and aspiring urban school leaders, reflective papers and observations of arts engagement sessions. Twenty interviews were conducted in all. These included current school leaders (n=2), district administrative leaders (n=2), principal mentors (n=2) as well as principal interns (n=14) from two urban school leadership development programs. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and all identifiers were removed to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. The qualitative data were coded first using open codes, then clustered as axial codes and finally coded using selective codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Emergent themes were identified and discussed in the research team through an iterative process until distinct patterns were evident (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The validity of the qualitative data was strengthened by prolonged time in the field, thick descriptions including verbatim notes and transcription (Shenton, 2004), negative case analysis (Corbin, 2004), reflective discussions, peer debriefing and scrutiny (Creswell, 2003), and purposeful sampling of core study participants (Patton, 1990). Data from the observations and interviews were triangulated (Creswell, 2003) with reflective papers from the participants to help shed light on the learning processes and identified links between leadership practice and the arts.

### **Results**

The analysis of the participants' narrative reflections on the experiential engagement with the arts, indicates several recurring themes of intrapersonal and interpersonal learning in the context of the schools and school leadership. The art experiential was meant to "spark" new thinking and new ideas around leadership and creativity. The session facilitator, teaching artists and artists encouraged participants to reflect on the experience and express their comments openly. These comments made during the sessions were like seeds that were later discussed and developed further in the classroom curriculum with the help of program faculty. Some students made the connections to leadership spontaneously during the sessions itself, while others needed more support to link the learning to their practice. Some of the program mentors also attended the sessions and reinforced ideas in discussions and interactions. In addition to classroom discussions, the aspiring principals were also required to integrate creative ideas into their final project, which involved creating an innovative visionary school. The reflections and insights generated by the aspiring school leaders were captured systematically by the project evaluators, who attended the sessions and conducted individual interviews with the participants. Participants were asked questions about their impressions of the creativity and imagination sessions, what they learned from it, as well as whether and how they implemented lessons learned back in their own schools.

The themes that emerged from the data included gaining new perspectives on optimal contexts for learning, developing a deeper understanding of the nature of collaboration and creativity in educational settings, articulating new dimensions and nuances of leadership, and the benefits of risk taking and creative problem solving. In addition we will discuss some successes and challenges of translating the lessons learned during the arts workshops into actual practice are also described.

### ***Optimal Contexts for Learning***

The context for learning through the arts was modeled first by the program faculty who welcomed the students to attend the session with an “open mind” and a willingness to try something new. That directive was further reinforced by the ways in which the teaching artists set up the session. Given that a majority of the participants were not artists and had limited expertise in any art form, there was expectedly some apprehension and concern about whether the arts sessions would be applicable to them. To some, it was initially an intimidating experience. At least one participant in each session would refer to their inability to make music or dance (“I cannot sing,” “I have two left feet,” etc.). For a small minority of participants, art forms could be emotionally challenging based on prior negative experiences. For example, one respondent said, “Music lessons make me very anxious. It reminds me of school and I was terrible at singing.” But for the majority of the participants, this diffidence surrounding the arts was overcome through the support and encouragement of the teaching artists and other participants. By opening up the session to activities that encouraged expression of words and analogies, the task of understanding the expressive elements of the art form was made accessible. Teaching artists also designed workshop activities into simple units of rhythms, steps, sounds or words that precluded the need for any artistic talent. In particular, participants referred to the resulting safe and creative context for learning established by the facilitating teaching artist.

She (the teaching artist) created a warm and secure environment where students wanted to share out and know that no matter what they were saying, their opinion was valued. She provided engagement with the hands on activities, which made me feel as if I was a part of the assignment and not just being lectured.  
(African American male principal intern)

I am not the best participant in musical situations (I love music but do not fancy myself to be a musician of any kind). For me, it was a nice learning tool that served more as an ice-breaker for what took place later. The teaching artist was great at building a common "stage" for all to participate. She built a common vocabulary, used simple beats to include all and ultimately made everyone feel comfortable. It is a really wonderful demonstration in inclusionary learning!  
(White male principal intern)

### ***Empowerment Through New Experiences:***

In the beginning stages of the workshop, there were some reservations and embarrassed smiles as participants began working with strangers. As the workshops progressed and participants engaged in the experiential components, the self-consciousness slowly diminished



and there often was laughter, joyful expression, experimentation and engagement. This modeled for participants the advantages of taking risks and opening themselves up to new experiences and new learning. The experiences served to encourage participants to try something new: to take a risk, potentially learn something together, reach out to others and gain a sense of agency and empowerment. Participants referred to learning more about themselves and new potential ways of being.

It is nice to see the performers and different connections between art. It's challenging to me, because I'm more of a manager, and I like to do things in a traditional way. So for me to see something in a more creative way... I appreciate it, because I think I'm going to probably need to do something like that from time to time if I ever am in leadership as a principal...I want to do something that'll maybe speak to the other brained people, who are on the other side.

(Hispanic male principal intern)

Art and aesthetics have been an integral part of this program. I want to build experiences for my staff and students that shake them out of their complacency. I want to build experiences that offer new ways of looking at the world, because I want the educators I work with to do the same for our students.

(White male principal intern)

Another participant referred to changes in her own approach to motivate and support her staff through first building trust:

I have used the sessions to reflect on my adaptive practice and realized that I need to work on my emotional infrastructure ...to provoke employees but also make them feel secure through trust.

(White female principal)

### ***Understanding the Nature of Collaboration and Creativity in Educational Settings***

Reflections and descriptive conversations on the experiential component of the workshop and the performance helped participants see the analogous connections between collaboration, creativity and leadership.

We live in such a sanitized and dull school society that silences all of the wonderful noises and sounds that people make. We have to turn off the mute and listen to the music, whether it is a comfortable experience or not. I believe very strongly in building community and collaboration, but also experiencing discomfort, because we DO NOT learn unless we are in our zones of proximal

development.

(White male principal intern)

I didn't truly appreciate the arts and their value for academics but now I see a little more clearly that the aim of a quality education is to produce "performers," life performers. As an educator, current teacher and aspiring school leader, I made connections by seeing how motivating it is for all stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members) to be reminded through performance and final products that this is what we are aiming for all of us... from students at our schools to citizens at large.

(Hispanic male principal intern)

### ***Learning the Nuances of Leadership***

In interviews, participants were asked directly about what they took away from the experiences of engaging with the art form, seeing a performance and listening to the collaborative and creative processes of the artists. In the process of articulating the experiences of dancing together or making music together, participants also referred to subtleties and nuances of being a leader including when and how to be a follower. For example, in the workshop session that preceded the tango performance, respondents worked individually and then in pairs to explore individual experiences of pace, speed, pushing, pulling, etc. "Trust" emerged as participants got to "know" each other and began to feel familiar.

It takes time to build trust and let go of caution when you are engaged in unfamiliar learning activities...As a leader who is busy leading, you need help to detect what is happening around you...Followers can also lead when the moment is right. As a leader, you have to give your follower opportunities to lead.

(Comments made during group workshop)

Tango, like many other art forms, is not an exercise of freestyle artistic expression but a structured and intentional activity. Therefore, tango dancers don't lead by default or convenience. Neither should leaders. There has to be a great amount of emotional engagement and intentional pursuing in both tango and leadership.

(Comments made during group workshop)

Participants' experiences with the workshop and art form ignited some reflection around learning more about one self, in particular the self-as-leader. Referring to the session on tango and jazz, respondents spoke of what they learned.

I learned that a leader needs to know when to lead. I've tried to pick up clues as to when I can lead and when I need to wait on those that are following.

(Hispanic male principal intern)

For me, probably the most impactful was actually with the jazz, and we were in small groups. And our person gave us the objective, and we had to then create something. Because we couldn't just all be the leader, we had to figure out who had the more base knowledge, so that we could get started, and then we pulled out our individual strengths. So we had to figure out who was not necessarily the most intelligent or most educated, but who has the most background connection to each piece, so that we could figure out how to create the music, and how we were going to do the presentation. And it really got me thinking about leadership in how it relates to [refers to own school]...Then about how it is necessary to elicit what people's strengths are, their background connections in assigning roles or tasks. And what I took away from that is you really need to understand what somebody's background is and their connections and their strengths, so that you're best utilizing them, but also what you need, which is the organization, whether it's in test scores, team building, camaraderie, whatever the goal is that you have."

(White female principal intern)

### ***Abstract to Concrete Understanding of Relational Constructs***

Some participants made the connection between the analogies and metaphors in the art form and experiences with the teaching artists through watching performances. These school leaders were able to connect the insights they gained from an informed engagement with the arts, with their own practice as educators and school leaders. For example, participants made links from chamber orchestra ensembles to differentiated leadership and differentiation in the classroom. Participants also spoke about the unique qualities of art that help build connections, break down barriers and link different communities and cultures.

A lot of it (application of learning into practice) is going to be through professional development but also building relationships with students. Like students with other students in things like two groups of people who aren't getting along, and they're having issues. You could use creativity rounds to break those barriers down because there's a lot of music and dance and art that people share, but they don't even realize it because they're from different cultures

(White female principal intern)

I have been more appreciative of the arts and have been more encouraging to

students who are talented or interested in the arts.  
(Hispanic male principal intern)

Still others made links between the interdependence of leaders and their teams through engagement with tango session. Narrative description of the experience with the art forms helped bridge two traditionally unrelated disciplines: school leadership and artistic expression. Responses to the experiences in the art forms helped participants articulate lessons that transferred learning from one discipline (arts) to another (leadership). Speech acts and articulation of the personal experience seemed to bridge one discipline by analogy to another. Articulation of the experiences led to deepening the group's understanding of what it meant to lead and what it meant to follow. The words and phrases used to describe the experience of dancing the tango can immediately be viewed as being relevant to the leaders' roles as principals and assistant principals in their schools.

As a leader who is busy leading, you need help to detect what is happening around you; Followers can also lead when the moment is right. As a leader, you have to give your followers opportunities to lead.  
(White female principal intern)

This description led to further discussion of group dynamics and how leaders can facilitate the success of the different members of the group. Referring to the dynamic in the jazz group, one participant said:

Each of the musicians is an expert in their instrument: drums, guitar, voice, bass, piano. They are experts. But they make it work together as a group. They might have one main leader who brought everyone together, but they work as a group and each person gets their time to do a solo and shine.  
(White female Principal)

The experiences of engaging with the arts and developing insights through the experiential component also highlights ways in which school leaders can explore new options to solve some of the pressing issues in urban schools. Some participants were enthused by the sessions and took it to their own schools and professional contexts. They were able to see what the session offered conceptually and take that learning to create new ways to bring about change in their schools.

Just the fact that you get to think about being creative, being innovative...these musicians or dancers, how they talk about the collaboration that they have amongst each other so they can sound good or dance well and play at the same

time and everything comes out the way it should be. And I think that translates well into the work of an (school) administrator—of how we need to learn how to collaborate with the teacher and stakeholders, and how we have to try to sometimes be creative because sometimes with the resources we have, we just have to be as creative as, as much as we can.

(African American male principal intern)

Also the jazz session taught me the importance of collaboration. I have used the buildup technique used by the teaching artist to spark interest and create a comfort level to spur collaboration with my team.

(African American female principal)

Despite the positive experiences and lessons learned in the session there are also some participants who did not find the sessions as useful. As discussed earlier, some participants were hindered by prior feelings of inadequacy around artistic expression. A few others did not find value in the workshops because they sought a more traditional model of leadership development training. Another participant said that she identified herself as being very creative and did not really need these sessions. One participant cited logistical challenges to attending the sessions, which were held mostly on weekends.

Some participants who did attend the session felt hindered by their school environments and unable to implement lessons learned. They struggled to take the insights and translate them to the context of their own schools especially if they did not perceive themselves as being able to change much in their schools. Some participants (who are not yet in full-time leadership positions) used it in their own lessons as an instructional tool rather than as a leadership practice.

I liked it, because it adds another dimension to learning and explore and building relationships. I love the art. I love music, I love dance. But those are things that I do to relieve stress... but for me I can't use it right now. My principal has no interest in me bringing anything like that into our building. So I'm putting it away to use when I get my own school... which is very frustrating because of what my situation is...but it is knowing that I'll pull it out when I'm in a position to be able to use it.

(White female principal intern)

The changes have sometimes also been modest and related to how the school leader interacts with their staff and colleagues.

I'm an outsider, it's my first year at this new school, and so I think in trying to prove myself to the staff. I think I've gained their trust and been able to have real conversations with people that ultimately do take me seriously. I've seen application of the things we've done in class, lots of places I think it's hard to integrate structural changes in the middle of the year and when the year starts and when you're a first year person at a school, and so I think most of the effect and changes that I've made I've tried to take approach of having a more a long term effect on the school and be slow and steady. I would say in the areas of working with affecting people, delivering professional development, encouraging creativity, and trying to develop trust, and using those concepts to kind of guide my actions at the school, I'd say that's kind of what I've done.

(Hispanic male, principal intern)

### **Discussion and Implications**

This paper highlights how experiential engagement in the arts can inspire creativity and enable learning of the nuances of leadership among aspiring urban school leaders and administrators. The goal was to address a gap in the literature on the applications of creativity in the urban school leadership context and to offer new tools and techniques to aspiring school leaders. The approach described in this study offers school leaders a new way of approaching the challenges in their schools and the practice of leadership. The lessons learned related to self-awareness, reflection, collaboration, innovation and trust among school leaders, teachers and students. This is especially salient in the context of urban schools that often struggle to recruit and retain inspired and committed school leaders.

By demonstrating thoughtful lesson planning, preparation and implementation of workshops, the teaching artists modeled for participants *optimal contexts for learning*. Through these experiential workshops guided by an expert teaching artist, the participants learned to engage with the art form at an individual level. The supportive, non-judgmental collaborative environment created by the teaching artists and educators helped participants share their thoughts openly and engage in authentic self-reflection. As described by Greene (2006), the arts encouraged imaginative self-expression through music, dance and narratives. Participants referred to becoming unexpectedly open to trying new forms of expression in this setting. A few participants also applied the lessons learned to the context of their own schools and classrooms.

A key element of learning was the articulation of experience in one discipline (arts) that mirrored the experience in another discipline (school leadership). The metaphor of the art form and the analogies expressed during the workshops helped the participants articulate a more *nuanced understanding of leadership*, their style as a leader and generate ideas on how

to improve their skills and practice. Mills (2010) highlights the usefulness of metaphors, particularly the jazz metaphor in enabling learning in students of business, management and marketing. When choosing a metaphor or analogy, we are aiming for a mechanism that is easily understandable, translates well, is not contextually or culturally constrained and therefore can successfully aid student visualization and action. As a universal language, music often transcends cultures, languages, and other differences and contexts quite successfully. This lends to the jazz metaphor's appeal for use in today's more globally populated classrooms (as opposed to metaphors based, for example, on sporting, business, or other contextually based images). Jazz has also been identified as an important metaphor in theory development for organizational studies (Kamoche, Cunha & Cunha, 2003) and has also been seen in a range of management literature dealing with strategic fit (Neilsen, 1992), organizational development (Lewin, 1998), new product development (Kamoche & Cunha, 2001; Moorman & Miner, 1998), leadership (Newton, 2004), and organizational networks (Pavlovich, 2003). The narrative descriptions generated by the participants also highlighted the role of reflection and language in bridging two disparate disciplines (arts and school leadership) and enabled the transfer of learning (Catterall, 2005) from one to the other. For example, analogous to the different skills of members of a jazz ensemble, participants identified the dynamic nature of leadership such that each person in a team could take on a leadership role based on expertise as related to the school context.

The successful individual experience of participating in a new art form encouraged the development of *a sense of empowerment and agency*. It highlighted the importance of creative professional development for leaders and their staff. The study also demonstrated the need to consider differentiation and experiential components for adult learners. As Greene (1994) indicates, the arts can be a springboard for innovation, and this study demonstrates "how" principals can apply the lessons from the arts, and, transfer learning from one discipline to another. The experiential component enabled participants to turn *abstract words like trust and collaboration into a concrete understanding of relational constructs*. Through an experienced understanding of the rhythms, trust and collaboration that are integral to a successful tango performance, participants identified the analogies in the dynamic between the artists in the tango duo and their own role as a leader interacting with a staff member, student, teacher or community partner in the school.

In addition, the format of the workshops and the opportunity to experience a live performance, together helped facilitate ongoing discussion within a supportive community of peers that was essential to overcome barriers to innovation and creativity in the school culture. This is an especially salient point because many of the urban schools with diverse populations of students and teachers require greater efforts to build bridges and connections across barriers of language, culture and socio-economic backgrounds. Some of the participants who engaged

with the materials and content took it back to their school and applied them in a variety of ways. To some, it offered new perspectives on the way they interact with staff and colleagues at their schools. To others, it offered ideas on how to promote innovation and encourage creativity in the functioning of the school. A few of the participants integrated lessons learned into their own practice as educators by integrating arts based learning into their classroom lesson plans.

Despite many of the lessons learned, there remain some questions that need further study. The respondents who actively participated in the sessions were aspiring and experienced school leaders who were open and willing to try out the experiential lessons in the sessions. The creativity sessions were not mandatory to all participating school leaders and as a result not everyone chose to attend when given a choice. Some students did not value the sessions either because they sought a more traditional leadership preparation program or found the lessons unhelpful for their practice. A few responses from those who didn't attend sessions indicated resistance stemming from prior negative experiences with participation in the arts. At every session, there were individuals who spoke about their diffidence and lack of skill in the art form.

Although the teaching artists and the facilitators helped dispel the perception that any skills were needed, it is possible that not all participants felt connected to or appreciated the art forms. This is an important educational issue to consider in future studies, namely, how students' prior associations or fears with the arts might affect their ability to learn and benefit from the lessons the arts have to offer. These responses are not unlike other commonly known challenges in learning such as when a topic or method of delivery does not resonate with a student. Even though a student might not respond in the moment, there might be an opportunity for growth and learning at different points in time, and the experience itself might provide a doorway to future more positive experiences. Another consideration is that the metaphor of the art form and the associated analogies might be better suited to some schools, contexts and individuals than others. Participants could also be encouraged to identify other art forms, cultural activities or sports activities that might provide similar metaphors and analogies for reflection and learning. Another identified challenge was taking the lessons learned and translating them into actionable plans. Further research is needed on the factors that help and/or hinder transfer of learning into action. Some participants reported being unable to translate the lessons learned into their school contexts, citing difficulties in changing the structures and systems in their schools and not having buy in from staff for their innovations and ideas. One component for further consideration is the challenge of fostering creativity among participants who do not connect to the format of the sessions described in this study. In addition, future research could examine ways to encourage innovative and



imaginative thinking among participants and whether they can be taught to seek out inspirational tools for their work as leaders in schools.

### **Conclusions**

The study demonstrates how the arts can be a learning tool, and how individual leaders can potentially translate (through reflection) the metaphors and insights gained from the arts into greater effectiveness in their everyday practice. The lessons sought to reinforce the idea that school leaders have the opportunity and privilege to inspire school wide acceptance of creativity and imaginative problem solving and can influence change beyond the level of the individual classroom teacher. Further study is needed to understand how creativity and innovation can be taught to school leaders, sustained in leadership practice and incorporated into a school's culture.

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