

In Pursuit of Educational Justice and Liberated Hearts

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This article contributes to a discussion about educational leadership programs related to social justice and diversity. It focuses on the development of social justice leaders through a doctoral program that culminates in a Doctorate in Educational Justice. The program's design is intended to empower graduates to act with hearts liberated through moral courage and competency in social discourse as a form of identity.

Introduction

How do social justice leaders enhance self-awareness, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions regarding educational justice? The first century educator, Quintilian, provided an answer: "The job of an educator is to arrange victories for students." Victories arise from liberated hearts. Such hearts are capable of being fully present in the lives of others (Palmer, 2002). The term, "liberated heart," refers to the outcome of recognizing one's egocentrism and then challenging that egocentrism through reflective judgment. Such judgment involves serious consideration of multiple perspectives beyond one's own. If one chooses to be a social justice leader, then one takes on the additional goal of attaining proficiency in social justice discourse. This involves a commitment to embrace and promote respect for the dignity and worth of people marginalized in society. Such adult development necessitates facing one's prejudices rather than trying to justify the righteousness of their existence. While people may not totally overcome prejudices and the emotional reactivity they evoke, a social justice leader monitors his or her own thinking to distinguish whether critical thinking or prejudicial thinking is taking place. Furthermore, within the context of social justice, a primary intention is universal love as the highest state of human development. "It seems the less you open your heart to others, the more your heart suffers" (Robbins, 2006, p. 223). The purpose of this article is to share how a doctoral degree program at the University of Redlands focuses on developing an authentic educational justice leader whose identity is consistent with social justice. The following story captures the dilemma facing each student entering the program and being invited to identify personally held unexamined assumptions and challenging these deeply held, but possibly uninformed, beliefs:

The Truth Shop

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the name of the shop: THE TRUTH SHOP.

The saleswoman was very polite: What kind of truth did I wish to purchase, partial or whole? “The whole truth, of course,” I said. No deceptions for me, no defenses, no rationalizations. I wanted my truth plain and unadulterated. She waved me on to another side of the store. The salesman there pointed to the price tag. “The price is very high sir,” he said. “What is it?” I asked, determined to get the whole truth no matter what it cost. “Your security, sir,” he answered.

I came away with a heavy heart.

I still need the safety of my unquestioned beliefs (De Mello, 1982, p. 88).

Persevering in Spite of a Heavy Heart

Addressing one’s unquestioned but deeply held beliefs reaches to the core of one’s identity. Within the doctoral program, the student who is courageous perseveres in realizing how others in this society experience marginalization in its myriad of forms. Rather than picking which forms of marginalization to address and which to ignore, the person strives to end all of the following forms of discrimination and prejudice existing in education and society: (1) ableism (discrimination based on one’s challenges whether they be physical or mental), (2) ageism (exclusion based on age whether young or old), (3) classism (marginalization based on one’s lower socioeconomic status and judgments made against them as being of lower intelligence and morality), (4) genderism (harassment based on not fulfilling stereotypical role expectations of how males should act and how females should act), (5) heterosexism (oppression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual people on the basis of homophobia), (6) racism (discrimination and exclusion based on race), (7) religious oppression (marginalization of others based on their religion or lack of religion by those possessing the dominant religious ideology that may be connected to nationalism through syncretism), and (8) sexism (discrimination based on one’s sex as male or female; historically, this has taken the form of oppression of females based on the assumption of the superiority of males, especially the existence of white male privilege). Although these constitute prejudices, people perpetuating them may go to great lengths to justify discriminatory behavior to one or more of the outlined forms of oppression as being morally correct.

These forms of marginalization and discrimination are woven into the fabric of social institutions such that people of entitlement tend to accept them without question. The very institutionalization of oppression can result in illogical conclusions that such practices are acceptable. Take, for example, white privilege and entitlement. Those thus advantaged may deny that it exists by claiming what they attained happened because of meritocracy.

Each major core class, including Social Justice Theories and Issues in Education; Ethics in Educational Leadership; Sociopolitical Leadership and Education Policy and Reform; Information Systems in Equitable Environment; and Theory and Application of Critical Pedagogy, is accompanied by a seminar class so students have the opportunity to translate theory into practice (Lalas & Morgan, 2006). This support design, as well as the use of mentors and accessible teaching staff, is done with the hope that a “heavy heart” does not result in people steadfastly embracing unexamined assumptions and/or leaving the program but, rather, encourages engagement in personal and professional transformation. The seminar classes are oriented toward enhancing self-awareness of attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of educational justice as it is situated within social justice discourse. This extends to the ways in which marginalization and discrimination impact fiscal and human resource allocations, policy development, curriculum and instruction, classroom environment, school and district culture, and the understanding of what constitutes the purpose of education in a country espousing democratic ideals.

The lenses for examining course content include attribution theory, behavioral conformity, capitalism, civil rights, class-consciousness, critical pedagogy, critical theory, critical race theory, elite theory, feminist theory, hegemony, human capital theory, Marxism, and queer theory. This is done to support the development of systems thinking and proficiency in social justice discourse for educational justice leaders.

The Learning

The doctoral student who chooses to move beyond the security of personally held unquestioned beliefs seems to journey deeply into transformative learning. Mezirow, in a dialogue with Dirkx, provided the following description of such learning:

This rational process of learning within awareness is a metacognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired *frame of reference*—a mind-set or worldview or orienting assumptions and expectations involving values, beliefs, and concepts—by assessing its epistemic assumptions.

This process makes frames of reference more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Frames with these qualities generate beliefs and opinions that will prove true or justified to guide action.

Most of the process of learning occurs outside of awareness and may include emotional, intuitive, symbolic, imagistic, and/or contemplative models of learning. [The process] involves

1. recognition that an alternative way of understanding may provide new insights into a problem;
2. context awareness of the sources, nature, and consequences of an established belief;
3. critical reflection of the established belief’s supporting epistemic assumptions;
4. validating a new belief by an empirical test of the truth of its claims, when feasible, or by a broad-based continuing, discursive assessment of its justification to arrive at a tentative best judgment;

5. coping with anxiety over the consequences of taking action; and
6. taking reflective action on the validated belief This process enhances one's disposition and insight for making meaning through transforming awareness . . . (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006, p. 124).

The hope is that educational justice leadership arises from the pursuit of transformative learning. This learning "can be seen as having liberation from oppression as its goal and social justice as its orientation" (Cranton, 2006, p. 39).

Learning as Courage

Moral courage occurs when a leader evaluates current beliefs he or she accepted uncritically, discovering them to be unjust while colleagues and friends still embrace them as true and justified (Paul & Elder, 2001). When such evaluation reveals the beliefs are false and the practices arising from them are in error, a leader faces the possibility of being ridiculed and rejected by others. This involves confronting one's fear as an act of personal responsibility in the pursuit of social justice (Brown & Moffett, 1999). It means forming one's conscience in alignment with fundamental human rights such as equity, liberty, and the pursuit of an inclusive democracy (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2007). It means that "the self stands in judgment on the self" (Green, 1999, p. 26). Based on such conscience formation, one consciously acknowledges that overcoming injustices involves risk because it requires objecting to those who possess social, political, and economic power within institutions (Freire, 2000). The potential consequences for being a social justice leader in the midst of others and the world may be severe (Paul & Elder, 2002). Given the human need for a sense of belonging, rejection and exclusion from one's social group can be painful. Courage needs to be tempered with strong interpersonal abilities, the recognition that one exists in multiple human social systems characterized by differing beliefs, and the need to work as a social justice leader in ways that earn the leader the credibility and respect of others. Thus equipped, the social justice leader stands poised to contribute to the transformation of the world itself.

Systemic Understanding of Educational Justice

Educational justice, just like the education system itself, exists as a subsystem within the larger societal system. This involves recognizing the way in which power over education occurs: "The means and ends involved in educational policy and practice are the results of struggle by powerful groups and social movements to make their knowledge legitimate, to defend or increase their patterns of social mobility, and to increase their power in the larger social arena" (Apple, 2000, p. 9). For example, in response to the fear of globalization, political forces in society led to the implementation of the content-standards and assessment-driven model of education. Spring (2005) provided the following

illustration of how education is a subsystem that often is governed by a larger system within highly politicized contexts:

State testing now has a major impact on the content of instruction and textbooks. Standardized tests and textbooks convey the idea that what is taught in schools is neutral and that all scholars agree about what kinds of knowledge are valuable. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. In every field of study, scholars disagree about content, interpretation, and methodology. In addition, most subject matter areas contain values and assumptions that conflict with the values and beliefs of some public group. Knowledge is not neutral, and the knowledge taught in schools is the result of political and economic decisions (p. 186).

Given that the educational system exists as a subsystem within the larger societal system, being an educational justice leader arises from being a social justice leader.

Trends for the Future

Awareness of the trends facing future generations that directly impact education and the world is vital to discerning the most appropriate direction of political activism. Marx (2006) asserted that today's students will, as adults, face (1) solving an accumulation of social injustice wrought by previous generations, (2) allocating resources as the elderly outnumber the young with both groups having needs to be met, (3) ensuring social cohesion by valuing diversity because no single racial group will dominate the United States, (4) facing the problem of poverty, (5) caring for the environment, (6) shifting from an education system entrenched in standardization to personalization where lifelong learning and human development are valued, (7) recruiting and retaining quality educators, and (8) ensuring that ethical decisions are made regarding societal realities, technology, and scientific discoveries.

Given these emerging trends, educational justice leadership necessitates recognizing that the current education system's theory of knowledge, learning, and literacy is didactic with an emphasis on teaching students *what* to think rather than *how* to think (Paul, 1992). The didactic model is not designed to prepare students to engage in the kind of problem-posing and problem-solving that will confront them as they become adults in the world they inherit from us.

The didactic model is perpetuated by socializing students to question authority rarely, if ever (Macedo, 1994). While upholding and conforming to laws that are just is central to living within a society, history reveals the danger of blind obedience to those in positions of legitimate authority who abuse power by violating fundamental human rights. For example, inhumane policies in Nazi Germany led to the systematic genocide of people based on race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, size, and age. Even though such policies were formulated in the minds of the few, genocide was possible only because a large number of citizens did their duty by following orders (Haas, 1988; Milligram, 1974). When leaders understand

that democratic ideas cannot be simply reduced to the “majority rules,” but include the necessity of protecting the fundamental human rights of individuals, especially marginalized groups, there is cause for hope. Examples of such rights are those outlined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted on December 10, 1948, by the General Assembly of the United Nations:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (Oakes, J. & Lipton, M. 2007, p. 11).

Well-being includes the right to experience a predictable sense of belonging and acceptance at school. A student can depend on such safety. This is in contrast to living in a state of fear or embarrassment from teasing to harassment to hate crimes. Because schools can be microcosms of the larger society, an educational justice leader must embody advocacy for all marginalized students. Unless the leader is committed to all oppressed students, some marginalized students will be ignored whether because of being gay, differing in size or physical and mental ability from the norm, belonging to a non-dominant race at the school, etc. In other words, if a leader is not aware of his or her own prejudicial tendencies and confronts them, he or she may exacerbate educational injustice instead of upholding social justice for all.

The Political Nature of Schooling

In the current political environment where there are more content standards in every academic subject than can be taught in a given year and where the quality of teachers, administrators, and schools is determined by standardized tests given once a year, the need for educational justice leaders to understand the political nature of schooling is critical. This entails breaking the myth that educators are supposed to be apolitical. How can educational leaders be silent when federal legislation has caused several states to replace “instructionally rich, improvement-oriented systems with more rote-oriented, punishment-driven approaches” (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 5)? This question and statements such as the following could provide the means for educational justice leaders to engage with all stakeholders in advocating for students, especially those most in need of our support: “The very definition of what constitutes an educated person is now dictated by federal legislation. A well-educated person is one who scores high on standards math and reading tests . . . all of this has implications for democracy . . .” (Meier, 2004, p. 67).

In making sense of our current education system, we must be able to recognize that schooling is both liberating and dominating in our discernment for action:

It is a process that can help students and teachers develop the liberating sides of literacy and support teachers who develop liberating relationships while they teach,

leading all to greater control over their lives and even to self-transformation. Schooling can focus our attention on discussion of how we wish to live together in and out of the classroom. But schooling can be an arena for indoctrination, acculturation, and standardization, an institution designed to reproduce the social and economic status quo (Shannon, 1992, p. 1–2).

Reflection for Self-Awareness as an Educational Justice Leader

Cranton stated: “Our natural human interest in emancipation drives us to reflect on the way we see ourselves, our history, our knowledge, and our social roles” (1996, p. 75). Liberation begins with the self and a willingness to experience the disequilibrium that may arise in evaluating one’s beliefs in terms of alignment with social justice discourse and challenging one’s egocentrism, sociocentrism, and ethnocentrism. From such critical reflection and adult learning emerges action. Paul (1992) wrote that moral virtues provide a means for monitoring tendencies towards egocentrism (making one’s own ideas and beliefs the center of all judgment to the exclusion of considering other people’s perspectives), sociocentrism (acting in ways that evidence the belief that one’s culture and social group are superior to others), and ethnocentrism (acting as if one’s race and ethnicity are superior to all other groups). These virtues include (1) moral empathy that requires the self-discipline to be present to another person in a way that suspends one’s prejudices such that the other person experiences you as understanding her or his perspectives, experiences, and life circumstances; (2) moral humility, whereby one holds upper most in the mind the recognition that in any situation he or she may be in error and calls to mind previous situations where one’s certitude proved to be false; (3) moral perseverance which demonstrates that one is committed to the pursuit of understanding instead of dismissing another person or abandoning the effort to understand; (4) moral fair-mindedness which involves the development of systems thinking where one considers multiple perspectives with special attention to those that evoke an initial strong, negative emotional reaction (Paul, 1995). These are offered as examples of the need to have some criteria for examining one’s conscience in acts of reflection to ensure that actions are consistent with espoused beliefs.

Educational Justice Leader as Political Activist

If the world is to be transformed, actions must accompany words. However, activism is not about fighting, it is exercising one’s presence in the world in a way that believes the world can transform itself to meet fundamental human rights. Such rights include concerns regarding race, ethnicity, class, diversity, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, spirituality, justice, equity, marginalization, and caring. Freire (2004) provided further insight into how one’s identity is connected to the work of social justice:

To the extent that we come capable of transforming the world . . . it follows that our presence in the world, which implies choice and decision, is not a neutral presence. The ability to observe, to compare, and to evaluate, in order to choose, through deciding, how one is to intervene in the life of the city and thus exercise one's citizenship, arises then as a fundamental competency. If my presence in history is not neutral, I must accept its political nature as critically as possible. If, in reality, I am not in the world simply to adapt to it, but rather to transform it, and it is not possible to change the world without a certain dream or vision for it, I must make use of every possibility there is not only to speak about my utopia, but also to engage in practices consistent with it (p. 7).

Conclusion

Each student in the doctoral program is afforded opportunities to engage in transformative learning and become more conscious of self-awareness, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. This requires engagement in personal transformation to develop a liberated heart and become a social justice leader. Through such adult development, the person pursues influencing social movements by "embracing social change and building a society that responds to human wants, needs, and values" (Burns, 2003, p. 147). Because such leadership involves opposition to all forms of oppression (e.g. ableism, ageism, classism, genderism, heterosexism, racism, religious oppression, and sexism) as well as advocacy for an education system to attain democratic ideals for all, two realizations are necessary to sustain the leader's longevity in social justice work. The first is recognizing that being present to all marginalized people may go against the majority's view of what is considered normal, moral, and correct even though such a reality perpetuates oppression and marginalization of others. Challenging the status quo may be a threat to others and requires moral courage. The second is living one's life without expecting the dreams of an educationally just education system, a socially just society, and a socially just world will come true in one's lifetime. This does not mean that the work of liberating hearts is any less noble, necessary, and critical to a future of hope.

An example shared with the doctoral students involves the life of Ignaz Semmelweis who was the head resident of obstetrics in a Vienna hospital in 1846. He promised a new mother, dying of puerperal fever, that he would discover the cause of this illness so often associated with childbirth. He found that at a nearby hospital staffed by midwives, the incidence of mortality attributed to the fever was significantly lower than at his hospital where doctors delivered babies. He sought out differences in birthing procedures between the doctors and midwives and found none. However, when a male doctor died from the same symptoms as puerperal fever, he investigated this death. He discovered that a student had cut the doctor who was holding a cavity of a corpse open during a dissection allowing organisms from the corpse to infect the doctor. Semmelweis postulated that infecting women with decaying organic matter caused puerperal fever. When he first asked administration to require that doctors change clothes after dissecting corpses and wash their hands in a chlorine solution prior to any

surgery, and that orderlies clean rooms and beds for each patient, he was told that such practices were absurd and too expensive. When he instituted these practices with his students, the mortality rate dropped to zero. Even so, the medical community rejected him. He challenged the beliefs and practices held to be true (i.e. normal, moral, and correct) by the medical profession at the time. Thus, the established normative practice of “bleeding” and using leeches on a patient with puerperal fever continued. Although he possessed moral courage, it cost him dearly. He died in an insane asylum from infected wounds caused by beatings that he received from guards. Later, his son, Bela, committed suicide in despair that his father’s teaching would never be accepted. However, as the next generation of doctors began taking his teachings seriously, the number of deaths related to infection significantly decreased (Carter & Carter, 2005; Thompson, 1949).

For a social justice leader, ending oppression in all its forms is worth making a lifelong cause even if this work is not fully attained in one’s own lifetime. The goal of the educational justice doctoral program for leaders at the University of Redlands is to create opportunities and support so that each participant learns how to embrace the broad, all-encompassing nature of social justice work and to act with a heart liberated through moral courage and the virtues of empathy, humility, perseverance, and fair-mindedness.

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