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Dialogic Leadership for Social Justice: Overcoming Pathologies of Silence

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In this article, I draw on current scholarship about leadership for social justice, my own (and others') empirical research in schools, and my previous experience as a K-12 educator to develop a framework intended to help educational leaders think about leading for social justice. I critically examine some ways in which the status quo marginalizes large numbers of students and their families, preventing them from being heard or even acknowledged. I suggest that transformative educational leaders may foster the academic success of all children through engaging in moral dialogue that facilitates the development of strong relationships, supplants pathologizing silences, challenges existing beliefs and practices, and grounds educational leadership in some criteria for social justice.

Keywords: *transformative leadership; social justice; dialogue; relationships; deficit thinking; pathologizing practice; beliefs; class; ethnicity*

Educational leadership is widely recognized as complex and challenging. Educational leaders are expected to develop learning communities, build the professional capacity of teachers, take advice from parents, engage in collaborative and consultative decision making, resolve conflicts, engage in effective instructional leadership, and attend respectfully, immediately, and appropriately to the needs and requests of families with diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Increasingly, educational leaders are faced with tremendous pressure to demonstrate that every child for whom they have responsibility is achieving success—often defined as performance to a designated standard on a single, standardized test. Particularly in the United States, the stakes are high: "25 states have the power to distribute financial rewards to successful or improved schools, and 25 states have the power to close, reconstitute, or take over low performing schools" (Amrein & Berliner, 2002, p. 5). Portions of school budgets are being withheld to

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provide students from low-performing schools with extra tutoring or transportation. It is little wonder that many believe educational leadership itself is in a crisis. Some relate the crisis to a lack of qualified candidates for superintendencies (Esparo & Rader, 2001) or school principalships (Chirichello, 2001; Malone & Caddell, 2000). Others believe that the crisis has occurred as a result of naïve, conservative, and traditional leadership responses to increasingly complex, challenging, and postmodern educational contexts (Maxcy, 1994). Giroux (1992) associates difficulties of educational leadership with crises of democratic government. Still others are concerned about the lack of leadership offered by school boards themselves (van Alfen, 1993) or about the propensity of educators to adopt a series of reforms in rapid succession (Fullan, 2003), failing to empower either teachers or administrators.

Into this array of competing demands and pressing challenges comes another compelling claim: Educational leaders are expected to be transformative, to attend to social justice as well as academic achievement. In this article, I present a framework for addressing social justice goals that I believe will also assist educational leaders to position their practice in moral action and, in fact, will provide some guidance through the labyrinth of demands placed on them. The framework I suggest will not alleviate the pressures of accountability, the reality of fiscal restraint, or the persistence of political interference, but it may help the educational leader to become firmly grounded in a moral and purposeful approach to leadership.

Bogotch (2000) has defined educational leadership as a “deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power” (p. 2). I take up this definition and suggest that rather than trying to balance numerous competing programs and demands, one of the central interventions of educational leaders must be the facilitation of moral dialogue. I propose that transformative leadership, based on dialogue and strong relationships, can provide opportunities for all children to learn in school communities that are socially just and deeply democratic. I begin by examining some of the inequities inherent in the status quo and suggest ways in which current practices and beliefs may be challenged and changed through transformative leadership, strong relationships, and moral dialogue. I argue that if strong relationships with all children are at the heart of educational equity, then it is essential to acknowledge differences in children’s lived experiences. To ensure that we create schools that are socially just, educators must overcome silences about such aspects as ethnicity and social class. Finally, I provide some social justice criteria that educators might use to ground their practice as they engage in transformative and dialogic leadership.

EXAMINING THE STATUS QUO

Educators, policymakers, and indeed, the general public are increasingly aware that despite numerous well-intentioned restructuring, reform, and curricular efforts, many children who are in some way different from the previously dominant and traditionally most successful White, middle-class children are not achieving school success[1] (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001; Shields & Oberg, 2000). Regardless of how ethnicity or socioeconomic status (SES) are determined, there is no doubt that children from certain minoritized ethnic groups and/or from impoverished social classes generally fail to perform in school to the same levels as other children (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Reyes, Velez, & Peña, 1993). In North America, high failure and dropout rates, overidentification of behavior problems, and placement in low-level academic programs are particularly prevalent among minoritized children (McBride & McKee, 2001; Nieto, 1999, p. 25). In the United States, many indigenous, African American, and Hispanic children find that schools, as they are currently made up, present particular challenges and often barriers to their success (Banks & Banks, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Deyhle, 1992, 1995; Nieto, 1999). In other countries, the phenomenon is similar, although the specific groups may change; for example, Sikh and Punjabi male students in Canada experience particularly high dropout rates (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991).

In 1997, Valencia asked what is still a key question for educators, one with considerable moral import: "What accounts for such school failure . . . among a substantial proportion of low-SES minority students?" (p. 1). Valencia then provided an overview of explanations often found in educational literature, including caste theory (Ogbu, 1992), structural inequality (Pearl, 1991), or deficit thinking and blaming the victim (Ryan, 1971). Valencia (1997) advances and elaborates the theories of deficit thinking as the most viable explanation for the poor school achievement of some groups of children. Bishop (2001) and Bishop and Glynn (1999) elaborated this point when they wrote about Maori children. They explained that colonization "developed a social pathology approach towards Maori social and political institutions" in which a supposed inability of the Maori culture "to cope with complex human problems" was widely disseminated (p. 29).

Based on socially constructed and stereotypical images, educators may unknowingly, and with the best of intentions, allocate blame for poor school performance to children from minoritized groups based on generalizations, labels, or misguided assumptions. Although it is certainly appropriate to recognize the wide range of abilities and talents that occurs within any group or

subgroup, we must also expect that the average achievement of each group will be similar. Anticipating or permitting lower performance from any group of children is inequitable. Educational practices that ignore such inequities, either by essentializing difference or attempting to ignore it, are manifestations of firmly rooted and pervasive attitudes that may best be described as pathologizing the lived experiences of students. I use the term *pathologizing* to denote a process of treating differences as deficits, a process that locates the responsibility for school success in the lived experiences of children (home life, home culture, SES) rather than situating responsibility in the education system itself. In large part because educators implicitly assign blame for school failure to children and to their families, many students come to believe they are incapable of high-level academic performance. Pathologizing may be overt when, for example, policies, statements, or practices use discriminatory language. However, it is equally common for pathologizing to be covert and silent, engendering in students and their families feelings that, somehow, they and their lived experiences are abnormal and unacceptable within the boundaries of the school community and their abilities subnormal within the tightly prescribed bounds of core curriculum or transmissive pedagogy still too common in many schools and classrooms.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE STATUS QUO

Historically, difference has been described and presented through much pseudoscientific research as genetically fixed and hierarchically ordered (see Gould, 1996; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). The assumptions, attitudes, and language are deeply embedded in the educational traditions, institutions, practices, and beliefs of our time, in what Bourdieu might call our "habitus" of education (Swartz, 1997). In 1980, Bourdieu defined habitus as

> a system of circular relations that unite [*sic*] structures and practices; objective structures tend to produce structured subjective dispositions that produce structured actions which, in turn, tend to reproduce objective structure. (p. 103)

According to Swartz (1997), because our beliefs and attitudes have developed over time and function "below the level of consciousness and language" (p. 105), they are extremely resistant to change. Habitus thus constructs the persistence of deficit thinking not simply as an individual problem but as a structural and societal one, requiring new approaches and enduring change if it is to be overcome. An understanding of habitus implies that we must not

simply point fingers at teachers and school administrators, assuaging our consciences by finding new "victims," but that we must work to understand and eradicate the erroneous beliefs on which our habitus of education has been constructed. Bourdieu argues that practices are constitutive of structures as well as determined by them (Swartz, 1997, p. 58); hence, with considerable effort, innovative practices may help us to create new and more equitable educational structures. The challenge for educators, I believe, is to recognize how our habitus restricts equity and social justice and then to find ways to overcome these constraints. To do this, we must learn to acknowledge and validate difference without reifying it or pathologizing it.

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Three theoretical concepts are useful in thinking about how educational leaders may begin to challenge the current habitus of education. Educators must become transformative leaders, develop positive relationships with students such that children may bring their own lived experiences into the school and classroom, and facilitate moral dialogue.

Transformative Educational Leadership

I use the term *transformative* and not the more commonly used term *transformational* to signify that the needed changes go well beyond institutional and organizational arrangements. Transformational leadership, as defined by theorists like Leithwood and Jantzi (1990), focuses on the collective interests of a group or organization. Transformative leadership is deeply rooted in moral and ethical values in a social context. Astin and Astin (2000) summarize in these words their hope that transformative leadership may help to change society:

> We believe that the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life; to expand access and opportunity; to encourage respect for difference and diversity; to strengthen democracy, civic life, and civic responsibility; and to promote cultural enrichment, creative expression, intellectual honesty, the advancement of knowledge, and personal freedom coupled with responsibility. (p. 11)

Hence, transformative educational leaders will work to create school communities in which educators take seriously their accountability for advancing the "value ends" identified above.

Acknowledging the Centrality of Relationships

For several decades, educators seeking to introduce meaningful change have ignored much of the wisdom of educational philosophers and focused more on programs than on people, more on reforms than on relationships. The roots of relational ontology in the 20th century may be traced to Buber's (1987) differentiation of I-Thou and I-it relationships and to his claim that "in the beginning is relation" (p. 69). Psychologists, sociologists, and educators have also focused on the centrality of relationships. Contact and interaction with others were identified by Adler (1947) as one of the building blocks of human personality. Giroux (1997) posited that "how we understand and come to know ourselves cannot be separated from how we are represented and how we imagine ourselves" (p. 15). Relationships with others affect our own sense of self.

Taubman (1993), in a more extensive consideration of identity, identified three registers that help us understand how identity is constructed, what it means, and how it functions. Taubman's fictional register "imprisons the subject" (p. 291) in an identity created by language and others' perceptions. Because of its tendency to portray identity as fixed, this register is both alienating and objectifying. Unfortunately, this is the register often used implicitly by educators who ask students to bring something to represent themselves or their culture, without attending to the interplay of the other two registers. The second register, the communal, is important, Taubman says, because "it is only in relation to group membership that such identity may be explored." Finally, the autobiographical register permits us to exercise agency and responsibility as we acknowledge that each complex individual has many "selves." The autobiographical interacts with the fictional and communal register, supplementing, elaborating, critiquing, and problematizing them. It permits love of football, poetry, and music to coexist in meaningful ways in one individual.

Noddings (1986) has argued for a pedagogy of care—centered not on curriculum content but on the relationships between and among people in schools and the ideas under consideration. She called, almost two decades ago, for "taking relation as ontologically basic" (p. 4). In other words, relationships make up the basic fabric of human life and must not be pushed to the periphery of educational considerations. Others support the concept. Margonis (Sidorkin, 2002) suggests that "relationships ontologically precede the intrinsic motivation for learning and should therefore be placed at the center of educational theory" (p. 87). Sidorkin (2002) argues that

> an underlying reality of human relations constitutes the crucial context of education. What teachers, administrators, and students do and say could only have meaning and be understood against this invisible but very real matrix of intersecting relations. (p. 2)

Likewise, Margaret Wheatley (1992) considers what educational leaders might learn from "discoveries in biology, chemistry, and physics that challenge us to reshape our fundamental world view" (p. xi). She focuses on relationships as key to understanding both the material universe and human interactions, saying that "in the quantum world, relationships are not just interesting; to many physicists, they are all there is to reality" (p. 32). Citing Gregory Bateson, she argues that we should "stop teaching facts—the 'things' of knowledge—and focus, instead, on relationships as the basis for all definitions" (p. 34). In other words, we cannot understand facts in isolation but only in relation to ourselves as we bring our understandings and realities into the construction of meaning.

Madeleine Grumet (1995) emphasizes that our "relationships to the world are rooted in our relationships to the people who care for us" (p. 19). She claims that "curriculum is never the text, or the topic, never the method or the syllabus," but curriculum is "the conversation that makes sense of . . . things . . . . It is the process of making sense with a group of people of the systems that shape and organize the world we can think about together" (p. 19).

This understanding of making sense together, of learning relationships as the basis for pedagogy, as the root of curriculum, is fundamental to the creation of learning environments that are both socially just and deeply democratic. In sum, I contend that socially just learning is embedded in deeply democratic ideas and in relational pedagogy. Hence, an educational orientation to social justice and democratic community requires pedagogy forged with, not for, students to permit them to develop meaningful and socially constructed understandings.

Facilitating Moral Dialogue

If, as Grumet argues, curriculum is the conversation that makes sense of things, then one might argue that a fundamental role of the educational leader is to be a catalyst for such a conversation both in her school and in the surrounding community. Dialogue is therefore central to the task of educational leadership—not a weak concept of dialogue interpreted as strategies for communicating but a strong concept of dialogue as a way of being. Dialogue

and relationships are not elements that can be selected and discarded at will; rather, they are ways of life—recognitions of the fundamental differences among human beings and of the need to enter into contact, into relational dialogue and sense making (participating with our whole being) with one another. Thus conceived as an ontology, dialogue opens each individual educator to differing realities and worldviews. Bakhtin (1984) describes this ontological framework of human life:

> To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree . . . . In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life. (p. 293)

Burbules (1993) also develops a concept of dialogue as a fundamentally "relational activity directed towards discovery and new understanding" (p. 8). He emphasizes that the relationship may be filled with tension, but it must be one in which the participants are firmly committed to what he calls an "ongoing communicative relationship" (p. 19). Difference becomes not something to fear, or to avoid, but part of the rich fabric of human existence with which we interact on a daily basis. Understood as part of our very being, difference is the basis for human relationships, for organizational life, and certainly, for leading and learning.

Dialogue comes in many forms and serves several purposes. Dialogue may be either convergent or divergent. It may seek some sort of agreement or it may simply focus on increasing understanding of the different perspectives held by members of the community. In an educational community, dialogue will at times serve one purpose, at times another; but it will be grounded, as the community itself is grounded, on the norms of inclusion and respect and a desire for excellence and social justice.

To this point, I have outlined some of the challenges related to educational leadership, particularly in diverse and heterogeneous settings. I have focused on the need for transformative leadership, positive relationships and spaces in which these relationships may be developed, and dialogue as a way of bringing the conversation to fruition. In the next section, I take up two types (among many) of differences that are typically present in our schools, to illustrate how the current habitus of education prevents the development of positive relationships with many students and to suggest the need for moral and dialogic interventions on the part of educational leaders.

MAKING SENSE OF THINGS

Here, I argue that because educators are often uncomfortable with difference, we fail not only to develop strong relationships but even to hear or acknowledge some of the diverse voices that make up our schools and classrooms. Moreover, our discomfort often manifests itself in what I am calling pathologies of silence.

If educational leaders want to transform the educational experiences and achievement of all students in their schools, we will need to help teachers overcome these pathologizing silences and understand that learning is situated in relationships in which students need to be free to bring their own realities into the conversation to "make sense of things." We will need to create more inclusive learning communities if we are to change our habitus, to promote deeper understanding and more meaningful relationships and to enhance social justice for all students.

Overcome Pathologies of Silence

What are pathologies of silence? They are misguided attempts to act justly, to display empathy, and to create democratic and optimistic educational communities. Educators often find it difficult to acknowledge difference, in part, I think, because we have not learned to distinguish between recognizing difference in legitimate ways and using a single characteristic or factor as a way of labeling and consequently of essentializing others. Sometimes we are afraid of being politically incorrect or of offending those with whom we hope to enter into a relationship. On one hand, it seems safer, kinder, and perhaps even the only reasonable position to pretend that children are all the same, to fall back on the arguments ascribed by Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) to liberal multiculturalists who argue that there is one race—the human race—and that differences are unimportant. On the other hand, many educators recognize that children with home backgrounds that are the most dissimilar to the social and organizational cultures of their schools tend to be the least successful in our education systems (see, for example, Knapp & Woolverton, 1995). In this case, assumptions about a lack of parental involvement, children coming from single-parent homes, children who have no fluency in English, and children whose cultural community is different from that of the mainstream are often perpetrated in ways that pathologize these children and their lived experiences.

We know that there are children who come from various ethnic backgrounds, who speak different home languages, who live in extreme poverty or extravagant wealth, who struggle with issues related to neglect or abuse, and who, for various reasons, live lives that are very different from those commonly depicted, valued, and validated in our schools. Although, in recent years, educators are more cautious about overtly allocating blame for low educational achievement to these home factors, it is almost equally as rare that educators explicitly work to create spaces in which children may feel comfortable bringing the totality of their lived experiences into the learning situation. We often remain silent in a well-intentioned but inept attempt not to single children out. In so doing, we are pathologizing the lived experiences of many school children and preventing them from fully entering into the "conversation that makes sense of things."

Of course, children's home situations, SES, home language, ethnicity, parental presence, and so forth make up only a few forms of difference that teachers encounter in today's schools. Teachers may be equally challenged by differences in ability, disability, sexual orientation, or spiritual belief. Here, however, I focus on two examples—differences in ethnicity and SES—to illustrate topics about which transformative educational leaders must develop deeper understanding through dialogue with their staffs.

Acknowledge Ethnicity

Regularly, I ask my graduate students, all thoughtful and experienced educators, "What does it mean to say you are color-blind?" Invariably, my Caucasian students say that it means they do not see difference; they are tolerant; they treat everyone alike. Invariably, my non-Caucasian students say, "What are you missing?" With passion, they explain that when others ignore obvious differences in appearance, it is likely they are also negating more fundamental differences in worldview, culture, and tradition. Other researchers (see, for example, Cooney & Akintunde, 1999; Holcomb-McCoy, 1999; Johnson, 1999) have reported similar findings. Taylor (1999), for example, reported that White girls in her study were confused by questions about race and made comments like, "I think that Whites and Blacks are just people" (p. 6).

An educational framework for social justice must value, rather than ignore, diversity. Moreover, when educators protest that they are color-blind, that we are all members of the human race and hence are all the same, they are actually denying the very differences that were the impetus behind the statement in the first place. Indeed, Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) remind us that being color-blind is a hegemonic practice that only White people have the luxury of believing.

Color-blindness perpetuates a situation in which educators not only ignore color but also culture. In a series of research studies I have conducted in southeast Utah in schools with high Navajo populations, teachers and parents often indicate on surveys and in interviews that "schools should not teach culture" or that "culture should be taught only if there is time," that "culture belongs in the home"; they make statements like, "This is America, they came here and they should speak English" (Shields, 2002). Sometimes, when I ask students about what parts of their cultures they value and plan to pass on to their children, the White students respond that the question does not pertain to them, or that they do not understand, or ask if I am talking about their religion.

Pathologizing color and culture through silence does a disservice not only to those who are visibly different but to any student who leaves our schools believing that he or she is culture free and that questions of culture do not relate to him or to her. If we believe that schools are culture free, there is no need to explore which culture(s) are reflected in the school and in the curriculum, which groups have power and are dominant, and which groups are marginalized and often excluded.

If we remain silent about color and culture, we are pretending that everyone is the same. We are ignoring differences that may lead to deeper and richer relationships and increased understanding of ourselves and of others. In the classroom, those who do not find their color or cultural experiences represented in the formal curriculum or textbooks cannot participate with the same awareness of the situations represented as those who are depicted in formal ways. Thus, silence about color and culture leaves some children's traditions and tacit knowledge valued and validated and others' excluded. It becomes more difficult to "make sense of things" and humanity becomes bland and colorless.

Worse still, when we ignore differences of color or ethnicity, we are suggesting that there is no need to determine whether some groups are advantaged and others disadvantaged by our practices. Through our well-intentioned silence, we send the message that the culture of schools is neutral, that it does not reflect the dominant values of wider society, and that there is no need to attend to cultural differences to enact education that is socially just and academically excellent. Relationships are built on the false premise that we are so similar there is nothing of worth to be learned from our differences. Silence about color and ethnicity is another way of perpetuating the dominance of the status quo both in the wider school community and in the pedagogy of the classroom.

Recognize Class

An even more difficult challenge is how to acknowledge class differences and bring them in real and ethical ways into the explicit conversation of our classrooms. Davies (1999) states, "SES is the strongest and most enduring social determinant of educational attainment" (p. 139). Knapp and Woolverton (1995) claim that "decades of sociological work and the intuitions of thoughtful people suggest that social class is fundamental to understanding the workings and consequences of educational institutions" (p. 549). They state that understanding issues of class is particularly important in that social class is often hidden in schooling but is "central to social inequality" (p. 549). Moreover, they claim that there is "an enduring correlation between social class and educational outcomes" (p. 551) and that these correlations hold true across cultures and over time such that, in general, higher class correlates with higher levels of educational attainment and achievement and lower class with higher dropout rates, less likelihood of attending postsecondary institutions, and greater likelihood of holding lower status jobs.

Yet, we pathologize class differences by remaining silent about them as we perpetuate the implicit knowledge that certain lived experiences are more normal and hence more acceptable than others. It is well documented that the large majority of educators in developed countries come from what may loosely be called the middle class and, hence, may find it difficult to understand, communicate with, or develop meaningful relationships with students from working class families, children whose families receive social assistance, or those who live in other impoverished situations. The insidious part of this is that without even being aware of it, educators often make decisions about students' ability, programs, and suitable career paths based on class (and some well-known correlates such as style, grammar, and tidiness).

The challenge, both personal and professional, is how to overcome pathologies of silence with respect to class and to deal with differences in ethical ways. How do we value difference when we see that the outcome is that some children come to school with fewer material (and sometimes social) advantages than others? How can we value lived experiences that permit children to come to school hungry? How can we value the fact that some children have different clothes, no running water, or no electricity? How can we value dysfunctional families[2] in which children are compelled to take on parenting functions, deal with the lingering effects of alcoholism or neglect, or hold a job to provide basic necessities for themselves and their families?

Sometimes, the answer is, "We can't." We cannot value abusive situations. Indeed, we must repudiate and report situations that endanger our students. We cannot and should not accept hunger and poverty as normal and therefore

desirable. We cannot remain silent. We must speak out about immorality and injustice wherever it is encountered. These situations are complex, difficult, and particularly compelling and demand social and political discourse and action outside of the schoolhouse itself; but addressing them through wider societal intervention is not the focus of this article.

Here, I am arguing for the acknowledgment in schools of a wide range of common lived experiences. I am urging that conversations that explore difference become regular occurrences in staff meetings and teachers' lounges; I am calling for the curricular inclusion of images of children living in inner-city apartment buildings, trailer parks, and subsidized housing developments as well as those who live in more comfortable urban and suburban homes.

Again, our intentions are good. We do not want to single out and further embarrass children whose circumstances are already difficult. But when we close our eyes and our mouths, we are giving children a clear and strong message: Your experience is not normal; it is something to be ashamed of. You do not only need to struggle with your life circumstances, you need to hide them so no one will know your reality. We are sending the implicit message that middle-class experience is the only valid foundation on which to build in-school sense-making conversations and relationships.

Bassey (1996) comments that "one way to begin class dialogue is by problematizing everyday life" (p. 49). One of the best examples I know of educators overcoming silence about class issues in this way became known in its school as "The Poverty Discussion."[3] A local newspaper had written an article in which it referred to many students from a small elementary school in Nova Scotia as "living in poverty." Although the overall SES of the school community was quite low and many families did live well below the poverty line, other families who lived quite comfortably were not happy about the characterization of the school. Two teachers took the issues to their sixth-grade classes, and as the children talked, the teachers wrote their comments on a flip chart. Directly taking up the question about pathologies of silence, one child asked,

> "Are we saying that violence and poverty are things we should not talk about?"
> Another responded, "That reminds me of our discussion about truth and lies. Not saying something that is true is as dishonest as saying something that is not."
> A third continued, "And violence and poverty are things we have to talk about if we want them to go away."
> Another, responding in typical fashion, said, "Yes, but, the article says many . . . that sort of sounds like blame or shame."
> The next child replied, "Yes, but Teddy, poverty is not poor people's fault and not having everything you need should not make you feel less of a person."

This sixth-grade class was learning to talk about the social constructions of class and poverty in ways that many adults never do. They were learning how to avoid blame, how to recognize difference, and how to ensure that their classmates from both poor and more affluent homes were included in the conversation.

Educators who remain silent about important issues fail to understand how to deliberately intervene in the educational processes toward the value ends of socially just learning communities. In contrast, educators like these sixth-grade teachers who take the initiative to engage in dialogue about difficult issues are investing themselves in the Bakhtinian "dialogic fabric of life."

Become Inclusive

I am not suggesting that class, ethnicity, or other types of difference should become the central focus of every discussion held in schools and classrooms, merely that there must be space created in which such conversations may occur naturally and normally as needed, so that all children can feel that they belong. Dialogue about difference must not be suppressed when it occurs naturally—whether in a math class, the gymnasium, the teachers' lounge, or staff room. If we create conditions under which some children feel they must hide who they are and what their circumstances are, we are denying the importance of democratic participation and meaningful relationships. When we make assumptions about the ability of children based on what we know (or think we know) about their home lives, we are not creating opportunities for full personal and communal participation either for the present or the future.

When children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success (see, for example, Brokenleg, 1999; Dodd, 2000; Glasser, 1996; Goodenow, 1991; Newmann, 1992; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990). The research shows that the benefits extend beyond the specific conversation to increased academic self-concept and increased involvement in school life. Unless all children experience a sense of belonging in our schools, they are being educated in institutions that exclude and marginalize them, that perpetuate inequity and inequality rather than democracy and social justice.

In 1990, Anderson wrote that a school leader needs to attend to questions of invisibility, legitimation, and nonevents. He argued that unless we take seriously the need to understand "the invisible and unobtrusive forms of control that are exercised in schools and school districts . . . [educators and researchers] will continue to perpetuate a view of school effectiveness that is

unable to address in any significant manner the problems of their underprivileged clients" (p. 39). In some ways, class differences are invisible. And educators' silence about invisible class differences perpetuates and pathologizes them as much as any overt comment or act.

I repeat that I am not suggesting that educators should single out any student, focusing on differences of color or class in ways that make him or her feel even more self-conscious and more embarrassed than the silent status quo already does. I am arguing that we need to open our curriculum (formal, informal, and hidden) and create spaces in which all children's lived experiences may be both reflected and critiqued in the context of learning. Overcoming the silence about class differences is a way of ensuring that our schools and classrooms are more inclusive, enabling fuller and more democratic participation by more people. It helps to legitimize and validate the realities of more students and hence to provide a basis for the development of more meaningful relationships and deeper sense making. When we engage in conversations in our schools and classrooms, they must not be based solely on middle-class experiences and continue to exclude or pathologize the lived experiences of the rest of society.

DEVELOPING A SOCIALLY JUST SCHOOL

Transformative educational leaders, as described by Astin and Astin (2000), "believe that the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life" (p. 11). To do this, educational leaders need to reflect carefully on how to move forward such a deeply moral, transformative, dialogic, and relational agenda. Deliberate interventions of educational leaders to develop meaning that is socially just, build a deeper understanding of dialogue, and help educators to critically examine their practices are essential. In practice, however, holding such ideas at the forefront of leadership practice is difficult. In this final section, I suggest some approaches that may help educational leaders to act deliberately and agentically to promote social justice goals.

Develop a Guiding Framework

Because so much of a leader's day can be consumed with "putting out fires," it is important to have some guiding criteria against which to ensure that actions and decisions maintain a social justice focus. One way is to stop to ask questions of every decision: Who is being included or excluded, whose reality is represented and whose marginalized? Another is to have a quick

lexicon of social justice concepts against which to examine actions and decisions. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1995) claim that the meanings created by any system of education must be just, democratic, empathic, and optimistic (p. 3). I have found that these concepts, taken together, provide the educational leader with a sort of holistic litmus test, a framework from which one can reflect on individual and collective actions and beliefs and guide daily practice.

A just education is usefully elucidated using Farrell's (1999) concept of equality of access, sustainability, outputs, and outcomes. A system of education that is just will ensure equity of access, making available to all children programs that meet their cultural, social, and academic needs (to name a few), giving all children access to the curriculum through the inclusion of their lived experiences; it will offer to all children, regardless of family background, academically challenging programs that can lead to university, college, or a desired workplace. It will also ensure equitable sustainability, that the dropout and completion rates of students from various groups (e.g., aboriginal, single parent, or impoverished families) are comparable. Education that is just also requires equitable outputs and outcomes, academic standards that equip all children from all groups to leave school fully prepared to lead productive, successful, fulfilling lives.

Education that is democratic offers all legitimate stakeholders opportunities to participate. Democratic participation in decision making cannot be accomplished simply by issuing an invitation and holding an open meeting; it often requires teaching people how to participate, making them feel comfortable, and empowering them to feel competent and capable. Likewise, democratic participation in learning is not accomplished by having teachers tell and talk, while children sit passively listening. Democratic education requires empowering children to participate in, and take responsibility for, their own learning. Delpit's (1990) work is informative here. She emphasizes that in all organizations there are rules of power that operate to the inclusion of some people and the exclusion of others. She indicates, moreover, that it is those who have little or no power who are most in need of having the rules made explicit. If all students are to negotiate schooling successfully, if pathologies of silence are to be eliminated, it will be necessary to provide some students with direct teaching of the rules and processes so that they may participate fully and actively in their own learning.

Empathic education requires understanding caring as a value and a cognitive commitment, not simply an emotion. Caring cannot and must not resemble pity; rather, an empathic education is one firmly grounded on positive interpersonal and pedagogical relationships (Noddings, 1986). The connection is explicit. Learning takes on meaning when embedded in the reality of

caring human relationships. Because the interconnections between relationships and learning are so critically important, educators who strive for social justice must be concerned "with the quality of relationships among all those who constitute 'the school' and the nature of the school circumstances in which children learn" (MacKinnon, 2000, p. 7).

Optimistic education opens windows of understanding and doors of opportunity for all children. Optimistic education attends carefully to those who are generally the least successful, the most marginalized, and the most disadvantaged in our education system. An optimistic education balances and values both social justice and academic excellence, for if we do not ensure that all children have attained similar levels of academic success, doors will close and opportunities will be constricted for those for whom we do not find the keys to success. Optimism takes seriously what Barber (2001) described as the "fundamental task of education in a democracy"—"the apprenticeship of liberty—learning to be free" (p. 12).

Taken together, these four terms—just, democratic, empathetic, optimistic—offer strong support for educational decisions that are socially just; they provide the basis on which transformative leaders may assess policies and practices within their schools. They provide a framework for initiating dialogue that will help teachers to clearly understand how they either inhibit or encourage student success by marginalizing and silencing them or by listening carefully and creating strong relationships with them.

Examine Practice

MacKinnon (2000) argues that transformative educational practice must be based on a pedagogy of social justice in which teachers begin with "the local, their own stories and those of their students" (p. 11). Shields (2003) has operationalized this claim by developing strategies for creating a school profile as a basis for a blame-free examination of present practices. The profile provides data about the sex, age, and ethnicity of a school's faculty, the ethnicity of students, and the academic and extracurricular programs offered; it identifies which students and teachers are associated with which programs and activities. Educational leaders may then use the data as a starting point for asking questions about who is included and excluded in given programs, about who has been marginalized and who privileged by specific decisions and resource allocations. It provides a blame-free starting point from which to develop strategies for change. For example, one vice principal gathering data for such a profile found that no English as a second language (ESL) students in his large high school were on the school honor role. Subsequent questioning provided an explanation: ESL students did not take the six

discrete subjects required for the calculation of honor role status. Having benchmarks against which to examine this practice, and having the willingness to engage in dialogue about it, led to the creation of a new and more equitable policy related to honor-role eligibility.

Bishop, Richardson, and Berryman (2002a) have developed a workshop in which they begin by asking educators to account for the persistent lack of student achievement on the part of some students in their schools. After teachers have brainstormed and recorded the myriad of explanations that come readily to mind, the leaders ask the teachers to categorize their accounts under three headings: home and student factors (such as poverty and ethnicity), school and structural factors (such as lack of money or instructional resources), or classroom factors over which teachers have control and agency. Bishop, Richardson, and Berryman (2002b) report that with remarkable consistency, 80% of the ideas fall into the category of student and home, about 16% under school and structural factors, and only 4% in the teacher and classroom category. As the workshop continues, the authors share students' perceptions that teachers "do not understand" them, think they are "stupid," "fail to make classes relevant or interesting," and are "unwilling to offer assistance" when asked. Clearly, there is dissonance between the perceptions of educators and students with respect to the location of the problems and ways to overcome them. Bishop and colleagues (2002b) report that when educators begin to overcome deficit thinking, take responsibility for student outcomes, relate to students in positive and encouraging ways, and introduce more interactive pedagogical strategies, student achievement soars remarkably quickly.

Starting with practice permits educators to recognize inequitable practices and leads to the rejection of deficit thinking—the component that Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1995) found was the single most important factor in the academic achievement of minority students.

Take Responsibility

Some students may well come from very difficult and/or impoverished family situations; some may come to school fluent in a language that is not spoken at the school; others may come from ethnic and cultural traditions in which their parents have not experienced the structures of Westernized education. All of those factors are outside of the control and primary responsibility of the school and cannot be used as excuses for poor student achievement.

Shields, Mazawi, and Bishop (2002), working with a critical framework, examined the ways in which three specific indigenous populations—Bedouin Arab children in the Negev desert in Israel, Maori in New Zealand, and

Navajo in the intermountain western region of the United States—had been pathologized and minoritized. They discovered that neither social justice nor academic achievement is directly and necessarily related to fiscal resources or modern school facilities. Indeed, they found that whether children were educated in tent schools in "unrecognized settlements," typical public schools, or ultramodern, highly funded, and well-equipped facilities, persistent pathologizing of the lifestyles and cultures of children inhibited academic achievement. On the other hand, rejecting deficit thinking and adopting student-centered pedagogies opened doors for increased achievement and success. In other words, they found that attitudes and relationships are more important and more directly related to student achievement than funding or facilities.[4]

Teachers and educational administrators must avoid the temptation of blaming the system for lack of resources, large classes, too little equipment, too many children with special needs in a given class, lack of teacher aides, or whatever else one might identify as an impediment to student achievement. Such a censuring approach limits the agency of educational leaders and often prevents us from taking responsibility for factors within our control.

What is clear is that when educators examine our attitudes and assumptions, avoid pointing fingers of blame, and take responsibility for socially just education in our own contexts, academic achievement improves in concert. Cuban (2001) expresses concern that educators are being asked to take responsibility for "curing ills that are located in the larger society" (p. 15); moreover, he contends that the current emphasis on accountability suggests that if educators would "work harder than they have in the past, then test scores would improve" (p. 15). This is not what I am arguing.

Educators do not need to work longer hours, but we do need to work differently. We need to critique the ways in which our present practices marginalize some students and their lived experiences and privilege others—both overtly and through our silences. We need to act agentically, to lead deliberately, to facilitate transformative dialogue, and to achieve socially just learning environments for all children.

SUMMING UP AND MOVING FORWARD

I have argued that educators must learn that difference is normal. It is neither to be celebrated nor denigrated. It just is. The differences in our schools provide a rich tapestry of human existence that must be the starting point for a deeply democratic, academically excellent, and socially just education. No one is defined by a single factor or characteristic. Indeed, individual and

group identities are formed by continuous and dynamic interplays of social, political, and cultural characteristics as well as genetic and inherited traits. To take appropriate account of these factors, transformative educators and educational leaders must address issues of power, control, and inequity; they must adopt a set of guiding criteria, perhaps those I suggest in this article (justice, empathy, democracy, and optimism), to act as benchmarks for the development of socially just education; and they must engage in dialogue, examine current practice, and create pedagogical conversations and communities that critically build on, and do not devalue, students' lived experiences.

Difference is an inescapable and foundational quality of our society and our education system. If we are to achieve academic excellence and social justice in education, our leaders must be transformative—seeking not only to transform our practices of schooling but our socially constructed and persistent understandings. Bakhtin suggests that entering into a relationship and participating in dialogue with another person is the means by which one may overcome "closedness" and achieve understanding. For Bakhtin (1986), depth of understanding only occurs when we encounter difference and deal with it in ways that address its meanings:

> A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. (p. 7)

We must develop a new and more open approach to difference; understanding it is an intrinsic aspect of daily life—expecting to encounter difference on a daily basis, refusing to pathologize it, but accepting it and coming to understand it by placing dialogic interactions and positive relationships at the center of moral practice. We must ensure that educators do not celebrate some legitimate differences and pathologize others. Instead, we must open our curriculum, our policies, our hearts, and our minds to challenge inequities, to eliminate pathologies, and to ensure inclusive and respectful education for all students.

If educational leaders and those who help to prepare them for the remarkable task of educating our children take seriously the need for overcoming our pathologies of silence about differences (including those of ethnicity and class) and work explicitly to replace deficit thinking with deep and meaningful relationships, we will have taken great strides toward achieving education that is socially just and academically excellent for more children.

NOTES

1. I do not shy away from the use of the term *success*, as I believe one goal of a formal system of education must be for all children to succeed. However, I do not use the term to denote a narrow, test-based version of success but rather a wide range of learnings and achievements related to the development of an "educated citizen."

2. It is important to add the caveat that class is neither a predictor nor a cause of dysfunctional families; nevertheless, neither can we ignore the ways in which poverty exacerbates difficult family relationships.

3. The incident is recounted in Vibert, Portelli, and Leighteizer (1998), a report of a school known to the coinvestigators (of whom I was one) in our project as NS1 and published as part of a *National Study of Student Engagement in Learning and School Life*. It is also described in Vibert and Portelli (2000) in their discussion of social justice and critical practice.

4. This should in no way be interpreted as an argument for underfunding of education, for that too is socially unjust, especially where it results in disparities of educational opportunities (see Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Neither should it be interpreted as a saying that funding has no bearing on achievement, simply that it is not sufficient. Rather, it points to ways to think agentically and take charge of reform efforts even where other structural changes are also badly needed.

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