
Centering Love, Hope, and Trust in the Community: Transformative Urban Leadership Informed by Paulo Freire

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Abstract

In this article, we suggest that communities must explore alternative leadership ideologies, actors, and venues to make meaningful academic and social improvements in our cities. We examine how themes from Paulo Freire's critical ideology can help expand our conceptualizations of educational leadership and facilitate pragmatic responses to complex urban dilemmas. To illustrate our claims, we provide two case examples of urban educational leadership that is guided by Freirean dialogical tenets of love, faith, humility, hope, critical thinking, and solidarity.

Keywords

leadership, urban, cultural responsiveness

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Introduction

In this article, we suggest that communities must explore alternative leadership ideologies, actors, and venues to make meaningful academic and social improvements in our cities. We examine how themes from Paulo Freire's critical ideology can help expand our conceptualizations of educational leadership and facilitate pragmatic responses to complex education dilemmas. We suggest that Freire's work can make particular contributions in *urban* communities because, although many of these areas are faced with multitudes of educational and social dilemmas, they are also areas that are replete with assets that might be developed and/or further cultivated for widespread individual and community growth.

Conceptualizing Urban Education: Its Constraints and Opportunities

We embrace Noblit and Pink's (2007) notion of urban education not easily understood or guided by simplistic definitions about what is and what is not urban education. We do not remiss in noting the complicated nature of the problems that define urban schooling and education. For one, we understand the urban education phenomenon as "a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with distinguishing but not easily identifiable features" (Hopson, Greene, Bledsoe, Villegas, & Brown, 2007, p. 898), beyond a geographical explanation as implied by the adjective to education. Among these features are both those that are traditionally attached to "urban" conceptualizations in the mainstream discourse (high density areas, economic disparity, diversity of residents, and shortages of resources, and so on) *as well as* those that are often overlooked (cultural richness, resilience, perseverance, and so on, see Kincheloe, 2004). In addition, Noblit and Pink (2007) position that understanding urban education is understanding and embracing concepts that define it such as multiplicity, power, difference, capital, change, and intersectionality.

The fact that a large portion of our inner-city schools and communities are struggling is widely known and has been broadly analyzed (see, for example, Hopson et al.'s (2007) discussion of conditions in Pittsburgh, Trenton, and Chicago), though this depiction of struggling urban schools and education is hardly an acceptable conclusion or analysis of the situation as many suggest (Flessa & Ketelle, 2007; Foster, 2007; Leonardo & Hunter, 2007). Low test scores, low graduation rates, high rates of teacher and administrator turnover, and a host of other problems have been attributed to various factors. In their diagnostic efforts, however, it is apparent that many scholars and academic

leaders have maintained views that are too focalized (Anyon, 2005a; 2005b; Warren, 2005); instead, rarely is urban pushed “beyond a locale” as Noblit and Pink (2007, p. xv) suggest. That is, rather than viewing issues such as failing test scores and high school incompleteness as local indicators of more global concerns, there is a tendency to address only the immediate precipitators of these outcomes (class size, outdated curricula, teacher preparation, and so on). Ironically, although the diagnoses of school failures underestimate the influence of outside factors on school effectiveness, these same schools, once (hypothetically) straightened out, are commonly positioned in the public discourse as social panaceas. Schools, here, are depicted as being minimally affected by their surrounding environments but maximally affective of these same environments. The prevailing thought seems to be if we fix the schools, the rest of the ducks will fall into order, that is, employment and home ownership rates will increase, crime and drug use will go down, and so on.

Berliner (2006) depicts such perspectives as “impoverished” and encourages a broadened outlook of schools and their role in societal growth. He presents a substantial arsenal of data to indicate that, in academic pursuits, inner city schools are handcuffed by overwhelming social ills and, in efforts to address these social ills, schools provide but one sliver of the spectrum of services and strategies that are required to comprehensively address them. Addressing the former, Berliner asks:

Why do we put so much of our attention and resources into trying to fix what goes on inside low-performing schools when the causes of low performance may reside outside of the school? Is it possible that we might be better off devoting more of our attention and resources than we now do toward helping the families in the communities that are served by those schools (p. 963).

Echoing the work of Anyon (2005a, 2005b), Berliner depicts the poverty-related troubles facing urban areas in the United States as being particularly broad in scope and damaging to kids’ future expectancies. Among his revelations:

- The United States has “the highest rate of childhood poverty among rich nations” (p. 956).
- “The poorest of the poor”—those who are living at no more than half the official poverty rate—constitute “over 40% of the tens of millions of people that are officially classified as the ‘poor’ by our government” (p. 958).

- The United States is “a leader among the rich nations in the world in terms of failing to help people exit from poverty once they have fallen into poverty” (p. 960).
- “Environment is the overwhelming influence on measured IQ among the poor. This suggests that unless environments for the most impoverished improve we will not see the expression of the normal human genetic variation in intelligence that is expected” (p. 970).
- For students who are identical in every other way, “the differences in their educational attainment as a function of their neighborhood deprivation was estimated to be a difference of between the 10th and the 90th percentile on an achievement test” (p. 978).

These findings indicating the pervasive force of poverty on urban schooling are even more troubling when considering the correlation between race and culture with socioeconomic status. African Americans and Latinos are represented at disproportionately high numbers in the poorest sectors of urban communities and, therefore, in light of the aforementioned statistics on poverty and education, face the most daunting social and academic challenges (Anyon, 2005a, 2005b; Schutz, 2006).

Educational Leadership in Urban Contexts

We cite Berliner's (2006) and Anyon's (1997, 2005a, 2005b) work to contextualize our discussion of educational leadership theories and perspectives. As these challenging conditions in the United States have continued (particularly in our cities) over the past quarter of a century, educational leadership has repeatedly been cited as having profound implications for student and school outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). However, many educators and scholars have been reticent to embrace the perspective that school effectiveness is *essentially* tied to wider community health and fertility. Indeed, despite the pervasive influences of poverty, racism, and other such debilitating factors, educational leadership discussions have largely remained limited to that which occurs within school walls. Such bounded conceptualizations are evident in the ways that theories of educational leadership have been engaged in recent years, as witnessed in common descriptions of transformational, participative, collaborative, distributed, and servant leadership which have primarily focused on place-attached and/or principal leadership (Spillane, 2006). Taking an alternative viewpoint, we call for “Freirean” leadership that recognizes social conditions, invites new actors and transcends school-community boundaries (in both theory and practice). Foregrounding

our discussion of how Freirean insights might inform educational leadership discussions, we next proceed to describe some of the core elements of Freire's philosophy of action.

Paulo Freire's Transformative Ideology

Paulo Freire (1923-1997) is widely regarded as a central figure in the reconceptualization of education as a liberatory action. Freire's critical ideology emerged within the context of Brazilian literacy campaigns and was quickly disseminated internationally as a radical alternative to common status quo-maintaining educational perspectives. Throughout his voluminous writing, including *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992), *Pedagogy of the City*, and *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), Freire develops his overriding ideals of education as a transformative, context-laden, grassroots political movement. His influence on scholars (including Donald Macedo, Henry Giroux, Cornel West, Bell Hooks, & Peter McLaren), practitioners (such as those described by Oldenski, 1997), and their communities (especially in poverty-laden urban areas throughout North and South America) continues to be witnessed nearly forty years after his first book.

Of particular note among Freire's writings on education is his depiction of "dialogue" as a means for transformation through education and social action. Working toward "cultural synthesis" among leaders and people who have historically experienced the brunt of oppression (in its various manifestations), Freire (1970) claims that "dialogue cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people . . . Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself" (p. 89). This conceptualization of "dialogical love" is characterized by humility, faith in the people, hope, critical thinking, and, ultimately, solidarity. Freire's dialogue, then, entails a deeper, richer engagement than is commonly inferred in haphazard calls for "dialogue" in modern schooling contexts. Such conceptualizations commonly equate dialogue with "two way communication" (Sanders & Harvey, 2002)—a potentially shallow interaction that is not necessarily rooted in love.

Freire claims that years of disregard for oppressed people's humanity have influenced the creation and maintenance of social and institutional structures that limit and denigrate. With this in mind, Freire states that leaders who seek change (in contexts such as those that characterize many large urban cities in the United States) must go to the people humbly, openly, and ready to listen to their ideas. He claims, "In essence, the correct posture of one who does not consider him- or herself to be the sole possessor of the truth or the passive

object of ideology or gossip is the attitude of permanent openness” (1998, p. 119). He further describes how this openness of thought is antithetical to arrogance and elitism, “One of the necessary requirements for correct thinking is a capacity for not being overly convinced of one’s own certitudes . . . correct thinking is in this sense irreconcilable with self-conceited arrogance” (1998, p. 34).

In conjunction with this humble openness to learn from the people, Freire (1970) describes dialogue as being marked by intense faith in the inherent capabilities of all people to name their realities and to transform them, for, those who have experienced the brunt of oppressive structures (such as immigrants, people of color, and/or people who are poor) have long been deemed incapable of creating change and working for the betterment of their own conditions and society in general. He writes, “Faith in people is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue; the ‘dialogical person’ believes in others even before he meets them face to face” (pp. 90-91). In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire (1998) reiterates the importance of leaders’ faith in the people: “On no account may I make little of or ignore in my contact with such groups the knowledge they acquire from direct experience and out of which they live” (p. 76). The absence of this faith promotes leadership that is rooted in notions of domestication and “assistencialism”—a condition of dependence that is often created and sustained when systems and institutions do not engage emergent community capacities, thereby forcing people to rely on external support. (1973, p. 15). Freire describes:

If a social worker (in the broadest sense) supposes that s/he is “*the* agent of change,” it is with difficulty that s/he will see the obvious fact that, if the task is to be really educational and liberating, those with whom s/he works cannot be the objects of her actions. Rather, they too will be agents of change. If social workers cannot perceive this, they will succeed only in manipulating, steering and “domesticating.” If on the other hand they recognize others, as well as themselves, as agents of change, they will cease to have the exclusive title of “*the* agent of change” (1973, p. 116).

Therefore, with such humility and faith, dialogue centers the contextual expertise of the people as active advocates for social transformation. This is done for both moral and pragmatic reasons as, from Freire’s perspective, the oppressed deserve such humane engagement, but—more importantly—they are uniquely experienced and strategically positioned to instigate authentic change directed at widespread humanization.

Of foundational influence on this faith and humility is the awareness and recognition of history. Freire inserts the element of time into his discourse on power and social construction, insisting that humble and faith-filled transformative action only emerges when leaders and the people contextualize their efforts in the complex, multilayered pasts that characterize their communities' daunting presents. So central is this historical situation of the educative moment in Freire's analysis that he describes social, institutional, and individual identities as being inextricably dependent on past experiences, claiming that "human beings are not just what they are, but also what they were" (1973, p. 133). Leaders, then, can only go to the people and work with the people when they know the rich contours of the people's lives unfolded in time. This element of Freire's work is especially noteworthy in light of Macedo's assertion that:

we have become a people without a sense of history. We accept the present as given, bereft of historicity. Because we have so little comprehension of our past, we have no appreciation of its meaningful interrelation with the present. (in Freire, 1998, p. xxviii)

Freire's historical perspective, foundational to the establishment of humble leadership that has faith in communities' rich, diversely resourced capacities to enact social change, also underscores his contention that people from oppressed groups must themselves work within time and place. Such elevated awareness or, what Freire terms *conscientization* (1970), involves bringing to surface the critical consciousnesses of the people so that they might be more fully aware of the systems and structures that have affected their lives. Freire claims that by becoming aware of such conditions, people might better understand that their troubling predicaments were not simply of their own volition, but were significantly influenced by inequitable policies, norms, and traditions. He writes:

A more critical understanding of the situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction. Now the person who has this new understanding can engage in a political struggle for the transformation of the concrete conditions in which the oppression prevails. (1992, pp. 30-31)

Freire's humble, faith-filled, historically informed, and critical dialogue, although put to work in the midst of stifling oppression, is rooted in hope. This hope flows from his conceptualization of oppression as a limiter, not an

absolute prohibitor. He describes an “understanding of history as *opportunity* and not *determinism*” (1992, p. 91). That is, those who are oppressed should not see their realities as being naturally or permanently relegated to the neglected fringes of society. Rather, with hope, Freire (1998) asserts that the work of the people can remain (or become) purpose filled and meaningful. He writes, “The future is seen not as inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history. It’s the knowledge that sees history as possibility and not as already determined” (p. 72).

Giroux (1988) identifies Freire’s hopeful transformative process as a distinguisher from other critical discourses where “the language of critique is subsumed within the discourse of despair” (p. 111). Unlike many postmodern perspectives, Freire’s radical love and advocacy for the goodness of life refuses to be squashed even by pandemic oppression. Giroux further explains:

This is a notion of education fashioned in more than critique and Orwellian pessimism; it is a discourse that creates a new starting point by trying to make hope realizable and despair unconvincing . . . Education becomes a form of action that joins the languages of critique and possibility (1988, pp. 109-110)

Finally, Freire’s (1970) statement that “the people must find themselves in the emerging leaders, and the latter must find themselves in the people” (p. 163), indicates his belief that dialogue is necessarily dependent on and directed toward leaders’ *solidarity* with the people. He writes, “Solidarity is born only when the leaders witness to it by their humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people” (p. 129). By joining in union with the people, leaders can avoid paternalistic efforts to tell the oppressed what they need and instead work toward cultural synthesis. This historically informed solidarity is, in fact, cemented in recognition that leaders and the people are immersed in systems of oppression that dehumanize all (both the oppressed *and* their oppressors) and that fuller humanization can only be fulfilled through dialogue. (Refer to Table 1 for a summary of key elements of Freirean dialogue.)

Can We Transfer Freire’s Lessons to Different Contexts?

Attempts to learn from and be guided by Freire’s notions of humility, faith, hope, critical thinking, and solidarity must be carried out with appropriate

Table 1. Key Elements of Freirean Dialogue

Humility	Leaders are permanently open to new thoughts and understandings. They do not assume that they “have all the answers” to how productive living and learning might best occur.
Faith	Leaders have fundamental confidence in the people to name and describe their realities. Leaders draw from the experiential knowledge of the people in all phases of their work.
Hope	Better life possibilities are seen as being attainable. Opportunities for growth and achievement are real.
Critical thinking	Leaders and followers are aware of systems and structures of oppression and actively seek to change them.
Solidarity	Leaders and followers are seen as having destinies that are interconnected. They work in union toward better life conditions for all.

awareness of his ideology (and its limitations) and understandings of the potential relevance that his specific work can have in unique environments (similar to the awareness demonstrated by Anderson & Grinberg, 1998 in their description of Foucauldian insights for educational leadership). Although it is not an overt critique of Freire’s work itself, many scholars and educators have been criticized for claiming to utilize his context-specific pedagogy in arenas that are much different. For example, attempts to directly transfer Freire’s Brazilian-rooted literacy work into privileged school and university settings in the United States can result in the heart of his radical underlying message being lost in translation. Freire (1992, 1997) warned against such misuse and urged others to draw from his ideology, but to determine their own educational methods—ones that are appropriate for their given settings. To convey his point more clearly, in the text *Paulo Freire on Higher Education* (1994), he describes how some aspects of past political leaders’ ideologies influenced his perspective. He stresses, however, that it was imperative that such work be read with “historical context” situating the time and space in which the work was written. In *Pedagogy of the City* (1993), Freire further notes that although many people have misused his work and his pedagogical methods in trying to force them onto their given situations, if read with critical awareness, his transformative ideology can be useful in many different contexts, including educational movements in the United States. In fact, Freire claims “We need to change the face of schools” (p. 32) and he writes of education “that transforms the space where children, rich or poor, are able to learn, to create, to take risks, to question, and to

grow” (p. 39). In sum, then, Giroux’s (1988) assertion about the utility of Freirean “meta-language” seems appropriate for our use of this work in the area of educational leadership. He writes:

What Freire does is provide a meta-language that generates a set of categories and social practices. Freire’s work is not meant to offer radical recipes for instant forms of critical pedagogy, it is a series of theoretical signposts that need to be decoded and critically appropriated within the specific contexts in which they might be useful (p. 114).

Leadership Informed by Freire

Throughout his body of work, Freire repeatedly describes the essential responsibility that transformative educators have to start “where the people are.” He writes:

You never get *there* by starting from *there*, you get *there* by starting from some *here*. This means, ultimately, that the educator must not be ignorant of, underestimate, or reject any of the “knowledge of living experience” with which educands come to school. (1970, p. 58)

Transferred to the field of urban education, then, Freirean “meta-language” calls for us to examine how grass-roots perspectives might inform change movements. For Freirean leadership, humble, faith filled, critical, and hopeful is *in and of* the community. Its organic, community-reflective nature employs actors who live and work in the spaces of local meaning making and identity formation. Giroux (1988) further explains:

For Freire, education includes and moves beyond the notion of schooling. Schools are only one important site where education takes place, where men and women both produce and are the product of specific social and pedagogical relations. (p. 110)

Accordingly, Freirean leadership is not relegated to remain within school walls. It can work in neighborhood churches, community centers, and local political halls—the most likely venues “for radical social change in America. (West, 1993, p. 668)

It is manifested at the hands of clergy, activists, and organizers—leaders who have historical awareness and faith in their communities because they themselves are often *products* of the communities (Wood, 1994). In these

spaces and among these actors, local experiences can be couched within global and systemic conditions to elevate collective consciousnesses (Wood & Warren, 2002). Here institutional detachment (primarily from schools) emboldens liberal critiques of oppressive regimes. In such arenas, alternate social realities are made visible, codestinies are forecasted, and collective expectations are raised.

The “critical” aspect of *community*-based leadership is especially of note, for, the antifoundational possibilities of those who work within school systems are often mitigated by their institutional ties. Freire (1998) warns:

The kind of education that does not recognize the right to express appropriate anger against injustice, against disloyalty, against the negation of love, against exploitation, and against violence fails to see the educational role implicit in the expression of these findings. (1998, p. 45)

Community-based educational leadership—that which is immersed in urban life and committed to urban transformation *can* openly counter institutional and social structures that perpetuate injustice, exploitation, and violence. Armed with emic love and historical understanding, Freirean leadership engages oppression at its core without fear of professional repercussions. It can work naturally to support the marriage of critique and possibility. Such leadership counters that which was richly described in Larson’s (1997) examination of a school-community conflict in the Western U.S. Larson found that school-based leaders’ institutional attachments limited their capacities to critique their own organizations and that when faced with community dilemmas these leaders ultimately chose “safe” practices that preserved their jobs rather than just practices that served diverse constituents.

Freirean leadership, although commonly engaged outside of school walls, remains significantly interconnected with school-based action. For, as it addresses diversely manifested destructive conditions in local communities (as described by Anyon (2005a, 2005b) and Berliner (2006)), it facilitates the development of social and academic foundations that were previously nonexistent. School achievement can then be established on these foundations. Therefore, although it emanates predominantly from the outside of schools and is by definition far more political and institutionally critical than most school-based leadership, Freirean leadership is *educational* leadership in that it helps create opportunities for school success. Similar to Anyon’s (2005b) argument that social policy is *educational* policy, it pushes us to expand our conceptualizations of educational leadership so that we recognize

Table 2. Traditional Leadership Practice Versus Freirean Leadership Practice

	Issues addressed	Common venues	Common actors
Traditional leadership practice	Curriculum, instruction, school discipline, staff development, general building oversight	Schools	Principals, teachers, other school staff
Freirean leadership practice	Social oppression, institutional critique, community asset development, community vision-setting	Schools, churches, community centers, social halls, political offices, neighborhood streets	School staff, activists, organizers, clergy, parents, college faculty

school-based action as inextricably related to neighborhood and community conditions (refer to Table 2).

Situating Freirean Leadership Among Other Leadership Theories

Like other specific veins of critical discourse that have found increased space in educational leadership research, policy, and practice in recent years (Bogotch, 2000; Capper, 1998; Dantley, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, English, 2003; MacBeath, 2007; Ryan, 2003, 2005; Shields, 2005; Shields & Edwards, 2005; Theoharis, 2007) Freirean leadership is grounded in “morality and meaning,” it rejects notions of objectivity, neutrality, and social detachment, and it is “principled and purposive.” However, Freirean dialogue presents an additional contribution to the leadership conversation in its explicit portrayal of dialogue as a *dialectic* relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors. It depicts leaders as being engaged in a *common* plight with the people. Their solidarity is cemented by their recognition that they share a common fate—one group’s fuller humanization is necessarily influenced and, in turn, followed by the others. This notion counters traditional ideas of educational leadership which call for leaders to “empower” others—a notion suggested by transformational, facilitative, and collaborative leadership which implicitly assumes that power is something that leaders altruistically “share” with others. In its depiction of shared ultimate destinies, Freirean leadership also differs from servant and other-centered leadership perspectives which actively suggest that maximization of self-interests should not be among leadership’s concerns. These theories perpetuate zero sum conceptualizations of power, implying that, through “sacrifice,”

Table 3. Comparing Theories of Educational Leadership

Theory of leadership	General characteristics	Underlying motivations	Role of social justice
Transformational (Friedman, 2004; Giles, 2006; Hallinger, 2003; Lam, 2002; Leithwood, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Ross & Gray, 2006)	Seeks second order change Involves multiple actors	Organizational change Multi-positioned empowerment	Not mentioned
<i>Collaborative/Distributive</i> (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Rubin, 2002; Yukl, 1994)	Leadership roles for multiple actors Cooperation and delegation are valued	Organizational effectiveness	Not mentioned
Other-Centered/ Servant (Alston, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977; Sergiovanni, 1994, 1999)	Foregrounds interests of others Employs empathic perspective	Moral imperatives Personal/organizational development	Not specifically mentioned—more closely resembles notions of charity
Social Justice/Critical (Bogotch, 2000; Dantley, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d; English, 2003; MacBeath, 2007; Ryan, 2003; 2005; Shields, 2005; Shields & Edwards, 2005; Theoharis, 2007)	Centers issues of power, privilege, and equity Takes on social activist role	Social change Equity, justice	Foundational—serves as the barometer by which leadership effectiveness is measured
<i>Freirean</i>	Rooted in humility, faith, hope, critical thinking, solidarity Relationships are horizontal and dialectic	Radical social change Equity, justice, and fuller humanization	Foundational—is the natural outcome of reconceptualized social relationships

leaders ultimately lose something significant in their interactions with followers. In contrast, dialectic Freirean leadership *is* self-interested in that it ascribes to a maximization of self-interest that is deeply enmeshed in, judged by, and dependent on widespread social justice (refer to Table 3 for comparisons of leadership theories).

Perhaps most noteworthy of this perspective's situation among other theories of educational leadership, however, are Freire's (1970, 1973, 1995, 1998) baseline discussions of love, humility, faith, hope, and solidarity—discussions which reintroduce language core to the human condition but foreign to the contemporary discourse on educational change in inner-cities. Centered on these dialogical concepts, Freirean leadership calls for the *purposive* mobilization of those who have experientially-entrenched love for and understanding of the people. Freire writes:

It is fundamental for us to know that without certain qualities or virtues, such as a generous loving heart, respect for others, tolerance, humility, a joyful disposition, love of life, openness to what is new, a disposition to welcome change, perseverance in the struggle, a refusal of determinism, a spirit of hope, and openness to justice, progressive pedagogical practice is not possible. (1998, p. 108)

Paralleling Freire's claim that "progressive pedagogical practice" is not possible without such characteristics, we suggest that progressive *leadership* practice is also dependent on love, humility, hope, and the like. These are not moral niceties being added on to mainstream discussions of leadership, but the reframing of the leadership discourse altogether. That is, describing educational leadership as rooted in Freirean dialogical concepts requires us to reexamine who leads, where they lead, and why they lead. It is, in these ways, a fundamental shift.

Examples of Freirean Leadership in Practice

To help illuminate our discussion, we next describe two noteworthy examples of programs/leaders that embody Freirean tenets: The Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, led by Ernie Cortes, and the Center of Life, led by Tim Smith.

Texas Industrial Areas Foundation

Dennis Shirley's (1997, 2001) insightful descriptions of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (TIAF) detail the leadership of Ernie Cortes and other organizers as they "developed a vision and strategy of school and neighborhood

improvement” (1997, p. 171) in local communities (which had been plagued by many of the urban poverty-related dilemmas that have been described in this article). TIAF is a broad, multidimensional collaborative that involves diversely positioned community leaders in the engagement of social and educational issues, but it is especially distinctive in its *critical leadership orientation*. That is, rather than simply seeking to *involve* various adults in the education-related issues in their community (in potentially passive, status quo-maintaining roles), Cortes has developed a model of leadership that calls for their “*political engagement*” (p. 172). Shirley (1997) describes:

Political leadership, as understood in TIAF organizations, consists of a number of factors, including 1) the ability to identify social problems; 2) skill in translating grievances into concrete political issues; 3) skill in coalition building; 4) implementing change; and 5) evaluation. (p. 172)

TIAF taps neighborhood social capital (as found, for example, in churches) for the construction of new ideas and *actions* related to schools and other organizations of influence. Importantly, in concert with their community organizing efforts, TIAF then joins the efforts of activists, parents, politicians, and other “grass-roots” adults with those of local principals to facilitate academic successes that are built on new social possibilities. TIAF leadership is distinctive in its flexible adaptation to community needs, but also in its fundamental reliance on community assets and abilities (correlative to Freirean humility and faith), its critique of structures of dominance (Freirean critical thinking), and its expansion of community possibilities (Freirean hope). TIAF has demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in its social and educational transformations of numerous communities throughout Texas. Undeniably, TIAF has served “to unleash the broader leadership capacities of (these) communities” (Warren, 1998, p. 13). In fact, the work of Cortes and other TIAF staff and volunteers has been so effective in promoting social and educational growth that their model of community organizing and leadership has spread to other Industrial Areas Foundation¹ sites throughout the United States and abroad; it is now thriving in over 50 cities (Warren, 1998).

Center of Life

On a more local scale, Freirean educational leadership is exhibited by Pastor Tim Smith and the Center of Life (COL) organization in Pittsburgh. Working toward new possibilities for urban youth in the local Hazelwood

neighborhood—which faces many of the social dilemmas described by Berliner (2006) and others (Anyon, 2005a, 2005b, Schutz, 2006; Warren, 2005; Wood & Warren, 2002)—Pastor Smith leads several creative, community-reflective initiatives that seek transformation. For example, COL’s “KRUNK Movement” (Kreating Realistic Urban New-School Knowledge) promotes social change through one of the neighborhood’s most cherished and visible assets: music. Teenage performance artists, with guidance and support from Pastor Smith, write, produce, and perform socially inspired hip-hop and jazz pieces. KRUNK (which has released two highly acclaimed albums) is supported by several local foundations and has become highly visible and widely influential in the Pittsburgh region. Transformation has been witnessed in the schools where KRUNK regularly performs (through their music they directly address issues such as violence, drugs, and racism), among the wider Pittsburgh community (politicians, corporations, and foundations have been impelled to respond to KRUNK’s social mission), and, perhaps most notably, among the KRUNK musicians themselves. Through their socially conscious mission—which is facilitated by Pastor Smith, their demanding work schedules, and their ambitious travel schedule, these teenagers have been awakened to new individual and community possibilities. They demonstrate academic and social leadership development that is virtually unparalleled in this community. In fact, in a neighborhood where a disproportionately low percentage of students graduate from high school, *every* KRUNK musician has graduated and gone on to attend college.

Like KRUNK, Pastor Smith’s “Fathers and Sons” basketball program meets “the people where they are” in working toward improvement of neighborhood conditions. Similar to other late night basketball programs that have emerged in urban communities throughout the country, Fathers and Sons has great value in providing teenagers with male role models and constructive recreation during the evening hours. However, especially noteworthy about Pastor Smith’s program are the formative conversations between men and teenagers that precede the basketball action each week. During this time, the group formally engages in open, critical discussions about social responsibility and social change. Meeting on “comfortable turf,” high school-aged kids are challenged to become leaders for personal and community renewal. Then, through both the strategic relational bonds that are forged and the community and COL resources that are available, they are able to take action.

Throughout both KRUNK and Fathers and Sons activities, a vernacular of faith, hope, love, critical thinking, and solidarity is unmistakable. Participants are recognized and valued for what they do well and love to do. They are then

challenged to excel as students, professionals, *and civic-actors*. Participants are able to envision and ultimately work toward the cocreation of an equitable and just community—largely because Pastor Smith and other COL staff members passionately exude belief in them and loyalty to them. Although not “school-based,” this Freirean leadership—built on experiential knowledge and time-earned trust—is clearly of foundational benefit to the educational and social pursuits of Hazelwood youth.

Ernie Cortes, Tim Smith, and their respective organizations have distinct aims in the work that they do, but their leadership works find common ground in their clear and ongoing commitment to Freirean notions of humility, faith in (and solidarity with) the people, hope, and critical thinking. Their work is promising not just for the value it places on these ideals, but for the impressive social and educational outcomes that they have achieved.

Conclusion

The insights gleaned from Freire’s work, then, have significant implications for the practice of educational leadership in our urban communities. Like other critical, social justice theories of educational leadership, Freirean leadership is of note for its critique of institutional structures and traditions that perpetuate inequity. However, Freire’s language calls for leaders to work with love, humility, faith, and hope and it beckons us to expand our conceptualizations of educational leadership responsibilities, strategies, and interactions in urban settings. The educational arena, from a Freirean perspective, consists of schools *and the complex social contexts that surround them*. Berliner’s (2006) assertions on the linking of educational and social action reflect such Freirean leadership foci:

When we push for more rigorous standards in our schools we should also push for a raise in the minimum wage, or better yet, for livable wages . . . When we push for advanced placement courses, or college preparatory curricula for all our nation’s students, we must simultaneously demand universal medical coverage for all our children . . . When we push for all day kindergarten, or quality early childhood care, or de-tracked schools we need also to argue for affordable housing throughout our communities. (Berliner, 2006, p. 987)

Leadership here takes on a holistic perspective—one that counters the compartmentalization of education matters from social matters. It recognizes that “attempting to fix inner city schools without fixing the city in which they

are embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door” (Anyon, 1997, p. 168). Freirean leadership enrolls historically aware school-based actors, clergy, activists, politicians, and other key community leaders who play pivotal roles in the everyday lives of students and their families to engage issues and conditions that heretofore in the education literature have remained largely unaddressed.

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1. The Industrial Areas Foundation builds organizations whose primary purpose is power—the ability to act—and whose chief product is social change (www.industrialareasfoundation.org).

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