

Educational Leadership or Followership?

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ABSTRACT

Opponents of the neoliberal privatization of schools must be cautious in formulating their opposition so as not to situate themselves as the defenders of an otherwise indefensible status quo. Though we might expect professors in traditional university-based educational-leadership programs to protect their institutional self-interests and their traditional monopoly on the preparation of school leaders against the challenge presented by Eli Broad's Superintendents Academy, do we know for a fact that the curriculum of Broad's Academy differs significantly from their own programs? It would be hard for us name very many professors who have defended those programs as bastions of democratic values.

This article is a response to:

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RESPONDING TO MILLER'S (2012) discussion of Eli Broad's mounting influence over how our dominant institutions define and shape the public's definition of *educational leadership*, I want to do more than echo his concerns. While I do share those concerns, I'm not convinced that the traditional university-based educational leadership programs that he seeks to defend from the likes of Broad have ever offered anything substantively different from what is being taught in Broad's Superintendents Academy. In fact, I've always viewed *educational leadership* to be one of the great oxymorons of our time, at least in terms of how it's actually been practiced by those in positions of authority. For example, how many educational leadership faculty within those university-based programs made Berliner and Biddle's *The Manufactured Crisis* required reading in the 1980s and 1990s? How many faculty within those programs openly and publically challenged the ridiculous claims of the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report? More recently, who within the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) or the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) challenged the 2010 Blue Ribbon Report from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) entitled *Transforming Teacher Education Through Clinical Practice: A National Strategy to Prepare Effective Teachers*?

Challenging the Medical Model

Should teacher-training programs really operate more like medical schools and require more hours of clinical experience? Rhetorically, such a prescription might sound appealing. It certainly plays on the prestige that our culture ascribes to medical

doctors, but is that prestige really based on the actual performance of the medical community? Or is it based on our culture's materialism that gives doctors their esteemed social status because of their income? Did anyone in a position of educational leadership ask any of these questions? Did any of them consider the ramifications of a study published just prior to the NCATE report by the U.S. Health and Human Services Office of the Inspector General detailing how mistakes by medical care providers lead to around 15,000 deaths every month? Those same mistakes cost U.S. taxpayers about \$4.4 billion dollars each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Why did no educational "leaders" tie these failures back to the professional preparation of doctors and nurses in the same way that low student test scores are tied to the preparation of teachers? Why is no one screaming for our nation's medical schools to be placed under greater scrutiny and held more accountable?

While medical schools do require students to spend much more time in clinical experiences than do colleges of education, how many of those 15,000 deaths each month can we attribute to the excessive demands placed on medical students during their

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clinical experiences that drive so many of them to exhaustion, burnout, depression, and substance abuse?

Is this really the model that teacher education needs to follow? Is more clinical experience always better? Given the rate of errors leading to patient deaths, too much clinical experience might not be what's best for medical students or their patients. According to another study published in the same year as NCATE's "blue ribbon" report, we should all avoid being hospitalized any time during the month of July. According to statistics described in that report, July is the deadliest month to be admitted to a hospital. It also happens to be the month when most graduating MDs begin their residency programs (Rice, 2010). But almost no one within the educational leadership community raises these issues or challenges the dominant logic. Given their status, our educational leaders within higher education have been remarkably compliant in the face of the corporate assault on schools, and this compliance with an economic and corporatist vision of education essentially spans the entire history of compulsory schooling.

No Time for Romanticizing Schools or Their Leadership

Much of Miller's discussion of Broad is grounded in the work of my frequent coconspirator, Ken Saltman, whose mentor at Penn State during his doctoral studies was Henry Giroux. Giroux (1988) wrote:

In the current political climate, there is little talk about schools and democracy and a great deal of debate about how schools might become schools might become more successful in meeting industrial needs and contributing to economic productivity. Against a landscape of shrinking economic resources, the breakup of liberal and radical school coalitions, and the erosion of civil rights, the public debate about the nature of schooling has been replaced by the concerns and interests of management experts. . . .

Unfortunately, at a time when we need a language of analysis to understand the structure and meaning of schooling, Americans have retreated back into the discourse of management and administration, with its focus on issues of efficiency and control. These issues have overshadowed concerns regarding understanding. Similarly, the need to develop at all levels of schooling a radical pedagogy concerned with critical literacy and active citizenship has given way to a conservative pedagogy that emphasizes technique and passivity. The stress is no longer on helping students to "read" the world critically; instead, it is on helping students to "master" the tools of reading. The question of how teachers, administrators, and students produce meaning and whose interests it serves, is subsumed under the imperative to master the "facts." The script is grim. (pp. 1–2)

Giroux offered this commentary in 1988, long before Broad ever entered into the educational policy arena. But even here, he used a language suggestive of a time in the history of state-sponsored compulsory schooling when the predominant model of teaching aimed at "helping students to 'read' the world critically." As early as 1793, Godwin warned that "before we put so powerful a

machine (education) under the direction of so ambiguous an agent (government), it behooves us to consider well what it is we do. Government will not fail to employ it, to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions" (as cited in Spring, 1994, p. 42). Goldman (1910) confirmed Godwin's fears:

What, then, is the school of today? It is for the child what the prison is for the convict and the barracks for the soldier—a place where everything is being used to break the will of the child, and then to pound, knead, and shape it into a being utterly foreign to itself. . . . It is but part of a system which can maintain itself only through absolute discipline and uniformity. (para. 2–4)

More recently, Chomsky (2003) described "the basic institutional role and function of the schools" as providing "an ideological service: there's a real selection for obedience and conformity" (pp. 27–28). And it is precisely through this selection process that people ascend to positions of educational leadership, making the entire concept so comical in light of so much documented compliance.

My point here is not to discredit Miller's description of the Broad Foundation's role in educational reform. We should all be concerned. However, as Illich argued, we must "abstain from romanticism, any kind of romanticism, in order to be able to face the kind of society we live in and have created, in order to be able, but barely able, to bear the anguish of looking at it" (Cayley, 1992, p. 142). In the end, I fear that Miller winds up inadvertently defending a status quo that he simultaneously critiques.

Beyond Leadership as a Title

We need to spend more energy moving beyond our traditional, institutionally determined definition of leadership as something measured in terms of someone's position within a hierarchy. Our thoughts on leadership must begin from the perennial question, *How do I lead a life worth living?* Notice how this question shifts the locus of authority. You must lead you! You must be the *author* of your own life's narrative, which helps us identify the ultimate source of *authority*.

Our approach to leadership must honor the value of autonomy, the fundamental autonomy of the individual to lead his or her life. This is where authentic leadership begins—in leading and authoring our lives. This approach sets us at odds with the dominant institutions of our age—the institutions of capitalism. By their very nature, those institutions deny the autonomy of individuals that provides the basis of any meaningful notion of freedom and any meaningful notion of political equality. This explains why our capitalist economic system has, from the very founding of the United States, undermined democracy. Capitalism depends on inequality for its very existence. In the broadest of terms, it negates the autonomy of the capitalist as much as it negates the autonomy of the worker, making each of them slaves to the economic imperative of profit and selfish individualism. Within this hierarchy of values, profit reigns supreme. In this sense, even the capacity of capitalists to lead authentic lives is diminished by the heteronomous relationship that subordinates them to profit. A CEO and

board of directors, for example, may not wish to lay off thousands of workers, but the profit motive, which has even been codified into law, mandates that they place profits ahead of people.

Because of the capitalist relation—the relationship through which one individual’s survival hinges on the willingness of another to offer a wage in exchange for labor—capitalist institutions are inherently hierarchical and the relationships within them intrinsically heteronomous. Rather than locating authority as essentially internal to the individual, they define authority as external in nature. Authority becomes something granted to you by the institution. You can be replaced, and that authority can be transferred to someone else. Maybe that person exercises that authority more effectively than you, maybe not, but the authority does not belong to either of you; it belongs to the institution. The institution authors you; it leads you. You don’t lead it.

Teaching and Learning as Leadership

To help us move beyond our conventional understanding of educational leadership, we need to consider some of the deep etymological connections between education and leadership, particularly in light of the increased emphasis on teacher leadership that we hear echoing in educational-reform discourse. To begin with, there is something almost beautifully redundant in the idea of teacher leadership. In Latin, *ducere* means “to lead,” in the navigational sense of guiding or conducting someone from one place to another. *Educere* means “to lead forth” or “to lead out.” I appropriate this as the definition of *education*. Under this definition, and herein lies the almost beautiful redundancy of teacher leadership, to be an educator is to play a role in leading something forth from or out of another person. I leave aside the question of what is being led forth for now. My more immediate concern has to be with explaining why the notion of teacher leadership is only *almost* beautifully redundant.

Obviously, I am drawing a distinction between *educator* and *teacher*. By *teacher*, I mean that title ascribed to a person employed to carry out certain activities as a functionary of state-mandated, compulsory schools. While I recognize that many teachers do their best to play the role of educators in the strict sense of the term as I have just partially explained, the institutional norms of compulsory schooling mitigate against *educere*. What passes for education inside most schools, and certainly the vast majority of public schools, conforms to a notion of education drawn from a different Latin root. *Educare*, in stark contrast to *educere*, means “to put something in,” like someone puts seeds into fallow ground and cultivates them.

We should not belittle or reject *educare*. Training someone to become technically and mechanically proficient at playing the guitar or training someone in the skills and knowledge necessary to become a welder constitute an act of *educare*. There are simply certain things you must know and be able to do in order to play guitar or to be a welder. To some extent, *educare* is also appropriate for teaching people how to decode the symbols of written language (i.e., how to read). Under voluntary conditions, when one person comes to another seeking to learn some certain skill or set of skills,

educare proves most practical, though we must remain vigilant in distinguishing it from education (*educere*).

There are also other, less voluntary conditions, under which each of us experiences *educare*. We are not born with any knowledge of the world, though we are born with a greater or lesser capacity to draw such knowledge of the world from the world. Neither are we born with a language already intact through which we can name the world, but most of us are born with the capacity for language. We are not free to choose or create our own language. Others must pass language on to us. This is the language that they, and previous generations, have created to name the world. As we acquire their language, we also inherit the ideas, beliefs, and values carried within it that have structured understandings of and behaviors in the world. During the *educare* of our socialization, those ideas are transmitted to us, and they structure our understandings and behaviors. In this way, society reproduces itself.

Because we inherit these ideas, beliefs, and values from sources external to us, because we internalize them at a taken-for-granted level of awareness (this is the way the world is because that is what I was told), we stand in heteronomous relationship to them. They form traditions and conventions that exert external authority and control over us, leading us to adopt certain understandings and behaviors. As we shall see, the heteronomous character of knowledge passed on through *educare* is what most radically differentiates it from *educere*. Furthermore, because *educare* characterizes the dominant model of instruction within compulsory schooling, we can readily discern how compulsory schooling promotes the value of heteronomy (external control or governance) over the value of autonomy (internal self-control or self-governance) promoted by *educere*. For this reason, we can legitimately make the case that our system of compulsory schools does not serve the value of education. These schools do not promote the autonomy of students and, though teachers may stand in a heteronomous relationship to students, neither do schools respect or promote the autonomy of teachers. Ultimately, this undermines and makes a mockery of teacher leadership.

Teacher Leadership as Farce and Imperative

As an element of contemporary educational reform discourse, teacher leadership may deceive members of the public, who have little insight into the power dynamics of schools. It deceives few teachers, who will soon, if they don’t already, recognize it as a rhetorical maneuver, paternalistically and patronizingly intended to offset the psychologically damaging language of accountability while simultaneously seducing them to more enthusiastically embrace their continuing subjugation. As Huxley (1946) wrote of the dystopian world he created in *Brave New World*, “That is the secret of happiness and virtue—liking what you’ve got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny” (p. 10). While it may sound as if teachers will gain greater autonomy over the work they pursue with students, in actual practice, teacher leadership will translate into advanced teacher servitude.

Authentic teacher leadership would work to transform the heteronomous relations that deny teachers their autonomy to lead students toward their own autonomy through education as *educere*. This returns us to the matter of what the practice of *educere* leads forth from or leads out of a person. It leads forth our autonomy that allows us to lead our lives, undermining the heteronomous effects of the *educare* we undergo during our initial socialization. Remember that during socialization/*educare*, we internalize the ideas, beliefs, and values of external authorities at a taken-for-granted or tacit level of awareness, which allows them to govern our understandings and our behaviors without our conscious awareness. They make us their subjects. They act through us. In essence, we don't lead our lives—they do!

Through *educere* we move toward autonomy by gaining consciousness of those ideas, beliefs, and values, as well as their origins and the concrete material interests to which they may be tied. *Educere* allows us to recognize ourselves as beings who are, in fact, separate from the external sources of our conditioning. The ideas and beliefs we carry around in our heads are not us. They are not ours, but gaining this separation from them does not necessitate our rejection of them. It does, however, afford us the distance necessary to evaluate them.

In his famous essay *What Is Enlightenment?* Kant (1784) equated the mode of being produced under the effects of *educare* with a condition of immaturity—"the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another" (para. 1). In response to this immaturity, Kant issued the challenge: "*Sapere Aude!* [Dare to know!] 'Have courage to use your own understanding!' that is the motto of enlightenment" (para. 1). This same spirit echoed in the voice of famed Brazilian educator Freire (1970) when he argued: "Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for people as uncompleted beings conscious of their incompleteness" (p. 27). This is what *educere* leads forth from us—consciousness of our incompleteness, and in our incompleteness we find the individual autonomy

to lead our own lives and possibility of a collective autonomy through which to transform those objective contexts.

Before we join Miller in opposing Broad's alleged assault on university-based educational leadership programs, he should have to convince us that those programs have ever promoted a vision of education even remotely compatible with *educere*. Until they do, those of us interested in authentic leadership, and not just school management, are left to wonder if they're even worth defending.

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