

# Social Justice Leadership in the Becoming

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## Abstract

In this letter, I respond to comments from David Gabbard regarding my article on the Broad Superintendents Academy. Energized by Gabbard's critique, my letter points toward a position for educational leaders that works both within and against dominant systems. I ask: How can we model in our own communities the kind of caring, inclusion, and dialogic relations that we espouse in our graduate seminars? This type of leadership carries the challenge of working in ways that are both effective and subversive, both oppositional and affirmative.

## This letter is a response to:

Gabbard, D. (2013). Educational Leadership or Followership?. *Democracy and Education*, 21 (1), Article 8. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/iss1/8>

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Dear David:

Thank you for your thoughtful commentary (Gabbard, 2013) on my article (Miller, 2012). You've challenged me to think harder about social justice, where we lead, and when we follow. You ask a thorny question: Can those of us who teach in the university authentically claim that our programs provide training in educational leadership? Are we following, all too passively, the dictates of state/corporate interests bent more toward private gain than public good?

To review my position: Following the front-edge work of Saltman (2010) and Giroux (2012) on corporate, neoliberal manipulation of education, what disturbs me about the Broad Superintendents Academy is the insistence on a managerial logic conveniently divorced from critique of social inequity. In my article, I suggested that we can do something different in our university-based leadership programs. But you may be right, that I all too easily used a critique of the Academy to valorize university-based graduate education. My desire to imagine university-based programs as a progressive force invoked your critical push-back. Hold on, Miller, I hear you saying, aren't you and your students quite content to serve the status quo?

I honor the distinction at the center of your commentary between *educere* ("drawing out") and *educare* ("pushing in"). As you point out, a commitment to *educere* lies at the heart of critical pedagogy, in the Freirean tradition. That's the tradition in which I was trained as a doctoral student, a tradition I bring to my own teaching. As we both know, nurturing schools as spaces of

liberation is not the agenda of the current reform efforts. Mainstream education has become a business of pushing common standards, harder and faster, without engendering autonomy and critical thought. To simply dismiss educational leaders, though, as servants of an oppressive regime is to close the possibility of working for change from an agentic position within (and on the margins of) the system.

In June, Appalachian State University held an orientation for the incoming doctoral students. Your commentary gave me a starting point to talk about leadership and social change. As an opening provocation, I told the new students about your commentary on my article, and I told them you'd asked if educational leadership might be an oxymoron. I then voiced my response that, yes, educational leaders can work for social change . . . and cited specific ways in which several doctoral students had already enacted their commitments: the university administrator who helped start a downtown café that serves anyone, regardless of ability to pay; the district superintendent who banned corporal punishment and put social justice on the agenda of a summer

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retreat with school principals. I told the incoming students that, wherever they work, they can find small spaces of social change, inching toward a more compassionate and inclusive society.

You might find that a soft-edged approach to social change, all too accommodating of the authoritarian effects of compulsory education, all too comfortable with capitalism's relentless drive toward intensified inequality. In my sharper critical moments, I agree with you: Educational leaders find themselves managing social machines that produce inequality, serving the demands of capital in ways that are hard to recognize, camouflaged in the discourse of 21st-century skills and framed as the production of globally competitive students. I join you and other critical observers in critiquing that language (Miller, 2010). I agree that educators have lost their voice in challenging the strong discourses of those who would dishearten teachers, dismantle public education, and erase notions of the "common good" as a bottom-line criteria for evaluating educational policy. As Carpenter and Brewer (2012) have observed, educational leaders find themselves in the position of "implicated advocate," expected to advocate for equitable outcomes for all children while responsible for administering policies that have inequitable effects. In times like these, we're all struggling with our implicated positions.

So here's my question, David: How can we hold onto our critical edges while also opening inclusive spaces that affirm the vitality and possibility embodied in the daily, microchange work that our students (and we ourselves) do? After all, public-supported schools and universities are the locations where many of us find ourselves. How do we practice a gentle politics of transformation that enables students to take a stand, where they already live?

This is a question I'm asking for myself as I work toward naming the space I inhabit as a teacher of educational leaders. It's a question I carry from my own training in critical pedagogy (perhaps one of the reasons you and I share questions is that I wasn't trained to be a school administrator). As I learned more about the field of educational leadership, I realized the profession carries a conservative legacy of preserving existing social arrangements (Shoho, Merchant, & Lugg, 2011). For many administrators, social justice becomes an impractical concern in a field pressed on all sides to produce results and close the gaps without being afforded the space to ask how and why such gaps are continually produced in society.

That said, the more I read, the more I appreciate how much professional writing on social justice leadership has emerged in recent years (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012; Shields, 2013). It's become a strong genre, urging educational leaders to center issues of power and equity in all aspects of their practice. Anderson (2009) argues for what he has named "advocacy leadership," an approach that attends to both authentic democratic relations in the world of schools and advocacy for social equity in the broader public. From this perspective, leadership honors the relational dimensions of educational life but demands more. As Anderson notes: "Authenticity at the interpersonal level is exceedingly difficult unless we create authentic institutions and an authentic society in

which the values of equity and democracy can be practiced" (p. 21). The advocacy leader, like Shields's notion of the "transformative leader," is focused on equity within and beyond the school.

Anderson observes: "To the extent that school leaders are not also asking broader social questions and are buying into their role as scapegoats for society's ills, the status quo will march on with slight fluctuations in test scores" (p. 43).

With Anderson (2009), I agree on the importance of foregrounding a political-economic critique of managerialism and neoliberalism in education. Graduate seminars, in their better moments, crack openings for students to entertain an unfamiliar (and often uncomfortable) critique of the workings of power and privilege in their everyday realities. These are the moments of *educere*, or what the adult education literature calls "transformative learning" (Mezirow, 2000), in which we recognize our conditioning and taken-for-granted worldviews as such and make our cognitive conditioning itself the object of critical reflection, thus making new, more critical and elastic thinking possible.

But is seminar talk enough? Your response pushes the question: What are the public responsibilities of educational leaders in a time when public education is under siege? Because I'm not a public activist myself, I'm neither experienced nor skilled in equipping students with tools for public advocacy. Others are: At New York University, for example, Anderson and colleagues have organized a progressive MA program in leadership, politics, and advocacy. I see this kind of program as a strong response to your question and a stark contrast to the corporatist silencing of social justice in the Broad Superintendents Academy. Such an approach comes closer to what Apple (2013) may be thinking about, when he urges the educational leader to become a "critical scholar/activist" (p. 12) who allies with oppressed groups and takes a stand in global struggles for justice. Apple asks educators to name the exploitation they witness while opening spaces of radical hope.

In a different response to my article, English and Crowder (2012) note that the Broad-sponsored reform discourse undermines the legitimacy of university leadership programs. Broad's allies argue that advanced degrees make little difference in a leader's ability to engineer improved system outcomes and that the monopoly held on leadership training by university-based programs should be broken. Your critique hits from another angle when you argue that educational leaders have been all too passive in the face of oppressive accountability policies.

In times when our state legislature is pushing forward with destructive reforms, how should education faculty, and especially those of us working with educational leaders, voice our opposition and convene new conversations with each other, toward a counternarrative of educational possibility? Can we teach both within and outside the political fray, working always to model in our own communities the kind of caring, inclusive, and dialogic relations that we espouse? How do can we work in ways that are both effective and subversive, both oppositional and affirmative, both over there and right here? As my pedagogy evolves, I'm especially interested in the kind of teaching that opens space for students to understand themselves as leader/scholar/change agents already-in-the-making and always-in-the-becoming,

within and outside of their classrooms and conference rooms (Clark/Keefe & Miller, 2012).

Here at Appalachian State, several nontraditional doctoral students have taken up questions about what it means to creatively engage with their own personal/professional becoming as leaders. As a companion to this response, my colleagues are posting an edited video clip of a presentation we made at the South Atlantic Philosophy of Education Society meeting in October 2012.<sup>1</sup> Better than my words here, it embodies the kind of affirmative space we're working toward.

In the end, I want to thank you, David, for responding to my article and pushing me to think harder about my work. Your question helps me clarify my position while motivating me to move further in progressive directions. As interim director of our doctoral program in educational leadership this year, with your critique echoing in my mind, I'm looking for at least modest ways in which we can assert a progressive, social justice agenda as central to our purpose, for ways I can encourage greater authenticity coupled with constructive advocacy. It's the kind of leadership work I'm trying to learn and become more confident in doing. People like Anderson, Shields, and Apple give me courage, and you've given me a positive challenge to always ask how we are enacting leadership in relation to the pervasive educational and social inequity around us.

Let's keep talking . . .

Yours,  
Vachel Miller

## Note

1. This video clip has been extracted from an extended conference presentation that employed poetry, dance, and creative engagement with the audience to explore notions of nomadic subjectivity and leadership-becoming. These articulations, composed by four doctoral students, arose as embodied personal/professional responses to an article written by two faculty members (Clark/Keefe & Miller, 2012) applying the work of feminist poststructural philosopher Bradotti to our understandings and enactments of educational leadership and doctoral education.

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