Beyond the Politics of K-20 Education: Navigating, Negotiating, and Transgressing the Academy—A Brother Speaks!

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Educators, who come to the academy in which I serve, are searching for answers. These individuals struggle with how to implement local, state, and federal legislation, seek efficient and effective ways to provide optimal learning experiences for all members of the learning community, and strive to make sense of the dynamic cultures in which they work professionally. During this era of market competition, globalization, and educational accountability, the challenge of the academy is transforming those aspiring educational leaders who are concerned more with "the bottom line" into critically conscious democratic leaders those in poverty, and the privatization of free public education force me to ask the following central question: What is the promise and purpose of a democratic education? Higher education and K-12 public schooling has changed significantly within the past 10 years. The advancement of the democratic promise of public education continues to be challenged by political and economic forces which constrain the opportunities for America's citizenry to enhance the value of one's life by accessing public colleges and universities and by benefiting from a "free" public education.

According to Carlson & Gause (2007),

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who seek to develop free thinking members of our society. Given the call for "principal executives," democratic education and freedom have been reduced to the ability to achieve academic standards and acquire material goods, wealth, and power without critiquing the consequences of inequity, greed, and inequality.

The national economic downturn, the last wave of horrific budget cuts, and the present political climate are adding to the hurdles for educators, particularly administrators, who must successfully educate students with less than adequate resources. These resources are not just monetary but human as well. The current socio-cultural political climate in the United States, the renewing of the Patriot Act, disaster relief or the lack thereof, terrorism and homeland security, the demonization of

In its most radical terms this promise has been that public education can provide the basis for an informed, engaged citizenry, fully capable of their own self-governance, and armed with forms of critical consciousness that allow them to question the commonsense beliefs embedded in political speech and popular culture texts. (ix)

Given the promise of public education, this article implicitly and explicitly explores the following questions:
- What are the pedagogical challenges of co-creating democratic spaces with practitioners to provide for seamless learning through the K-20 educational experience?

- How do faculty members of color who are committed to social justice confront student resistance in their higher education classrooms from K-12 practitioners?

As a creative educational leader who embodies education as a praxis of freedom (hooks, 1994), my perspective of democracy is evidenced in my practice. I strive to co-create learning environments where all member-voices are given the opportunity to be heard, shared, and awakened. The dialogic encounter is central to (de)constructing and (re)constructing spaces for knowledge acquisition and development. Gause in Gause, Reitzug, and Villaverde (2007) asserts,

> Because the personal is political and because I view my role as a teacher/activist within a framework that my perspective of democracy cannot be de-linked from what I do as a teacher/activist in the academic space; I envision democracy as the interconnections that lie within the quest of knowledge; the faith that our humanity exercises as we navigate the manifestations of our destinies. (p. 221)

In order for the citizens of the United States to continue to engage in "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," democracy must exist in institutions that encourage human beings to transform our environment, communities, neighborhoods, and schools into arenas where dialogue, discourse, and dissent are not silenced but celebrated. The aforementioned should be the foci of K-20 public and private education in the United States.

Moving Adult Learners Beyond Post-Secondary Education

While entering graduate programs seeking answers about how to reform schools, many students in educational leadership preparation programs find it difficult to engage in a discourse which moves beyond school reformation. The technical aspects of schooling are of their greatest concern given the pressure to meet so many political mandates.

> Women and men from diverse backgrounds and communities arrive at the doors of the academy, eager to learn how to lead the nation's schools to a better place. These educators enroll in leadership programs, hoping someone will help them make sense of dynamic school cultures.

(Rusch, 2004, p. 17)

Because schools are hegemonic reproductions of the larger society, engaging graduate students in discourse of power, knowledge, and pedagogy creates a "tension." I find myself encouraging students to understand the culture of school, particularly as it engages in an oppressive system of sorting and selecting students. This presents a barrier to resolving its many problems because of the linear and hierarchical

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decision-making structures that are inherent in the schooling process. Because of the tight organizational decision-making systems of K-12 schooling, students at the beginning of my courses find themes centered in social justice, liberatory practices and multi-dimensional learning paradigms, void of meaning to their practice. The challenges of today's educational leaders are indeed numerous, and aspiring educational administrators believe that to meet those challenges they must operate out of a technical/rational model of leadership without regard to issues of equity and social justice. According to Shields (2004):

> 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. (p. 109)

Moving students from the language of reformation to transformation is often difficult and viewed as

counter-productive; however, if schools are to be sites of democracy, this is the path of liberation. I encourage students to view themselves not as mere custodians of buildings of learning, but as proactive transformational leaders. Such a role involves understanding the school's culture and transforming custodial organiza-

capacities to understand different perspectives, communicate their understandings to other people, and engage in the give-and-take of moral argument with a view to making mutually acceptable decisions. These goals, which entail cultivating moral character and intellec-

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tions into creative learning communities. This change requires transformational leadership that is creative, courageous, and visionary.

The new millennium arrived with great economic prosperity; however, currently the United States faces a weaker economy, a depressed housing market, a costly Iraq war, and all the old problems of the late 20th century—power, race, identity, violence, and ethics. Current challenges for educators are the a) increase number of charter schools, b) voucher programs, c) increase in immigrant populations, d) for-profit educational organizations, e) inadequate funding for *No Child Left Behind*, f) inequities regarding accountability, and g) re-segregation of public schools along class/racial lines. These challenges have broad implications for higher education.

According to Hopkins (1997), education is considered to be the most accessible means for achieving social, political, economic, and cultural liberation in the United States. This traditionalist view accepts the idea that public schools are vehicles of democracy and social and individual mobility. Educators and laypersons alike believe that the nature of public schools is the major mechanism for development of a democratic and egalitarian society (Hopkins, 1997).

Gutmann and Thompson (1996) posit:
In any effort to make democracy more delib-
erative, the single most important institution
outside government is the educational system.
To prepare their students for citizenship,
schools must go beyond teaching literacy and
numeracy, though both are of course prerequi-
sites for deliberating about public problems.
Schools should aim to develop their students'

tual skills at the same time, are likely to require some significant changes in traditional civic education, which has neglected teaching this kind of moral reasoning about politics. (359)

Democratic education involves educators empowering students to engage in free and open discourse and offering consistent opportunities for students to engage in inquiry, reflection, critique, and ultimately, social transformation (hooks, 2003; Knight & Pearl, 2000; Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003).

Black Identity and Masculinity:
Politics of the Academy

Students who enter the learning space I facilitate come seeking answers on how to educate culturally and linguistic populations; however, most of them have a hard time receiving the messenger as well as the message. According to Gause in Cooper and Gause (2007),
Based upon my experiences, many students
have difficulty negotiating their own cultural
politics, especially when they are faced with
receiving instruction from me, a Black male
Ph.D., which many have never encountered.
In addition, I am 5 foot 10 inches and 255
pounds. More often than not, many of my
students (White, African American, and
Latino) have articulated that I am the first
African American male they have experienced
as an instructor in their entire academic career.
(p. 206)

I am the only African American male faculty member in my department, and for the past two years I have been the only African American male faculty member in the entire school of education. Interesting enough, my Black male identity is formed out of those who were enslaved by individuals who framed this country's democratic experiment (Gause, 2005a).

According to Cooper and Gause (2007),

The paradox of teaching for social justice in higher education—which comprises revered institutions grounded in patriarchal, Anglocentric norms—challenges any faculty member striving to use critical, liberatory pedagogies. Faculty members of color doing this work, however, must confront a second paradox: that of being disproportionately oppressed, devalued, and scrutinized by the same structures, institutions, and social norms that we work within, critique, resist, and encourage others to defy. (p. 201)

As an African American male academician, many of the critical perspectives I hold regarding the intersections of race, class, and gender affront the White Southern Christian values my students hold near and dear. The expectation is for me to operate out of false civility and behave as if these values should not be critiqued or interrogated, but honored and celebrated regardless of how they assault the plurality of values students bring into public schools daily. Couple this with my being a

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faculty of member of color, and regardless of credentials, ideological orientation, and instructional style, my students at times implicitly and explicitly challenge my professorial authority, scholarship, intellect, and political agenda (Baez, 2003; Hamilton, 2002; Lawrence, 1995; Tate, 1994; Thomas, 2001). After speaking truth to power in many of our dialogic encounters I have often heard students call me "the angry Black man" or "Dr. Thug." I find it interesting how they construct my passion for the subject and fiery delivery style as a place of subjugation. Given the atrocities occurring in public education in our nation today we should all be

angered to action. Shields (2004) asserts,

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. (p. 111)

In order to transform schools we must hold our students accountable. We do this by shifting them from a traditionalist view of education and democracy to one that is radical and transformative. We can do this by promoting environments which require students to engage in independent thinking, by motivating them to take ownership of their learning process, and by providing opportunities for rigorous intellectual study and committed activism that moves beyond arriving at the "right" answers. This requires critical change in teaching pre-K-20.

Conclusion: The Cause of Education

Teaching is a political as well as a liberatory practice. Our nation's freedom depends upon the development of enticing and exciting democratic learning communities where the pursuit of knowledge is the primary objective. Because American democracy is under a re-construction situated within globalization, evangelical fundamentalism, free market enterprise, and socio-cultural politics, the educational leader of today must be able to negotiate and navigate the often competing and conflicting forces of our democracy.

Teaching, learning, and leading democratically requires constant participation with change. The purpose of higher education and K-12 public education is to provide opportunities and spaces for the global citizenry to engage in democratic practices for the public good. Democracy is an enacted daily practice whereby people interact and relate through daily personal, social, and professional routines with a primary focus on continuing the betterment of our humanity. This is the cause of education. In order to do this, higher education must prepare critical transformative leaders who are willing and able to draw upon culturally relevant, critical, and counter-normative pedagogies. I do this by infusing cultural studies in the leadership discourse of our educational leadership program (Gause, 2005b).

Indeed, hooks (2003) states:

> We need mass-based political movements calling citizens of this nation to uphold democracy and the rights of everyone to be educated, and to work on behalf of ending domination in all its forms—to work for justice, changing our educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy or any ideology, but rather where they learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically. (p. xiii)

Critical change occurs with significant self-sacrifice, potential alienation, rejection, and costly consequences. As critical transformative educators, we must do justice to the larger social/public responsibility of our positions and roles, particularly in higher education. In (re)crafting the education of critical transformative leaders, we must demystify change, courage, and risk as we (re)imagine the language and fluency of multiple discourses in the (re)discovery of democracy and social justice. This occurs in the development of the democratic classroom, which should be the hallmark of higher education. I evidence this by having students reflect upon one of hooks' (1994) most powerful statements regarding vulnerability and empowerment: "any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (p. 21). This very act affronts the pedagogical challenges of seamless learning from K-20.

Critical transformative educational leaders who develop through the seamless K-20 educational system in the United States will facilitate the development of inviting, engaging, and dynamic learning communities that (a) transform the human condition, (b) unearth fallow ground, (c) interrogate and rupture the status quo, (d) question multiple political spaces critically, and (e) seek multiple epistemologies to re-create constructs that better serve our humanity. To further our thinking regarding the challenges of seamless learning from K-20, I call on all higher education faculty who actively serve in teacher education or educational leadership preparation programs around the country to (re)think the following by Gause (2005c). He asserts:

We are educating in a time of expanding globalization whose impact we witness via 24-hour digitally mediated discourse. How are schools and educational leaders keeping up with this global transformation? What type of impact does this transformation of schools from sites of democracy to "bedfellows" of consumerism have upon the school and much larger global community? How are the "souls" of schools affected? In the journey of school reform are educational leaders acknowledging that the "process of schooling" is filled with "cultural politics"? How are educational leadership programs preparing future school leaders? Are educational leadership preparation programs equipping schools' leaders for the "journey of the self" or for the "journey of the soul"? (p. 242)

As a former teacher, K-12 school administrator, principal, and current faculty member in an educational leadership preparation program in the Southeastern part of the United States, I work to co-create and decolonize democratic learning communities as a form

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of political activism. As a critical transformative educational leader, I inspire and transform others to become more conscious of the human condition. My teaching and practice is oriented toward social vision and change, not simply, or only, toward organizational goals. My teaching is a form of protest. In conclusion, I understand that it is my duty and responsibility to encourage other human beings, particularly those who are involved in the educational process, to transform our environment, institutions, communities,

neighborhoods, and schools into arenas where those with whome we come in contact will become agents of democracy and social justice. Together we must face the struggle of educating our citizenry with nobility and commitment. For together in the struggle we are one.

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