

“Tempered Radical”

by Chad Rountree

Enter: A man consumed by an unidentifiable passion, characterized by a hunger for knowledge, and determined to pick up the baton from where those who came before me had left it.

I pursued my Masters of Arts in Educational Leadership because of my experiences as a classroom teacher. It did not take long for me to realize that for me to effectively teach and lead in low-income communities I would require a further equipped skill-set. I prioritized building relationships with my students to foster trust so that I could push them to limits they had never experienced. But in doing so, I saw the depths of their despair and realized if I did not attempt to carry their burdens, they would not be strong enough to balance their lives with engaging in an education that was worthy of liberating them from their oppression. I was determined to use education as the vehicle to confront the injustices that marked the condition of my students' lives. However, despite my deep passions, I was abruptly awakened by the reality that my limited experience with education and social justice work restrained my ability to earnestly defend and empower my students. Using education to bring light into the lives that have existed in the dark shadows of American society would be no easy task. As a classroom teacher I was surrounded by many other educators, but very few of them envisioned their roles to serve capacities beyond adhering to various academic policies enacted by our government, most particularly No Child Left Behind. To most, ensuring all students reached equal educational outcomes on state administered assessments seemed logical. However, based upon my experience in urban classrooms, the methods employed to achieve these ends did not appear to be fair. I was a classroom teacher who realized educating those who have become systematically marginalized from the American dream meant I had to recreate my role so it encompassed not only elements of a quality education, but also was guided by the lessons learned from various civil rights activists that have fought throughout our nation's most tumultuous times for social justice.

I have learned the peril of urban education is far more complex than I had originally believed. Educators have found themselves in a time period that is distinctly different than ever before. The Age of Accountability has had commendable goals, but unfortunately has compromised the applicability and relevance of education that is offered to our nation's most disenfranchised students. It was in EAD 850: Issues and Strategies in Multicultural Education where I gained an understanding of how America's schools have lost equity in an attempt to gain equality. Such a priority has been placed on ensuring all students reach the measurement of excellence which has been determined by the success of our more privileged White counterparts. Educational practices tend to be developed with the status quo in mind, then altered slightly and applied to minority populations. While these practices can be used with those populations who have become "*othered*", they must be deeply explored and sincerely adapted to meet the needs of all learners. Consequently, we have begun operating in ways that have not leveraged the unique strengths of the community and its members to support our educational processes, and failed to be deliberate in affirming the identities of those we are teaching. We have not been empathetic towards how the scope and goals of education should vary depending on the human condition of those who are involved in the education we are helping to create. Condoleezza Rice, in a 2001 speech to the National Council of Negro Women, stated "educational excellence is key"; however, America has failed in determining what an excellent education means, both qualitatively and quantitatively, as the White model of excellence has been presented or understood as a universal standard. The key to educational excellence is one that uplifts the community in which you teach by equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to transform their lives and the lives of those who surround them. An excellent educational experience will not succumb to the subjugation that results from classroom practices which have been derived from methods that regulate extents of knowledge production, while preserving the hegemony of the status quo.

All of the discussion around the peril of urban education, and how it is often referred to as the “Achievement Gap” must be challenged. Although this language may just be rhetoric, let us be reminded by Toni Morrison’s philosophies that “language can be crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness”. While these words were shared during her Noble Prize lecture in 1993, they are still just as significant then as they are now. Our nation’s usage of the terminology -- “Achievement Gap” -- illuminates the differences of achievement between the status quo and those who have been historically marginalized by societal structures and become victimized by living within the peripheral of society. This language focuses our attention on merely outcomes of children, but prevents us from focusing on the conditions that caused those outcomes and how those conditions must be challenged to prevent further educational injustice from occurring. It was in EAD 830: Issues in Urban Education where I learned one of the greatest battles that must be won on the educational battlefield, including public policy, was the language we use to identify our problems so we can analyze issues through a more authentic lens. Only after we identify the real issues will we be able to create real solutions. If we begin using more accurate language the question then becomes, “Is America willing to conceptualize the solutions to language such as “an opportunity gap”, “a wealth gap”, and/or “an educational debt” which would more accurately define the peril of urban education?”

The most difficult element to fathom is that students in our urban schools will always have a more challenging educational experience in comparison to their more affluent counterparts as long as poverty exists. While it is accurate to acknowledge all students can achieve equal outcomes, the disheartening reality is poverty has and will forever be a roadblock that prevents many from reaching their fullest potential. The entire notion of poverty existing in America is dumbfounding. In 1972, Angela Davis delivered a speech in Los Angeles and is quoted in saying, “We are imprisoned in a society where there is so much wealth and so many sophisticated scientific and technological skills that anyone with just a little bit of common sense can see the insanity of a continued existence of ghettos and barrios and the poverty which is there”. While this comment was made over four decades ago, the accuracy of what is alluded to still rings true. It was in HDFS 895: Families in Poverty where I examined the causes of poverty and was able to draw the conclusion that poverty does not have to exist if our country operated in ways that were not racist and sexist in nature, and if the wellbeing of all of our citizens were placed in higher regard than the neo-political interests which are becoming increasingly more influential in the direction that our nation is heading. Our government’s web of repression, whether it is political disenfranchisement, economic marginalization, or social isolation is, just as Mary Frances Berry put it in 1996, “polarizing this country”.

Educators, particularly those in urban communities, must more intimately understand their role and embody the amount of social capital you present to under-resourced communities. They *must* use education to challenge the context of their students’ lives and to confront the plight of the communities they serve. If educators are not willing to make those conscious decisions to transform those realities then they must educate elsewhere, because silence in the face of this oppression make you complicit to it.

Throughout the short span of me pursuing my master’s degree I began as a classroom teacher, earned the role of being an instructional coach, and most recently, I became an assistant principal. A great deal of change has occurred professionally and I would credit it to my passion, the knowledge I have attained through my formal education, and the commitment I have to the community that I serve. But as my professional role has changed, so has my perspective around leadership and my ability to effectively lead. It was in EAD 867: Case Studies in Educational Leadership and EAD 801: Leadership and Organizational Development where I embarked upon a quest to discover effective leadership, both philosophically and practically, that impacted my understanding of leading and following. I am now able to draw the conclusions and employ the tactics necessary to begin leading in the urban educational landscape. I have realized the bureaucratic and hierarchal legacies found within education must be abolished, and there must instead be a push for greater leverage of authentic collaboration, coalitions, and

community partnerships genuinely situated around lasting student success. School systems must be led in such a way that they advance the social reality of diversity being real, having meaning, and leveraging its strengths to advance academic achievement. I must lead in ways that abandon the continual reliance upon external changes such as policy adjustments and the implementation of new structures, and encourage and support the psychological transitions that educators must embrace in order for more meaningful and sustainable changes to occur within education. I must begin structuring my institution to more firmly promote social responsibility, justice, and equity to challenge societal value systems and beliefs to elevate my students' human condition. I must develop my teachers in ways that increase their proficiency in creating more rigorous learning to increase their students' opportunities to engage, find value, and become committed to their education. I must lead my students in ways that they are treated as viable assets and are included in the decision making of the school building. I must acknowledge how my students' viewpoints have often been excluded and therefore some of the most credible perspectives have not been considered in making school decisions. I must accept the wisdom of Ella Baker when, in 1968 at a speech delivered at the Southern Conference Education Fund, she said "leaders must employ methods to create conditions of possibility for others to find their voices and develop leadership". In the end, especially considering the extent of education reform that our country is currently tackling, our school systems must refuse the "quick-fix" methods and begin leveraging the opportunities, skills, and dispositions found within the talent in their buildings to truly create a greater impact and more enduring legacy.

For I am now beginning to understand the advice that was offered by Shirley Chisholm's 1969 speech given at Howard University, "for America to remain among the leading nations of the world, it is going to have to make sure that it utilizes the fullest of all the capacities of its citizens. There is not more time, time's running out!" Only when schools are led in ways that are resilient to America's oppressive conditions will the human potential that exists here be fully leveraged. In doing so, our country will not necessarily regain its position of world dominance, but instead, it will challenge the world to create a new way of *being* - one that places justice, equality, and integrity above all else.

My passion for the work that I am involved in is no longer unidentifiable. I see the parallels between my desires for social justice with what Huey Newton and Bobby Seal possessed as they were mere college students and fledgling community organizers who cared deeply about the survival of the Black community. I understand that to be a successful urban educator one must be willing to never lose the desire for freedom from marginalization and oppression, and understand it will only be through a worthy education that the struggle for liberation will be won.

The knowledge I attempted to acquire has evolved into much more than the means to an end. I now understand what Toni Morrison suggested when she said, "We are standing waist deep in the toxins of America's past". There is no better moment than right now to be teaching the tactics and lessons of our past for equality to counteract the poison that has inflicted ignorance and hatred in the social, political, and economic arenas of the American landscape. In 1978, Vernon Jordan Jr, delivered a speech at the National Press Club and aroused the crowd by proclaiming, "The issues of morality are more complex, and the resistance more entrenched. In the 1960's we fought, bled, and died to build an open, pluralistic, integrated society. In the 1970's, that is still our goal, that is still our moral burden". Well, I would add there still remains the need for fighting, bleeding, and perhaps even some dying, for our nation to finally become equal, equitable, and morally prosperous. While I acknowledge the progress that has been achieved as our country has grown older, I will not allow progress to prevent me from recognizing how the interest of the status quo have been preserved as racist and discriminatory ways have been transformed and have become more sophisticated in nature.

While the baton that was left by my predecessors is heavier than I imagined, I must remain committed to the courage demonstrated by Shirley Chisholm as she proclaimed, "I intend to stay here and fight, because the blood, sweat, and tears of our forefathers are rooted in the soil of this country". Fortunately, there have been many steps taken, battles won, and achievements earned before I entered the struggle, but unfortunately, the fight is not over. It is here that I continue carrying the baton, as an educational leader, attempting to journey further and discover the one path that will eventually lead to the horizon of freedom.

Lorraine Hansberry, delivered a speech in 1964 in New York pleading for others to take action against segregation. She received much applause after saying, "we have already tried respectable ways to battle injustice, and it is now time to get radical!"

Exit: A tempered radical who possess a vision of tomorrow being marked by equality, armed with the skills and dispositions to effectively lead, surrounded by a school of ambitious and ready students, and willing to employ unorthodox tactics to stand in honor with those who fought for social justice before me.