

Making All Children Winners: Confronting Social Justice Issues to Redeem America's Soul

*Go to the people
Live with them
Learn from them
Love them*

*Start with what they know
Build with what they have*

*With best leaders
When the work is done
The task accomplished
The people will say
"We have done this ourselves?"*

-----Lao Tsu (700 BC)

Many ancient cultures, even before the time of Lao Tsu, may have operated within the context of his wisdom about leadership. However, the model most evocative of this wisdom that we've been lucky enough to witness is found in the African American community, a leadership model crystallized in the Southern Freedom Movement (Harding, 1997). The grassroots leadership piece of that movement was defined as radical by Ella Baker, mentor and advisor to many in the Movement (Ransby, 2003). Taught by Baker to young people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), this "radical" grassroots model is one honed by Bob Moses, who the noted historian, Cornel West, said "is the towering activist/intellectual of his generation---a grassroots freedom fighter of quiet dignity and incredible determination" (Moses, 2000, cover)

Moses, Civil Rights legend, MacArthur Genius Fellow, Eminent Scholar at the Center for Urban Education and Innovation at Florida International University, has brought the Movement model into the educational arena. He founded an organization, the Algebra Project (AP), which uses the experiences, strategies, and wisdom learned during his Civil Rights' work in Mississippi to organize disenfranchised communities to demand quality education as a civil right.

Recently, we have interviewed Moses as well as followed him into classrooms where he steadfastly teaches mathematics to America's forgotten children. We have followed him into the homes of those children to visit their parents; into churches where he teaches adults eager to learn enough mathematics to help their children with homework; into meetings with school superintendents; into seminars with university professors and graduate students; into conferences where he keynotes; and into meetings where he describes Quality Education as a Civil Right to potential donors for his AP and Center work. In addition, we have participated in similar circles with other Movement leaders like Vincent Harding and Curtis Muhammad. In all of those diverse contexts, we have experienced the same principled, respectful, humble, yet radical model of grassroots leadership reflected in the words of Ella Baker, Cornel West and Lao Tsu.

Thus, we cannot think, talk, or write about leadership and social justice without referring to the Movement Model and Bob Moses-----and not just because of the men and women or the honors bestowed them, but primarily because of the profoundly different model of leadership that they offer in these dark days of war, national and international bullies, betrayers of human rights, and degraders of our small planet, earth.

Through observing Moses and other Movement leaders, we've come to think about "leadership for learning" as both an ancient and a new way of being in the world that resists hierarchal relationships, that is rooted in the collective experience, and that seems to suggest that all leadership should be connected to the practice of excavating community wisdom. This paradigm is so alien to the hierarchal models that most of us were raised, educated, and now operate within that it seems to sometimes escape our full grasp. We know it when we see it demonstrated by Moses and others, but when we try to emulate it, like sticky paper, we sometimes can get caught in old leadership paradigms. Therefore, attempts to explain it may be

doomed to oversimplification and misinterpretation and may risk distorting the complexities of it. We know, however, that it is a model that all educators should dig into. In some inexplicable, intuitive sense, we believe that it offers “a way out of no way” (Young, 2003) for dysfunctional schools and educational systems. For that reason, we want to alert educational leaders and scholars across the continents who are not familiar with this grassroots organizing model to run as fast as they can to discover it.

Vincent Harding, a Southern Freedom Movement historian and participant, suggests that “the story of the African-American struggle for freedom, democracy, and transformation is a great, continuing human classic whose liberating lessons are available to all those who are committed to work and sacrifice for the creation of a better country, a more hopeful world” (Harding, 1997, cover). A number of books have been written detailing the stories of this visionary but tough model of leadership which helped shape American history in the 20th century (Branch, 1988, 2006; Carson, 1991; Forman, 1985; Grant, 1988; Harding 1997; Henry/Curry, 2000; Hogan, 2007; Moses, 2000; Payne, 1995; Ransby, 2003;). Anyone interested in experiencing the process, the effectiveness, the historical and present value of it must hunker down and read these books; then, must find and follow the people who continue to live this process. For the model is not a manifesto or a dogma that can be regimented and rigidly adhered to, but seems more an organic process, that, like life, demands diversity and an openness to the wisdom manifested in the small and the intimate in life.

A poem discovered a long time ago often comes to mind as we watch Moses lead.

*To look at any thing,
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say*

*'I have seen spring in these
Woods'; will not do--you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences
Between
The leaves,
You must take your time
and touch the very peace
They issue from,*

---from *The Living Seed* by John Moffitt, 1961

The intention, the “small silences,” the patience is palpable whenever one sits in any space where the Movement Leadership Model operates, whether it be in circles of children, parents, teachers, professors, community leaders, or donors. The implications for education of this particular practice are huge. In other cultures, in other countries, and especially in indigenous cultures around the globe, the Movement leadership model may not be such an anomaly. Certainly, leaders like Paulo Friere, Myles Horton, Cesar Chavez, the Zapatistas, etc. engaged in similar practices. But in the fast-paced, over-stimulated, over-caffeinated, efficiency-driven American leadership culture, this way of being in a room is daunting. It creates a space where the least powerful, the most often silenced, can speak and be listened to. It seems to “take [its] time and touch the very peace they issue from.”

Taking that time and waiting to touch that peace is lovely poetry but sometimes painful practice because many of us hail from a vastly different model, one of “sit-down, be quiet, and let’s hurry and make this happen.” We’ve often been either victims or perpetrators of leading from the top while using rhetoric that suggests democratic process; it’s a rather peculiar American schizophrenic conundrum. Most institutions in America, a country that espouses democratic, collective practice, are actually administered and led within a context of a “chain of command” that capitalizes on competition and individualism, ignoring the “folks at the bottom.”

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Therefore, when sitting in a room with people who might look tattered and torn and sound noisy and inchoate, we can become quite uncomfortable with the silence needed to wait for their words to emerge, for their ideas to be formed, for simple responses to shape themselves into group-imagined, owned, and driven directives toward action. Building trust in a community of people quite different from those typically seen in the halls of academe is labor-intensive, long-term, and full of back and forth failure and success, a very inefficient path. It is counter to the culture's passion for the cost-effective mode of operation. Such a careful model offered by the Movement, though, creates a container for courage to unfold in a room, where the concerns, knowledge, gifts of the people who have been shoved to the bottom of the societal rung can spring forth.

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee in New Orleans created a poster that reads "Nothing about Us, without Us, is For Us." That insight seems to us to succinctly go to the core of one of the key principles of the Movement model of "grassroots leadership." The people with the least amount of power must be central to the decision-making process that impacts their everyday personal and political lives, but especially their educational lives. If we do, indeed, honor that philosophy when we think of ourselves as "leaders of learning communities," can we legitimately continue to work in isolation to conceptualize, design, and determine the educational curriculum and course of other people's children? And do we dare allow legislators, district administrators, school principals, university presidents, deans, textbook publishers, corporate test makers to unilaterally make decisions about one of the most important journeys a human takes?

A biographer of Ella Baker suggests that her "radical approach of situational democracy meant [she] had to constantly assess and reassess the power dynamics in any given situation and

then tilt the leadership scales in the direction of the least powerful” (Ransby, 2003, p. 368). This is the disciplined practice that seems to consistently emerge and shake the walls of leviathan educational structures wherever Moses brings his Movement principles. This way of being with people carries tremendous promise for educators who want to “tilt the scales” in favor of a just and equitable educational system. Yet again, it is not an efficient model. It takes more time, more listening, than many leaders are willing to give.

In an interview about leadership in American schools, Moses said, “It’s not only about challenging systems and structures but also about challenging fears. Students, parents and communities locked into “sharecropper” education must similarly establish a voice to demand a quality public school education as a civil right. This will require a willingness to face the history of slavery and Jim Crow (a system worse than caste) and ‘to establish a culture of intellectual courage’” (Normore, 2006, p. 20). Thus, the change, the “tilting the scales” is simultaneously at the bottom and the top. The Movement Model both challenges the fears, at the bottom, of assuming power, of speaking their truth to power; and, at the top, challenging the fears of educational leaders in relinquishing power and privilege.

Held within those two fears are the challenges of making all children winners in an educational system that is fraught with social injustice and inequity. Urban Schools have been the focus of school reform for decades, yet the issue of injustice in education is much larger than that. For all children are at peril when any children are left behind. In a country where the mantra is freedom and justice for all, we have to be clear that none of our children are free until all are free of inferior education, health care, and living conditions. All students must learn social responsibility; what it means to be a citizen of the nation and of the world. Children segregated into suburban schools, if disconnected to the issues facing their counterparts in urban schools,

will never understand the complexities of the democratic system they belong to. Being isolated, they might never understand the consequences of their demand for power and privilege on the society as a whole. For, we must all come to see the “rotting shack” of Urban Schools as “a rotting America” (Payne, 1997, p. 5). The problem of Urban Schools is not the problem of the city, the problem of people of color; rather it is America’s problem.

Though we who collaborated on this article focus on Urban Schools, we know that educators must address these issues wherever their mission calls them in the nation. Oppressive systems make prisoners of us all (Jensen, 2002). Thus all students, wherever they go to school, must learn problem solving skills to tackle the social injustices that cripple the nation. When a nation neglects any of its citizens, when 13 million of its children go to bed hungry every night (U.S. Census Bureau survey, 2000), no child within its boundaries is a winner. No matter what cosmology we embrace, we intuitively know that on this small planet, all are connected to the whole. Thus, suburban, rural, and urban children share the same obligations in creating a just nation and in becoming stewards of the earth.

When thinking about leadership for quality education, like, the indigenous activist, Lil Watson, we believe that, “If you have come to help [Urban Schools], you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound with [theirs], then come let’s work together.”

Compelling Components of the Movement Model of Leadership

Many educational leaders want the nation’s best for marginalized families. Some of us have spent decades advocating for significant reform that would create schools of excellence for our society’s neglected children. And, yet, what we have not grasped is the wisdom that sets the Movement model apart from all of the rest of reform, the knowledge of the absolute necessity for

disenfranchised communities to demand for themselves a quality education. During at least the last four decades, advocacy has been impotent because it disregarded this essential component. Without children and their families at the center of school change---at the decision-making, policy-making tables of influence---meaningful and sustainable school reform will always be an elusive dream.

In addition, a huge barrier to that dream of change is the societal myth that families of color who are forced to live in poverty do not value education, a myth that the Algebra Project dispels at every turn. We believe that advocates for change must shatter this myth through a total surrender to the collective wisdom that emerges from actively listening to and working alongside students and parents who have been ignored and blamed for the “sharecropper” education that is delivered by this nation.

As we have researched the history of the Movement Model of Leadership and witnessed its practice through the work of Bob Moses and AP in schools in Mississippi and Miami, we see the following as its most compelling and crucial components: (Moses, pp. 15-22)

- The disenfranchised are brought together in small circles to discuss, understand, and demand what people say they don’t want----a quality education.
- Students and parents who are “at the bottom” of the educational system are urged to make demands on themselves, first, then on the system.
- Educational reform advocates learn how to engage in community organizing, understanding that it is a process not an event. The process includes a continuous series of meetings inside and outside schools with the people in the local community whose children are being deprived of a quality education.

- Families are made central to the educational process, assisted in devising their own means to changing the system.
- Educators value and understand the collective experience and wisdom of the community.
- Educators believe that young people have the energy, the courage, the hope to design the strategies to change their schools.
- Educators believe that reform requires young people to take the lead in changing the system, instead of just having their needs advocated by well-meaning radical reformers.
- The effort is for the “whole,” not just a chosen few.
- “You [the educational reformers] are working with and against various structures.

You’re in them, but you’re working against them at various levels” (p. 17).

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