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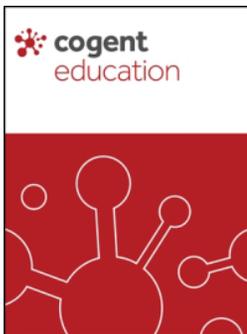
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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social justice leadership: Coming to know another possibility through autoethnography

Jacob D. Skousen*

Abstract: Traditional notions of learning, teaching, schooling, and leading, contribute to the inequity and injustice found in schools. In this study, autoethnography was used as a process and product to explore one leader's journey opening and leading a new "alternative" school as the school's principal. These experiences create the backdrop of a larger narrative about public schooling and leadership. The findings, expressed through narrative, demonstrate that schools do not have to beget oppression, and school practices, framed in social justice, can create the needed environment and culture to develop liberatory praxis.

Subjects: Educational Research; School Leadership, Management & Administration; Educational Change & School Reform

Keywords: leadership for social justice; autoethnography; principalship

1. Background

Public schools in the United States have long been characterized as unequal and inequitable (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gutierrez, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lomawaima & McCarty, 1999; Macedo, 1994; McLaren, 1989; Oakes, 2005; Spring, 2006). The unequal and inequitable nature of public schools have arguably worsened in the past decades, even to the point of pre-Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka et al. (Kozol, 2005), when apartheid schooling was common in the United States. *De facto* school segregation is often compounded by the political nature of school district boundaries and the way in which public education is funded in most states.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jacob D. Skousen has worked in public schools as a teacher, principal, and district-level administrator. He is an Assistant Professor in Educational Policy and Leadership in the Department of Educational Psychology, Leadership, and Higher Education. Prior to UNLV, Dr. Skousen spent three years as an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Northern Colorado. As a researcher having had 15 years as a practitioner in P-12 education, he works to bridge theory and practice. Dr. Skousen has a research agenda focused on leadership development and equity. This study connects to Dr. Skousen's research interests that include social justice leadership and leadership development.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Traditional notions of learning, teaching, schooling, and leading often contribute to the inequity and injustice found in schools. Through the use of autoethnography, as a process and product, one school leader's journey of opening and leading a new school was explored. Despite the traditions and existing school cultures, school leaders do have agency to re-think schooling and to collaboratively work with teachers, students, and communities to develop equitable practices and a school culture where hope is a possibility. The narratives described in this study provide examples of the ways in which school leaders can lead, and most importantly, illustrate how principals can think about the work they are doing. School leaders can center their practice in social justice to provide opportunities to further their own learning and the progression of others.

As an undergraduate student, I was exposed to the works of critical pedagogues such as Paulo Freire, Donaldo Macedo, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Antonia Darder, among others. It was at this time my growing passion and desire to change the system was born. I began to recognize the problems inherent in schools and decided to make my own practice a model that would challenge the status quo. I chose to follow what Purpel (1999) described as the “prophetic voice” in “critique, outrage, exhortation, hope, possibility and vision” (p. 117). I decided that I would teach, not in a traditional sense, but in a way in which all students would be allowed to learn and grow, acknowledging my own biases, and constantly reflecting upon daily practice. I would not participate in what Freire (1970) called “banking education.”

Experiences as a student teacher and then as a teacher provided contextualization of the “problems” that I read and studied. While student teaching, I wrote an essay entitled “The Last Hoop” (Skousen, 2001). In this essay, I described an experience where I witnessed one student reprimanded quite fiercely by my mentor teacher for being out of his chair while attempting to help another student. I wrote,

He not only didn’t care why the student was out of his desk but when the student told his story, the teacher didn’t stop yelling but criticized the student on a personal level and told him to get to his desk and not leave until the bell rang. I heard the story from the crying distraught child that told me that he wouldn’t “be back tomorrow,” because the teacher is “mean.” I was also told it wasn’t the first time he had been yelled at and/or criticized, and I’m sure that it won’t be the last. (Skousen, 2001)

This specific experience was the norm of my student teaching experience, which led me to question myself. In the concluding paragraph of that essay I wrote,

Student teaching has definitely taken its toll on me and in many ways has affected the ways I view education. Maybe the most detrimental part of this experience is what it is becoming, a list of reasons why I don’t want to be involved in a system devoted to the promotion of the status quo. (Skousen, 2001)

In spite of this experience and others, I decided to teach. Years later as a public school teacher in a high poverty, minority-majority middle school, I again experienced these similar problems in public schools. This time it was not a teacher who created the contextualization, instead it was two district office level “leaders” who demonstrated the problem of school leadership. Following mandatory professional development training in phonics instruction and vocabulary, I and other teachers who attended, were asked to complete an anonymous survey. The following week, I was teaching when the classroom phone rang. It was my principal. He abruptly asked, “What did you do?” and continued, without waiting for a response, with, “I’m sending someone to watch your classroom, you need to come to my office immediately. Stan Smith [school district superintendent] and Walter Herman [school district assistant superintendent] are coming down here right now!” I could not think of anything I had done wrong or what might be the issue. I hurried to the principal’s office, scared as if I were one of my middle school students awaiting punishment.

When I arrived at the principal’s office, I was again asked, “What did you do?” I responded saying that I did not know. My principal instructed me to stay quiet and agree to what the superintendent and assistant superintendent were about to tell me and he would help me. I sat down at the principal’s round conference table in his office and just moments later the superintendent and assistant superintendent arrived. As the superintendent approached the table, he tossed the document he was holding in his hand across the table toward me and stated, “Is this yours?” I quickly recognized the document as the anonymous survey I had completed the previous week following the professional development. I responded, “Yes.” The superintendent began telling me that this sort of insubordination would not be tolerated and that if I were unhappy and did not want to do what was asked, he would accept my resignation immediately. When the

superintendent finished, the assistant superintendent stated something about bringing concerns to the appropriate channels. Then, as quickly as they had arrived, they turned and walked out.

After the superintendent and the assistant superintendent left, my principal asked to see the anonymous survey. He read the survey and said, “That’s it?” as if he were expecting to see something and it was not there. (At the bottom of the survey I had written that I viewed literacy as more than just phonics and vocabulary and that a more holistic approach would allow for deeper learning and literacy development.)

1.1. Defining and re-defining leadership

Leadership, as I had come to know it, was synonymous with a title, such as principal or superintendent. Leadership was a position. Leadership was power and control. Leadership in schools was about managing adults and kids. I was once told, “Those who can’t, teach. Those who can’t teach, teach PE. Those who can’t teach PE, become administrators.”

Realizing that I was not making much progress in changing the system as a teacher, I was told that widening my “sphere of influence,” could have more effect. Even though I was skeptical, I applied to enter a principal preparation program. While I realized that earning an administration degree did not guarantee an administrative or leadership position, I completed the degree. The culminating activity was to write a theory of action paper. In my theory of action paper, entitled “Changing the Discourse in Public Schools,” I discussed not only my frustrations with the contradictions found in public schooling, but also a new definition of what it means to be a leader. I wrote,

Leadership is not a job, nor a title. Being a leader has everything to do with the individual. Bennis (2003), in his book *On Becoming a Leader*, stated, “... people begin to become leaders at that moment when they decide for themselves how to be” (p. 47). However, making the decision “to be” is much easier said than done. “All of the leaders I talked with,” continued Bennis, “agreed that no one can teach you how to become yourself, to take charge, to express yourself ...” (p. 49). Therefore, while societal and other individuals’ influences are great, “... other people are the mirror in which we see ourselves” (Tatum, 1997), and often determine who people become, the ability to lead can be recognized through the ability of ‘self’ to overcome the world’s power to manipulate. (Skousen, 2007b)

1.1.1. Social justice leadership

Similar to what I was told about my sphere of influence, researchers have found that school leaders have the ability to impact student learning (Day et al., 2009; Hallinger & Heck, 1996) and are the second most influential school-related factor in student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). Yet, it has also been found that the preparation of school leaders is inadequate (Davis et al., 2005; Jensen et al., 2017) especially when considering the complex issues of race, class, gender, disability (Skousen, 2020). Social justice leadership has been defined as, “Principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Scholars have theorized that fundamental to social justice leadership is praxis, based on the work of Freire, involving action and reflection (Furman, 2012; Jean-Marie, 2008). Given the importance of action in social justice leadership (Caliskan, 2020), it has been found that social justice minded school leaders need critical consciousness, knowledge, and practical skills to enact socially just practices (Capper et al., 2006). More recently, scholars have expanded the thinking about social justice leadership to include the parents and communities within the work of school leaders whose focus is social justice (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2017; Rodela & Bertrand, 2018).

Skrla et al. (2007) explained that social justice has been a concern for some in school leadership and administration since the 1970s. Yet, scholars have found that there are still many challenges for social justice leadership in the US (Easley et al., 2021; Skousen & Domangue, 2020) and in other nations (Canlı & Demirtaş, 2021; Wang, 2018). Regardless of the systemic marginalization of

populations, and the challenges of supporting the development of learners, their families, and communities, social justice leadership was type of leadership in which I wanted to engage.

1.2. Stating the problem and issuing a challenge

My dismay of public schooling stemmed from the unequal, inequitable, racist, and classist backdrop of public schooling, as well as schools lacking social justice minded leaders. Nonetheless, I persisted, earning two master degrees, one of which was in educational leadership. As I concluded the degree in educational leadership, I wrote a theory of action paper. In this paper, I also issued a challenge to myself, to become the type of leader I had described, one who would be able to build a school where equity, equality, and critical consciousness would be the norm.

In response to this challenge, I accepted a position as principal. In this position, I had the opportunity to open a new school, based upon a new concept which had not existed in the past. Many questions arose in my mind as I took on this challenge, but the most dominant was: Would I be able to live up to my convictions and lead others in providing schooling that was responsive to what was really troubling me? I wondered, “What the hell can leaders really do?”

As a newly hired principal, I was charged with opening this new school in a partially renovated former elementary school that would serve the most at-risk student population of 9th grade students in the school district. The students were described as failures and many had already begun discussing dropping out. Some of the teachers who were sent to teach in this school were considered “left-overs,” two of the eight had already begun planning their retirements. It was early July and I had received little direction from the district office of what the school was to be, but the opportunity of creating a school that would better serve historically marginalized students was an answer to the challenge I had issued myself. It was this experience that provided the context and background to this study.

2. Methodology

Writing, as described by Richardson (1994), is a “method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic” (p. 516). Autoethnography is a research methodology that is inclusive of a process and a product (Ellis et al., 2011). Therefore, as I wrote and came to know through my own experience, I once again hoped to raise consciousness and promote change.

2.1. Why autoethnography?

My experiences as an undergraduate student and student teacher, then as a teacher, and finally as a principal have each contributed to my learning. Through autoethnography, I hoped to re-live specific past experiences in order to make further meanings and gain insight through the narrative. This is significant. As both the researcher and the person whose lived experiences are being closely examined, autoethnography allowed me to acknowledge the emotion and feelings that accompany those experiences. Ellis and Bochner (2000) wrote,

Autobiographical genre of writing and research displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of the personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 739)

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was two-fold: First, to systematically investigate my experiences to understand, gain, and extend meaning; Second, to provide an account of my experiences for the purpose of raising consciousness, promoting change (Ellis, 2002), and giving voice (Boylorn, 2006).

Autoethnography is a research method and product “that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2011). Sparkes (2000)

wrote autoethnographies “are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological meaning” (p. 21). Recognizing my experiences were by no means unique or special, they are how I have come to learn and know, and I turned to autoethnography as a process and product to further analyze my experiences, “assembled using hindsight” (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 2004) allowing me to respond to the research question, “As a leader, what can I do?”

2.2. Data sources and analysis

After receiving the phone call announcing my new role as principal, I began writing, documenting my work through reflective journaling, and my writing continued through three years as principal of the 9th Grade Learning Institute. These writings filled one legal-size note pad and fourteen college-ruled notebooks, each one consisting of 120 pages. In these notebooks, I also stored notes taken during meetings or discussions with others on other loose-leaf paper, documents that were shared with parents, students and school personnel, and notes to me from students, parents, and school personnel. Other documents that were used as a data source were the weekly notes I prepared and sent to all staff. Additionally, many school-related activities, events, and experiences were documented with photographs and digital video recordings. There were 10,522 photographs and 9 hours and 47 minutes of digital video recordings. These photographs and videos were used “as a means of remembering and studying detail that might be overlooked if photographic images were not available for reflection” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Due to the enormity of the data set, I used two different strategies to help organize the data, code, and identify themes. These included a self-interview, asking the question, “What experiences, events or actions, stand out as important and meaningful during the three years as principal?” and a strategy called “event listing” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Having organized all data sources into chronological piles, I began reading, analyzing, and coding, starting with the data sources for the first year of my principalship, continuing through the third. After initially open coding (Saldana, 2013) the notebooks and documents, I used a deductive coding process (O’Reilly, 2009) and only coded the photographs and videos with the top ten most used codes, after which I analyzed the codes and the number of occurrences of each of those codes. Finally, in order to understand the themes that had emerged through the multiple steps of coding (Saldana, 2013), I constructed a matrix showing the cross-over of events that were listed prior to the data analysis and the actual occurrences in which these events were coded in the data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The analysis of the data set and subsequent writing led to something that some autoethnographic researchers had referred to as “vulnerability” (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). This is challenging and rewarding. Ngunjiri et al. (2010) wrote, “Vulnerability is part of what makes reading autoethnographic works so compelling as researchers expose their pains, hurt, loss, grief, heartbreak, and other emotions experienced as they travail through events in their lives.” Becoming vulnerable, I expose selfhood, my experiences, and the interpretations of those experiences to the critique of others. Nevertheless, through the narrative and close analysis, I hoped to raise consciousness and give voice to the narrative.

3. Findings

The findings of this study were written as vignettes. In this section the vignettes of leading from my experiences as principal of the 9th Grade Learning Institute are presented. The following vignettes are part of the findings: Home Visits, Addressing Inequalities: School Supplies, Re-Defining School: The First Week of School, Addressing the Opportunity Gap, Mural “Accept No Limits,” Open House, and Seeing is Believing. To understand the vignettes and their significance, I first provide the context, a description of the school setting and the students.

3.1. Description of the school

The idea to create a 9th Grade Learning Institute (GLI) came from the superintendent of the school district in which I taught. The school district’s student population, of approximately 6,500 students,

was almost entirely made up of two racial groups, approximately 62% Latinx and 35% White. The poverty level, as measured by free and reduced-meal numbers, was nearly 80% across the school district. The school district faced many challenges, one of which was the large number of “drop-outs.” Most students dropped out between 9th and 10th grades. The strategy developed to address the high dropout rate was to create a school to specifically address the needs of students transitioning to 9th grade, identifying the most “at-risk” in the 8th grade and assigning those students to that school. The identification and selection of the students who attended the 9th GLI was done during the last quarter of the school year by the administration, counselors, and eighth grade teachers of the two middle schools in the school district. Each middle school would identify 50 students from approximately 250 eighth-grade students who were the most at risk of dropping out.

Even though the students who attended the 9th GLI changed each year for the three years I was principal, the students who were identified and selected to attend the school had similar demographics from year to year. Approximately 97% of the students were identified as living in poverty. Twelve percent received special education services and 23% were identified as English language learners. Seventy-nine percent were Latinx, 20% White, and 1% identified themselves as “other.” Fifty-seven percent were male and 43% were female. The majority of the students who attended the 9th GLI also had extensive disciplinary files, attendance issues, failing grades in many of their classes during middle school, and approximately 25% had probation officers.

3.2. Home visits

It was June 30th and I had just received the phone call from the superintendent offering me the principal position and I was anxious to get started in my new role as the first principal of a new school. “Where do I start?” I asked myself. I knew that I needed to first get to know students who would fill the hallways in less than two months. Who were they? Where did they live? With whom did they live? What were their schooling experiences like? Dozens of questions like these flooded my mind.

The next day I went into the school district office and made a few phone calls. I was able to get a list of the students and their addresses and phone numbers. I was also able to find out some basic information about the students. That day, Susana, my spouse who is Latina and also a school district employee, and I poured over the students’ addresses and talked about where they lived. We devised a plan to go to each students’ home. We divided the town into five sections. Within the five sections there were three different mobile home parks, a migrant farm worker labor camp, and a neighborhood close to the freeway. We decided to spend five evenings, from 5:00pm until 9:00pm visiting the five different parts of town. Prior to going to each students’ home, we made a list of the information parents needed to know about the school, including: important dates, registration, dress code guidelines, some expectations, a note from the principal, and my contact information. From this list, I made a flier that would have this information in English and Spanish.

The first evening, I was feeling a little anxious and unsure of how I would be received by parents. It was July, and rarely did schools make phone calls, send letters, or visit the homes of students at this time. Susana and I dropped our children off with her parents and headed to the first home. When we arrived, as I parked our van along the street in front of the first house, Susana reminded me that we had fourteen other houses to visit and I had to be concise, and at the same time answer any questions or resolve any concerns that may arise. As we walked to the doorstep with one of the fliers in hand, I could hear the sound of a TV and what sounded like children running and jumping inside the house. I knocked and we waited. The house got silent and then the door was opened. “Bueno,” was the comment made by an older, short Latina women. In Spanish, I introduced myself as being the new principal of the 9th Grade Learning Institute and asked if she was the sister of Javier, who would be going to our new school in August. The women laughed, as did Susana, and she said that she was Javier’s grandmother. She asked what the school was and I reintroduced myself, asked for her name, and then responded to her question. I stated that it was

a new school designed to support individualized instruction with smaller class sizes and more one-on-one support.

Javier's grandmother explained that Javier had not done well in school and often did not behave appropriately. She continued, asking why she had not heard about the school before and then called for Javier. A smaller child standing nearby and listening to our conversation quickly ran into the house. I assumed he left to get Javier. I began to explain that this upcoming year would be the first year of the school's existence. Just then Javier walked to the door. Susana held out her hand and said "Hi Javier!" I immediately stopped and introduced myself and then I continued to explain that Javier had been selected to attend because the middle school where he had attended thought that he would benefit from this new school. Javier said he recalled his counselor at his old school saying something about him going to a different school but he wanted to go to the "normal" high school. Javier and his grandmother communicated back and forth about where he was going to go to school. I interjected a few comments into the familial exchange, feeling like I needed to "sell" the school. I remember thinking, the school was going to be great! Why wouldn't anyone want to go there?

The conversation continued with me reviewing some of the information on the flier and we set a date and time for an individualized orientation meeting with Javier and his parents and grandmother to review his class schedule, tour the school, review expectations, and complete registration paperwork. At this point, I thought I must have done a good job with the sell, as we set a date and time for their individual orientation meeting. Finally, I asked Javier and his grandmother if they had other questions. They both responded with "no" and I thanked them for their time and said that I was looking forward to meeting with them again in the near future. I explained, if they thought of other questions or concerns, they could call my cell phone number, which was on the flier.

As Susana and I walked to our van to go to the next house, she looked at me and said, "What did I tell you?" Approximately forty minutes had passed since pulling up to the first house. We talked about how to cut down the conversation, but we both agreed that time could not govern the home visits. "It is a new school," Susana stated, "It may take people some time to get used to the idea." I agreed and we both admitted that we needed to acknowledge the cultural background of the people we were visiting. Latinos needed a conversation and time to get to know, as Susana would say, "who this white guy is, why he speaks Spanish, and why he's at my house."

This home visit was definitely not the norm. Although there were some similarities in each home visit, each one was unique. The time we spent at each house varied as well. Sometimes we spent fifteen minutes; sometimes it was thirty or forty-five minutes. The longest home visit was more than 90 minutes. Sometimes we were invited to come into family's home; sometimes we stood outside their door or stood under the shade of a tree. Sometimes we were offered food; sometimes we were told to leave. Sometimes parents and guardians were pleased at the idea of a new school that would give more attention to their son or daughter; sometimes they wanted to know who to call to get their son or daughter off of the list. Nevertheless, after every home visit, Susana or I would write down a few notes about each student, his or her family, and something special or unique about him or her that would be remembered later.

In the two weeks following, Susana and I spent each evening visiting the homes of each student who would attend the new school. These home visits enlightened me to the concerns of the parents or guardians and students and helped me begin to understand the students on an individual basis. Furthermore, the home visits supported the ideas I had about ways in which we would need to create a school to enrich our students' lives through coming to truly know each student.

Each of the following two years I was the principal, Susana and I continued to conduct home visits prior to the beginning of the school year. My anxiousness and excitement about the learning and understanding I gained through each home visit remained the same each year. I noted in my

journal after concluding home visits the second year that I was surprised each home visit was unique and the understandings gained were also unique. This was a pleasant realization, as I had wondered if the process would become normalized and not appreciated.

3.3. Addressing inequities: School supplies

Knowing that the majority of the students were identified as living in poverty, it was important for me to not exacerbate the issue with long lists of school supplies parents and families would be required to purchase to attend school. Therefore, in spite of the already prepared school supply list, I decided to look at the store sales ads for school supplies during the summer. My wife and I made a list of supplies needed, taken from the lists given to me that was created by the teachers, and then we tried to determine what could be purchased for minimal costs. We calculated how many notebooks, 3-ring binders, pencils, pens, markers, highlighters, notecards, loose-leaf notebook paper, rulers, protractors, pocket folders, composition notebooks, etc. would be needed to supply each student with school supplies each quarter of the school year.

We went to multiple stores each day, and “price-matched” in the stores that would let us. Sometimes limits would apply and my spouse and I would enlist the help of our children, giving each the exact amount of money needed and the supplies that needed to be purchased. This was almost a daily process. Each week when the Sunday ads were published, we would scour over the ads and devise a plan to purchase school supplies during that week.

During the first meeting with the teachers, I told them what Susana and I had done and why. I was nervous, but they were accepting of the idea and we collectively devised a plan to ensure all students, in all classes, would receive the needed supplies without the students or their families having to purchase them.

3.4. Re-defining school: The first week of school

After a great deal of planning and preparations, the first day of school finally arrived. There was much anxiousness and extra planning because the front of the building and entryway were being remodeled, but I was excited to begin the school year. I had posted large sandwich boards with written instructions directing students where to go as they got off buses or were dropped off. The teachers and I welcomed students as they arrived and helped direct them to where they needed to go. Some teachers were positioned in the cafeteria to direct students through the breakfast line and two others, together with our school counselor, were waiting at tables placed at the end of the cafeteria with student schedules, which I had completed only the night before.

The first day of school started well. Teachers, staff, and I agreed we would do our best to welcome students and provide a welcoming environment for each student. We had also agreed during the first week of school our daily schedule would be modified to dedicate half of the day to the scheduled classes in which teachers would review the student handbook, discuss classroom rules and expectations, practice classroom procedures, review their course syllabi, and begin teaching, while the second half of the school day was reserved for school-wide “team building.”

After lunch on the first day of school, I was feeling anxious because I knew in a short period of time all the students and staff would convene on a grass hill under a tree on the playground for the beginning of the school-wide team building activities. I felt as if this were the opportunity I had always wanted—to open a school and build a school culture that would be truly designed for human development and social justice. For me, social justice meant valuing diversity and challenging injustice through providing equitable treatment of our students, who almost all belonged to a minoritized group or were identified as living in poverty. I opened my speech welcoming both student and teacher alike to an afternoon I had never previously known existed in public schools. “We would spend time learning how to work together,” I told them.

Prior to that afternoon, I had discussed the team-building activities with the teachers and they had selected the activities they would lead. We also discussed, as is taught in *Tribes* (Gibbs, 1987), the need to observe carefully as students worked together in the activity. This would allow them to notice as leaders emerged and enable them to learn much about each student. The activities required a great deal of preparation, which had also been completed only the night before. As it was explained in a document that was shared with the teachers, the activities for the first day included: Spider Web, Silhouettes, Cooperation Squares, and Building a Web.

As the first day came to an end and we walked our students to the buses and said our goodbyes, I reminded each teacher that we would meet for a brief discussion and reflection of the day's events, as well as ensure that we were ready for the next day's activities. We sat together in Marylyn's classroom and informally discussed what went well and what could be improved. All teachers were pleased with the activities and said they were surprised our new students participated so well. We discussed the fact that the groupings would be different on the following day and we would need to again watch and learn about our students as they worked through the activities.

The next day was busy, with new students arriving with their parents or guardians, construction work on and around the building, helping teachers with their classroom concerns and phone calls, but I was again excited about the afternoon. The students and teachers met on the grassy hill on the playground and I addressed the group. Once again, I welcomed everyone and expressed my gratitude for them being a part of our school. I asked the students, "Why are we doing team building activities instead of sitting in the classrooms learning math or reading?" It was supposed to be a rhetorical question, but students shouted responses. One student stated, "To get to know each other!" I acknowledged the responses and told the group that today's activities were different from those they had participated in the previous day. I expressed my hope that they would equally work together, participate and be an active part of the activity. The activities included: Handprint, All Aboard, Mousetrap Land, and Lines of Communication.

As we concluded the second day of school, the teachers and I again discussed the day's successes and areas in which we could improve. We also discussed our students and the observations teachers were making as students participated in the second day's team building activities. We were learning; and we conjectured that our students were learning as well. Overall, we hoped that they were learning they could take chances and open up to the idea of our school. We had an idea of the negative, pre-conceived notions our students had about school because two of our teachers were coming from schools from which some of our students came. Therefore, we had previously discussed the students who were assigned to the school and the importance of our students giving school a chance and start with an open mind. Although we hoped that our students were learning how to work together, and with their teachers, we were also learning how we, the staff as a whole, would work together.

The third day of school brought another afternoon of team building with different activities, which were equally rewarding as the previous two days. The fourth day of school was the conclusion of our school week and team building activities. In the afternoon, we again met on the grassy hill on the playground and again I addressed our students. I remembered being explicit, telling our students what I hoped we had gained from the previous days and the time and effort spent to realize the team building. I was honest. I was hopeful. I told them how much I appreciated the opportunity to work with each student, and I wanted to make sure that they knew our school was ours and we could make it a great place. It was our choice and this school could be a great school, I told them. I asked if they remembered me taking pictures during the team building activities and of course they remembered, as there were many pictures in which students posed. I explained I had created a slide show and we would be going back inside the school to watch it together, after which we would eat snow cones and talk for the remainder of the day. As we talked and walked towards the school building, I remember watching as the

students laughed as they talked and I thought, “We are going to do it!” I was thrilled. All enjoyed the slideshow. Students and teachers laughed and talked as they watched their pictures on the screen. It was a day to remember.

After the slideshow, the teachers and I made snow cones for our students and talked with them as they got their snow cone and selected their flavor. I remember asking multiple students, “When was the last time your principal made you a snow cone?” Sometimes I would ask, “When was the last time that your school ate snow cones and talked outside at the end of the first week of school?” “Never,” was the most common response. I thought at the time the students understood my point. This school was going to be different and that was okay.

For the next two school years we again planned the first week of school as we had the first year. Although, different games were added and some of the dynamics and interactions changed because the students were different, the first week of school was a time for team building. It was a time “to get to know each other,” and for students to learn that school would be okay, no matter what their previous experience with school had been.

3.5. Addressing the opportunity gap

Early in the first year, I received a visit from the community’s fine arts organization’s director. I was informed of the many events and opportunities in which schools could participate during the school year. Even though I was extremely busy, I knew offering a fine arts experience to our students would be an opportunity many, if not all, of our students had never been afforded. Offering our students multiple opportunities to learn and grow, especially through experiences, was a priority.

During early November, the first year, I arranged for our student body and staff to attend a professional dance company’s performance of “The Nutcracker,” which was to be staged in December. I was so hesitant to present this idea to the teachers. I remember thinking the teachers might agree we have come a long way in terms of behavior and learning with our students in a few months, but taking them to a ballet—poor kids from “the hood?” Although what I perceived as one of the teachers’ arguments against us attending, “What would these poor kids from the ‘hood’ have to gain from a ballet,” was a source of hesitation for me, the perceived arguments for why our students should attend the ballet were also the motivating factors for me to insist that we attend. I thought our students needed this type of exposure to something they would not necessarily choose for themselves. Then they could choose if they enjoyed ballet or not, having had an experience with it, I reasoned.

I extensively prepared for the staff meeting in which we would discuss our school’s attendance of the performance. Thinking the teachers may argue there were too many preparations to go on a field trip in such a short period of time, I created a modified schedule to ensure all students would attend all classes that day, a seating chart for students in the performance hall and corresponding teachers to supervise areas in the performance hall, a parent letter and permission form, two lessons to be taught prior to attending to prepare our students for what they would encounter in the performance, a list of expectations and consequences for our students, and a plan to remove unruly students if needed. As anxious as I was for the meeting, the teachers had questions, but they agreed our students should get an opportunity such as this. There were suggestions on how to improve my preparations, but my hesitations were unfounded.

The afternoon we attended “The Nutcracker” was phenomenal. The teachers prepared our students for the experience and our students enjoyed it. In fact, our school got the opportunity to meet personally with a few of the professional dancers, who told us of their lives and how they became ballet dancers. One male dancer told us of his story of growing up in inner-city Portland, in a poor family. He explained to the students he had not known about ballet dancing or that a person could make a living dancing and enjoy it too. Our students asked many questions and were fascinated by the individuals and their stories. When we returned to the school, our students

talked to their teachers about the experience and some wanted to know more. After school, in an impromptu faculty meeting, we talked about the experience, the doubts some teachers had, but had not expressed, and how we could again offer experiences such as the ballet to our students.

During the first year of the 9th Grade Learning Institute, our school participated in three events with the fine arts organization. In February, two months after watching “The Nutcracker,” we attended a piano recital of a professional pianist in the same performance hall. Again, we prepared our students and again we got the opportunity to meet personally with the pianist after the recital. The experience also proved enriching and informative. Finally, our school had the opportunity to have a professional mariachi group come to our school, play music, and then interact and speak with our students individually.

During the three years as principal at the 9th Grade Learning Institute, we continued our partnership with the community’s fine arts organization. Each year, our group of students experienced fine arts, an experience that many would not have had otherwise.

3.6. Mural “Accept No Limits”

The 9th Grade Learning Institute students had the opportunity to put their mark on our school literally. During the first week of school, our students were asked to put their handprint on the wall and sketch their initials in the palm. The student’s handprints were assembled in the form of the school’s initials. This activity was important for our students to feel like they belonged at school and were an important part of our school.

The activity also served as the springboard for the idea to paint murals in our school, which would be designed and painted by our students. The first year of the 9th Grade Learning Institute, we were fortunate to have received a grant to pay for an Artist-in-Residence program, which provided our school with two professional artists. Both were muralists and they worked with our students for three weeks. Our students learned about murals, designed three murals, and then painted them on our school walls. The professional artists were at our school every day during the three weeks and supported the students, but allowed them creative ownership of their murals.

One group of students painted a large (20 ft. x 30 ft.) mural with the words “Accept No Limits” in the center of their mural in large bold letters on a yellow banner. I had walked past their mural dozens of times each day as they worked on it. The last day, when the three weeks were coming to an end, I went to the mural as the students were putting their signatures on the mural and asked them to explain their mural and what it meant to them. They told me their design was purposeful and the central theme “Accept No Limits” was something they all felt needed to be stated for everyone, those currently in the school and those who would come later. The twelve students who collaborated on the design and painting of the mural took turns talking about why they would “accept no limits.” Each student had a story of a person or people in their lives, including teachers, who they said did not believe in them. The stories about past teachers who told them that they would “amount to nothing” or “would end up in jail” were heartbreaking. “Accept No Limits” was their way of saying they would succeed in spite of the people who did not believe in them.

3.7. Open house

At the end of the first year of the 9th Grade Learning Institute, I decided the July home visits were too late to talk to students and parents about our school. I wanted to be more proactive and show the incoming students and parents how good our school was becoming. Therefore, in May, I planned an open house in our school and arranged with the middle school principals for a group of our students, accompanied by me, to go to their schools. The purpose was to talk to prospective students, invite them to the open house, and give them a flyer inviting their parents to the open house.

Our visits to the middle schools were well received and our students did an outstanding job of talking about our school and the opportunities that were provided. Our students urged the middle

school students, only one year removed from them, to work hard. They also told them they were in their place the previous year, and they too didn't care about anything and knew what this felt like. Our students encouraged the middle schools students to take advantage of the opportunity they were given to go to the 9th Grade Learning Institute.

In planning for the open house, I invited our current students and their parents or guardians and asked some if they would be willing to speak during the open house to the prospective students and their parents or guardians. I was hopeful they would say something positive, but purposefully did not want to fill them with ideas about what they could or should say. I wanted their thoughts to be authentic and not staged. Of course, this created some anxiety in me. I thought, "What if they say something negative towards our school or staff?" Nonetheless, I believed it was worth the risk to provide a real and authentic experience for prospective students and their parents.

The open house started with a self-guided or guided tour and after about thirty minutes I announced we would start a formal meeting in the gym with a presentation about the school as well as time to ask questions. As we guided adults and children to the gym, I realized quite a few people were in attendance. In fact, after later checking the sign-in sheet, I noted over half of our prospective students and their parent or guardian had come to the open house.

I began the formal meeting with a welcome, followed by an introduction of the teachers and myself. After the introductions, I started a slide show of events and activities in which our students had been involved in the first year of the school's existence. I discussed the various activities as the slide show progressed. Then I announced I had asked a few parents of current students to talk during the open house and introduced the first parent.

Kevin's mother began by telling the group that she does not usually talk in front of people but made an exception. She continued to tell the group that she had moved their family to this town the previous summer because Kevin had gotten into so much trouble, and she and Kevin's stepfather did not know what else to do. She said that Kevin had gotten into trouble with drugs and law enforcement and she thought he was "lost." At this point Kevin's mother began to cry but kept talking. She said when she arrived, she was told Kevin would have to go to the 9th Grade Learning Institute and would not be allowed to attend the traditional high school. All she wanted was for Kevin to have a new chance and going to an "alternative school," she worried, would get him involved with the same type of kids that got Kevin into trouble in the first place.

Kevin's mother said she was worried and was ready to give up, but after speaking to the principal she decided to just give it a chance. She described how Kevin was a different child than he had been just months earlier and he had earned straight A's all year. She continued saying their house is much calmer now and she and her husband, Kevin's stepfather, do not yell and fight with each other anymore. Then to my astonishment, Kevin's mother, through her tears said that it was "this school that made the difference in Kevin's life and in our family."

3.8. Seeing is believing

During the first week of school in each of the three years I was principal, we would have "traditional" school picture day with a local portrait studio. The studio typically took pictures for the school yearbook and the student management system and the pictures were available for purchase to the families. I saw this opportunity and re-negotiated the agreement to include an additional photograph of each student dressed in graduation regalia identical in color and design to our district high school. In the negotiation, the studio also agreed to provide a CD with the photographs. I took the disc to the local Walgreen's and had a 5 × 7 of each student's photograph printed. The graduation photographs were used on a bulletin board outside the main office, with a heading above that read "Class of 2015."

In addition to the wall display, I also used the photographs in a slide show during the 3rd Quarter Awards Assembly. After all the awards had been given and the students were a little restless having sat for a little more than thirty minutes, I told the students I had a special presentation. At that point the lights were turned off and I began the slide show. There was some talking and restlessness during the time that the lights were turned off and the slide show was started, but as the music began and the first picture was projected, there was silence. Silence and all eyes, both students' and staffs', were glued to the screen. About forty seconds would pass and more than a dozen graduation pictures were shown before there was a sound in the gym. The first sounds were a few giggles and some whispers. The sound increased and the kids talked and laughed but their eyes were still glued to the screen. The talking and laughter was not in malice. They had been in school for three-fourths of the school year and they had all but forgotten they had taken the graduation photos.

When the slide show ended, I asked, "Why did we take the graduation photos and why did I show them to you right now?" Silence. I would like to think the students were pondering deeply the significance of this event. I answered my own question, "Sometimes seeing is believing." I repeated my response, "Seeing is believing." I continued to ask the students to raise their hands if they had thought about dropping out of school and did not believe they could actually graduate. Almost in unison, as if practiced, nearly every hand went up. "Do you believe you can graduate now?" Without asking for students to raise their hands, the same hands raised high in the air. I asked them to look around and take in what was happening. "It is okay to do well in school. In fact you are doing awesome!" I exclaimed. I then asked them to look at the back of the gym, where their teachers were standing. As the students turned to look, I said, "These are the people who believe in you. They knew the first day you came you would do well and they know now you will continue to be successful."

4. Discussion

Through this study, I was able to analyze some of my experiences as principal at the 9th Grade Learning Institute and contrary to my prior thinking that schools were created and therefore destined to be oppressive and that school leaders only played a role in this oppression, I learned that leaders have the potential to do much. Although, that may not sound profound, what might happen if every principal *knew* she/he could affect real change in public schools? I learned that school leaders can change some of the oppressive structures in schools and can help students and adults re-define school.

The 9th GLI was a new school, without a previously established school culture, traditions, or norms, therefore the opportunity to create a new school culture was favorable. Nevertheless, each person who was a part of the new school, the students, teachers, staff, and myself as the school principal, had experienced schools prior to the 9th GLI and the possibility of the school becoming similar to others, including the practices that further beget oppression that have been found in schools previously, should not be dismissed. Therefore, through the implementation of new practices, specifically those envisioned by the school leader, a new school and a new school culture can be created. This autoethnography was guided by the research question, what can I, as a leader, do? and the purposes of the study were to systematically investigate my experiences as a school principal to further gain and extend meaning and to give voice to these experiences to raise consciousness and promote change.

Researchers have found that the building relationships is an essential element for effective school leadership (Furman, 2012; Jensen et al., 2017). In fact, Dantley, Beachum and McCray (2008) stated that "relationships are at the crux of educational leadership" (p. 128). Further, Furman (2012) stated, "Social justice leaders proactively build trusting relationship with colleagues, parents, and students in their schools, across cultural groups" (p. 197). The act of getting to know the students, as individuals, and their families, through home visits and the individual orientation meetings many weeks before school started provided the foundation upon which

relationships between myself, as the school principal, and the students and their families, were formed. These relationships were strengthened and expanded to include the teachers and school staff through the first week of school community building activities. I had the distinct opportunity to develop and lead these activities during the first year, ever trying to incorporate the voice and ideas of teachers and schools staff. However, during the subsequent two years, while I continued to conduct the home visits with my wife, the community building activities and events of the first week were developed and planned in collaboration with the teachers and myself. The traditional notion that the principal was solely in charge and made unilateral decisions was non-existent and decisions were based on the collective views of all faculty and staff.

Prior to becoming the principal at the 9th GLI, I had thought that schools were to be developed and realized as, and within, the community, inclusive of all adults and children. Therefore, I viewed the relationships that were required to create a new school and school culture as essential. Even though I conducted this autoethnographic study alone, I viewed the effort and work to create and develop the school as collective. Certainly, the school leader should lead, implicit in this is the influence that a leader has due to her/his positional authority; nevertheless the leading should not always be conducted alone or with only a small group. While during the first year I was often alone, especially during the home visits and individual orientation meetings, I was always purposeful, as I worked with students, parents, teachers, and school staff, to discuss the school as “ours” and the work being done as a collective “we.” This was a difficult while working through this specific methodology that is so focused on self. I had to work through my need to include others, and the work that we did together at the 9th GLI and how I, as an individual, made sense of the data sources. These concerns were somewhat remedied in conducting member checks, and communicating with some of the faculty and staff with whom I worked at the 9th Grade Learning Institute, nevertheless, the work of this autoethnography and the analyses were conducted alone.

Schools can sometimes further exacerbate the inequalities that exist in society (Kozol, 1991). Wealth inequalities are often witnessed in schools as students are required to have certain school supplies. Subtleties of the best brands and the most expensive supplies are known among students, and this furthers the separation of students along socioeconomic lines. Included in socioeconomic inequalities are the opportunity gaps that are often perpetuated by the economic system and poverty (Burns et al., 2019). These inequalities can impact the school outcomes for children (see, Berkowitz et al., 2017).

Recognizing the socioeconomic realities of the students, I did not want school supplies to become an additional barrier for students and teachers. Prior to me being hired as the principal, the teachers who were hired at the 9th GLI had created school supply lists. I chose to change what had previously been established, namely that students and/or their families would purchase school supplies, and instead, I purchased school supplies. I was worried about the teachers’ responses and this stayed with me until our first formal staff meeting when I discussed school supplies and the plan that I had created. While teachers were surprised that I and my family had spent so much time purchasing school supplies, I think they recognized the reasons why this was important to me and accepted my unilateral decision. Additionally, the opportunities that were provided for our students to experience fine arts events, ballet and piano performance, were equally seen as necessary. These were a few small ways in which we could provide our students with opportunities that they had not previously been exposed and address a part of the opportunity gap (Burns et al., 2019).

Scholars have identified a number of characteristics or components to successful school leadership (Leithwood, Seashore Louis et al., 2004; Lynch, 2012). Among these is engagement of parents and community. Other researchers have reiterated and identified that family and community partnerships are key to effective school leadership (Auerbach, 2012; McLaughlin & McLeod, 1996). The vignette entitled “Open House” provided one example of an opportunity for the school

personnel, students, and parents to come together, in which parents were able to engage with other parents regarding the experience of school at the 9th GLI. While this example offered a parent's positive perception of the school, this type of one-way parental involvement is too common in schools, even those where social justice is at the forefront of the thinking of the school leader and there were attempts at providing equity to students who come from currently and historically marginalized groups. What I mean by one-way parent involvement is where the parents' participation is at the request of the school and is limited to the parent receiving something from the school. While this specific case involved the parent offering feedback about the school to others, this is still only one-way involvement. Parent and community engagement should include multi-directional communication. Parents and community members should not only be passive recipients of what a school offers. Instead, schools, parents, and community members should engage together, in authentic dialogue, collectively making decisions about the school (see, DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2017; Rodela & Bertrand, 2018). These decisions could include school related topics such as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, school related activities and events, among others.

Researchers have found that schools can be “game-changers” for traditionally and currently marginalized students (Samel et al., 2011). It has also been found that when schools incorporate certain practices students are able to gain a sense of belonging (Sanders & Munford, 2016). Similarly, at the 9th GLI through a number of activities students were able to gain a sense of belonging and were able to express their voice. As students worked with the muralists to design and paint murals within the school building, they were able to connect to the school, voice their previous frustrations with how they had been marginalized, and express their desire to achieve their own goals. This experience and the understanding that I gained was significant. As previously mentioned, I had my reservations about schools changing from places of oppression to places where people could be liberated, and while this example is far from perfect (see, McKenzie et al., 2008) the significance it brought me was witnessing an activity in a school where a glimpse of liberatory practice could be visible.

In the vignette describing the first week of school and re-defining school I wrote, “For me, social justice meant valuing diversity and challenging injustice through providing equitable treatment of our students, who almost all belonged to a minoritized group or were identified as living in poverty.” Capper et al. (2006) theorized that there are three domains of social justice leaders, “critical consciousness, knowledge, and practical skills” (p. 209). Since some of the initial discussions about social justice leadership, many scholars have questioned the ways social justice leadership has been discussed (Jean-Marie et al., 2009), defined (Furman, 2012), and theorized (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Nevertheless, some of the key characteristics that remain in the literature regarding social justice leadership revolve around the leader's beliefs and awareness (critical consciousness), their knowledge- “... areas included special education, ELLs, curriculum, differentiation and teaming, using data, presentation skills, race, poverty, working with diverse families, and taking a global perspective” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 250), and the skills to act and reflect (Hernandez & Marshall, 2016).

As a teacher I had recognized the deep rooted inequality, inequity, and entrenched racial problems that had been perpetuated for decades in the public school system in the US. I began to develop the critical consciousness and knowledge that a school leader would need to be able to act to develop the type of school practices that would challenge the status quo. While some of the work that was done at the 9th GLI could meet the expectation that I had self-imposed prior to even becoming a school leader, I can relate to what McKenzie et al. (2008) described in their recognition that “the perfect social justice leader or the perfect social justice school does not exist” (p. 114), stating, “What we are aiming for is that the leaders realize their unevenness in the application of social justice and strive to close the gap between the ideal and the application” (p. 114). Through this study, I was able to reflect on my own praxis (Freire, 1970), and question my own conceptualization of social justice leadership.

The different areas of knowledge that were most important included people, curriculum, and pedagogy. First, through the home visits and purposeful activities in the school around developing community and awareness of each other, provided the knowledge and understanding about the students, their families, and their backgrounds in order to engage with them to learn. This knowledge also supported the understanding of the ways in which we could address the opportunity gaps and provide experiences for students to engage in their own thinking about where they had been and what their futures could include. Additionally, it was through the knowledge I had gained about curriculum and pedagogy that I was able to develop the skills to be I was able to work with others to develop the learning activities to purposefully connect our school community. The skill to design community building activities and to collaborate with teachers allowed us to be able to work together to re-define the first week of school and ultimately challenge how schooling had been previously conceptualized for students, their families, and the 9th GLI personnel.

Beliefs are an important factor in learning. Scholars have found that students' beliefs and attitudes about the learning situation can impact the learning process, including mathematics (Brendefur et al., 2003), language arts (Wilkinson et al., 2017), English language learning (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Breen, 2001), and science (Monsour, 2009). Because of numerous and repeated experiences of "failing" in schools, the students at the 9th GLI had begun to believe that being successful in school and graduating high school would not have been possible. This belief for many students had led to what was perceived as a near apathetic attitude towards school. Through successful schooling experiences, including awards assemblies, the students at the 9th Grade Learning Institute were able to see themselves as being successful, which in turn creates the opportunities for being successful. Similar to student self-efficacy beliefs in mathematics, reading, and science, overall success in school may be impacted by the student's belief in whether or not they would be successful. Additionally, my skepticism about schools was changed and I began to believe that schools could become places where students, even those who had "failed" many times in school before, could learn to believe in their own school success story.

5. Conclusion

This study has reminded me of what I considered a special and unique experience in a public school. As I analyzed the data and was reminded of the experiences I had while principal at the 9th GLI, I was able to recall the feelings and emotions that went along with those experiences. These emotions forced me to rethink and reconsider the experiences and their meanings. Holman Jones (2005) described autoethnography,

Setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation ... and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives.. (p. 795)

As Holman Jones stated, I equally hoped that at the conclusion of this story those who read these words will ponder them deeply enough to apply them to their own lives.

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