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# Transformative Adult Learning Strategies: Assessing the Impact on Pre-Service Administrators' Beliefs

Kathleen M. Brown

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the effects of an alternative, transformative andragogy, i.e., the art and science of helping others to learn, designed to be responsive to the challenges of preparing educational leaders committed to social justice and equity. Three aspects of Mezirow's (1990) Transformative Learning Theory, which in this article are described as centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse, are interwoven with eight adult learning strategies intended to increase pre-service administrators' awareness, acknowledgement, and action.

While many agree that theory, research, and practice should be intertwined to support the type of schooling (and society) that values rather than marginalizes, few scholars offer ground-breaking, pragmatic approaches for preparing and developing transformative leaders. As moral stewards in a global, diverse, and complex society, school leaders need to be invested in purpose-defining activities and in "reflective analysis and...active intervention" (Bates, 1984, p.268) as opposed to simply managing existing arrangements. In fact, Murphy (2001) has recently criticized traditional approaches as "bankrupt" and has recommended recasting preparation around the *purposes* of leadership. For such changes to happen, pre-service leaders need to open their minds (see Rokeach, 1960) and explore their self-understandings that are systematically embedded in mindsets, worldviews, values, and experiences. According to Senge (1990), these can be seen as mental models; they are "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (p.8).

The strategies described herein are designed to help future leaders for social justice and equity develop as "transformative intellectuals who are both active, reflective scholars and practitioners, [who] engage in political interests that are emancipatory in nature" (Sleeter, 1993, p. ix). By being actively engaged in a number of assignments requiring the examination of ontological and epistemological assumptions, values and beliefs, context and experience, and competing worldviews, adult learners are better equipped to work with and guide others in translating their perspectives, perceptions, and goals into agendas for social change. The exploration of new understandings, the synthesis of new information, and the integration of these insights throughout

personal and professional spheres can lead aspiring educational leaders to a broader, more inclusive approach in addressing issues of student learning and equity.

## Rationale

While convincing research suggests that beliefs are the best predictors of individual behavior and that educators' beliefs influence their perceptions, judgments, and practices, research also states that beliefs are hardy and highly resistant to change (Bandura, 1986; Dewey, 1933; Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968). Understanding the nature of beliefs, attitudes, and values is essential to understanding future administrators' choices, decisions, and effectiveness regarding issues of diversity, social justice, and equity. Teaching for social justice, according to Ayers (1998), "arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom" (p. xvii), and ends in action to move against those obstacles. Preparing educational leaders to accept this challenge necessitates both a close examination of personal beliefs coupled with a critical analysis of professional behavior. It requires the problematization of those taken-for-granted practices that we no longer notice, unless we are explicitly asked to do so (Tripp, 1993). Given the relevance of beliefs and the difficulty involved in changing them, the results of this study should illuminate connections between leadership preparation experiences and student learning and help programs assess students' beliefs, evaluate strategies to effect beliefs, and monitor changes in beliefs.

From Dewey (1933) to Rokeach (1968) to Bandura (1986), scholars and researchers have long suggested that beliefs mediate knowledge, expectations, and actions. They claim that it is through reflection and challenge that individuals evaluate and adjust their thinking and turn from "what is subjectively reasonable for them to believe to what is objectively reasonable for them to believe" (Fenstermacher, 1979, p.167). According to Pajares (1993), "The process of accommodating new information and developing beliefs is thus gradual, one of taking initial steps, accepting and rejecting certain ideas, modifying existing beliefs systems, and finally accepting new ideas" (p.45).

Assessing beliefs in an effort to make them known and subject to critical analysis is an important initial step in the process. Because beliefs can change as a result of experience, it is critical for preparation programs to examine the impact of their strategies on pre-service leaders' attitudes, perceptions, and practices regarding issues of social justice, equity, and diversity. If personal beliefs can be positively influenced by courses dealing with diversity and with direct cross-cultural experiences, program planners should expose students to various meaningful cross-cultural experiences within and outside their coursework. If professional beliefs (and subsequent professional behaviors) are directly influenced by personal beliefs, it is critical that preparation program curricula address deeper issues related to diversity (i.e., the "isms" – racism, classism, sexism), multiculturalism, oppression, prejudice, and discriminatory practices (see Pohan & Aguilar, 2001).

## Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning Theory

The learner, the learning process, and the context of learning form the cornerstone of the field of adult education. Adult education takes place in a wide variety of situations and involves a set of activities or experiences engaged in by adults which leads to changes in thinking, values, and behavior. Knowles (1984), one of the most influential figures in the field of adult education, is best known for his work on the factors that distinguish pedagogy from andragogy. Although his assertions and claims of difference are the subject of considerable

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debate (see Davenport, 1993; Jarvis, 1987; Tennant, 1996), Knowles defined pedagogy as the art and science of teaching, and andragogy as the art and science of helping others to learn. For Knowles, andragogy was premised on at least four crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners. A fifth was added later (Knowles, 1984, p. 12).<sup>1</sup> These are as follows:

1. Self-concept. As a person matures, self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.
2. Experience. As a person matures, a growing reservoir of experience accumulates that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
3. Readiness to learn. As a person matures, readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of social roles.
4. Orientation to learning. As a person matures, time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.
5. Motivation to learn. As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal.

Mezirow (1991), relying heavily on adult learning theory and Habermas' (1984) communicative theory, moved "beyond andragogy" and proposed a theory of transformative learning "that can explain how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meanings, and the way the structures of meanings themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional" (p. xii). Mezirow (1990) defined it as a process of reflection and action:

From this vantage point, adult education becomes the process of assisting those who are fulfilling adult roles to understand the meaning of their experience by participating more fully and freely in rational discourse to validate expressed ideas and to take action upon the resulting insights...Rational thought and action are the cardinal goals of adult education (p.354).

Mezirow saw the process of critical self-reflection as leading to a reformulation of an individual's "meaning perspective" (the assumptions that a person uses to interpret experiences). This reformulation, along with acting on the reformulation, is called *transformative learning*. The effort to facilitate transformative learning, according to Mezirow (1990) is called *emancipatory education*.

Central to transformative learning is the assertion: "Because we are all trapped by our own meaning perspectives (i.e., frames of reference generated by life experiences), we can never make interpretations of our own experience free from bias" (Mezirow, 1990, p.10). Transformative learning seeks to free the individual from the chains of bias through the process of perspective transformation. It is "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world" (Mezirow, 1991, p.167). Transformative learning changes the way people see themselves and their world. It attempts to explain how their expectations, framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions, directly influence the meaning they derive from their experiences. Three themes of Mezirow's (1990) theory are the

centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse (see also Boyd, 1991; Cranton, 1994; Kegan, 1994).

As the founder of experiential learning, Dewey (1938) reminded us that not only are experiences the key building blocks of learning, but action is an intrinsic part of the learning cycle; this implies learning by doing as well as a practical understanding of the world. It also implies that human beings create meanings out of their experiences and act, or try to act, in accord with those meanings. Building on the work of Dewey (1916, 1938) and Piaget (1968), Kolb's (1984) view of experiential learning represents a model by which individuals structure reality and adapt to the world. The learning cycle, through which most people proceed when engaged in learning, encompasses four steps: (1) concrete experience—being involved in a new experience; (2) reflective observation—observing others in an experience, or developing observations about our own experiences; (3) abstract conceptualization—creating concepts and theories to explain our observations; and (4) active experimentation—using the theories to solve problems and make decisions. Regardless of the model or the sequence of stages (see Jarvis, 1987), learning comes from experiencing things, and the way in which individuals define and solve problems becomes the central process of learning. Perspective transformation explains how the meaning structures that adults have acquired over a lifetime become transformed. Rather than simply accepting learners' experiences and using them as a resource, Mezirow encourages a critical examination of these experiences, of the assumptions that underlie them, and of the individual's interpretation of them.

Mezirow's second transformative learning theory construct, thinking contextually and reflecting critically, is embedded within the realm of developmental psychology and the constructs of logic, dialectical thinking, working intelligence, reflective judgment, post-formal reasoning, and epistemic cognition (Brookfield, 1991). The ideas of critical theory—particularly that of ideological critique—are central to critical reflection. In his earlier writings, Mezirow (1977, 1981) described a learning cycle in which a "disorienting dilemma" (i.e., a situation in which our views of reality do not match what we now encounter) is first experienced, followed by self-examination, the exploration of options, and learning through planning a new course of action to overcome the dilemma. Reflection is obviously a part of this cycle; it is the examination of the justification for one's beliefs. Critical reflection is the assessment of the validity of the presuppositions of one's meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1990). Critical reflection, according to Brookfield (1995) focuses on three interrelated processes:

- (a) the process by which adults question and then replace or reframe an assumption that up to that point has been uncritically accepted as representing commonsense wisdom; (b) the process through which adults take alternative perspectives on previously taken for granted ideas, actions, forms of reasoning and ideologies; and (c) the process by which adults come to recognize the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values...(p.2)

The purposes of critical reflection are to externalize and investigate power relationships and to uncover hegemonic assumptions. To the contemporary educational critic Giroux (1983): "[T]he ideological dimension that underlies all critical reflection is that it lays bare the historically and socially sedimented values at work in the construction of knowledge, social relations, and material practices...it situates critique within a radical notion of interest and social transformation" (pp. 154-155). As a result, emancipatory education becomes a means of fighting oppression and cultural constraints.

“Transformative learning is not a private affair involving information processing; it is interactive and intersubjective from start to finish” (Mezirow, 1990, p.364). Since it requires exposure to alternative realities, groups (or, in the case of most preparation programs, cohorts) can provide a “dialogic context” wherein individuals have the opportunity to share their social, political, and cultural history. Brookfield (1986) supports this notion and posits that “when adults teach and learn in one another’s company, they find themselves engaged in a challenging, passionate, and creative activity” (p.1). Taylor (1998) adds that adults in interaction constitute a community of knowers as well as a community of learners. Freire (1970) also emphasized the importance of dialogue in which people analyze, evaluate, and express judgments, as this dialogue can lead to a recreation of the individuals involved in the process. Rational discourse then becomes a means for testing the validity of one’s construction of meaning. It is the essential medium through which a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one’s experiences is promoted and developed. Given this, participation in extended and repeated discourse about social justice and equity can provide unique opportunities for learner growth, transformation, and empowerment. According to Shields, Larocque, and Oberg (2002):

As we struggle to understand how issues of race and ethnicity affect the educational experiences for all students, we must work to overcome our prejudices by listening carefully to those whose backgrounds, perspectives, and understandings differ from our own. We must examine popular assumptions as well as the politically correct stereotypes that educators often use to explain what is happening in today’s multicultural society and its increasingly ethnically heterogeneous schools. Engaging in socially just leadership requires us to maintain an open conversation, to examine and reexamine our perceptions and those of others, constantly looking beneath the surface and seeking alternative explanations and ways of understanding (p.134).

### **Preparation Programs: The Context of Learning**

An awareness of and openness to issues of diversity is an important prerequisite of administrators’ ability to lead for social justice and equity. Culturally inclusive education is inseparably linked to struggles for social justice. Respect for diversity entails advocacy, solidarity, an awareness of societal structures of oppression, and critical social consciousness (Freire, 1973). The more critically conscious educational leaders become, the more attentive they become to redressing social injustices and developing enduring educational practices embodying equity. Critical social consciousness entails moving from simplistic, dualistic notions of social justice to more complex ones. It entails identifying societal power relationships of oppression and privilege and believing them transformable through resistant action. It necessitates the critical examination of personal and professional beliefs, attitudes, and values.

This study outlines clearly the need for professors to retool their curricular and instructional practices to address issues of power and privilege—to weave social justice into the fabric of educational leadership curriculum, pedagogy, programs, and policies. Andragogical shifts from faculty-centered to student-centered approaches that actively involve students in the learning process, eliminate student anonymity, and personalize instruction are needed for transformative learning to occur. McCarthy (1999) found that these recommendations are consistent with others who are encouraging the use of inductive, problem-based

strategies that are grounded in adult learning theory and the reality of schools (Bridges, 1992; Collet, 1989; Hallinger & McCary, 1991; Murphy, 1992; Shibles, 1988). While the strategies proposed in this article were randomly chosen and specifically focused on pre-service training, their applicability (along with other transformative learning strategies) to ongoing development is viewed as an important and necessary complement in supporting future leaders.

Encouraging the development of informed beliefs on critical educational issues first necessitates the identification and understanding of those beliefs. To foster such development, the related principal preparation literature supports traditional delivery methods for clinical experiences, internships, cohort groups, case studies, and problem-based learning. In this study, these strategies are endorsed in addition to some other, more transformative learning approaches including cultural autobiographies, life histories, diversity workshops, cross-cultural interviews, educational plunges, diversity presentations and panels, reflective analysis journals, and activist assignments at the micro, meso, and macro levels (see Brown, 2004).

The combination, sequence, and/or implementation of such strategies are not relevant in all adult education settings, nor are they stress-free. Because such issues can be volatile and frightening, transformative learning can actually pose threats to psychological security as it challenges comfortably established beliefs and values, including those that may be central to self-concept (Mezirow, 1990). Regardless of the strategies used, professional development needs to be carefully planned over a series of sessions, with adequate opportunities for debriefing, in a structured setting where people adhere to agreed-on guidelines for safety and confidentiality. Aware of the potential for surfacing conflict, professors should remember, “Conflict, if respected, is positively associated with creative breakthroughs under complex, turbulent conditions (Fullan, 1999, p.22).

For this type of work, an integration of social justice and equity issues throughout a range of courses is highly recommended. The trends in educational studies, as well as the social and academic goals of education, should be investigated and viewed from a variety of angles in several different courses so that a deeper understanding may be achieved. Pre-service administrators should be encouraged to ponder big picture, philosophical, legal, and ethical questions. What is the purpose of basic, K-12 schooling? Who is to be served by the educational system? How are the themes of “control” and “cultural domination” played out throughout the history of education in the United States? Are the themes of institutional, cultural, and personal oppression still relevant today? What are the roles and issues facing educational leaders in our schools and in our society? It is important to bridge theory and practice, to make connections between course material and the broader social context, to explain to pre-service administrators how they might take an active part in bringing about social change, and to validate and incorporate with course content adult learners’ personal knowledge and experience. According to Daresh (2002), a leader’s “personal formation,” their integration of personal and professional knowledge, can provide a moral compass for navigating the complex landscape of practice. As such, transformative learning strategies require an active, sustained engagement in the subject matter and an openness of mind and heart.

**Research Design: The Learners**

In this study, qualitative research methods were used to assess the possible effects of transformative learning strategies on pre-service administrator’s personal beliefs and future professional behaviors toward issues of justice in education. The strategies described are just one example of how one professor, the researcher and coordinator of the Master’s in School Administration (MSA) program, constructed three of her courses to promote such an agenda of social action.

Forty graduate students of educational administration (two cohorts of pre-service administrators) participated in this study. (See Table 1 for demographic information.) Both cohorts (23 and 17 respectively, for a total of 40 students, or n=40) were recently enrolled as full-time students in a two-year MSA program. According to Cook and Campbell (1979): “[C]ohorts are useful for experimental purposes because it is often reasonable to assume that a cohort differs only in minor ways from its contiguous cohorts” (p.127). Aside from a slight percentage difference in racial makeup, this was generally true for the participants of this study. A review of data collected from the past five years over ten cohorts indicated that the average MSA cohort at this particular institution consisted of 20 students, of which 60% were White and 40% male. The average student was 32 years old with eight years of teaching experience.

During their first year of full-time study in the MSA program, the 40 participants were enrolled in the required educational leadership course entitled, “The Social Context of Educational Leadership,” a three credit hour course taught by the researcher. This course was specifically designed to challenge students to explore various constructs from numerous, diverse, changing perspectives. Throughout the semester, the students were actively engaged in the eight transformative adult learning activities described herein. Assignments requiring the synthesis of such information included the completion of a weekly reflective analysis

journal (40 students x 10 entries each = 400+ journal entries). The journal was a means for identifying and clarifying thoughts, feelings, beliefs, perspectives, worldviews, challenges, hopes, and aspirations. It was viewed as an introspective tool for personal growth and critical self-reflection in connecting thought, feeling, and action from the inside out and the outside in. As Lukinsky (1991) noted, “Keeping a journal may help adults break habitual modes of thinking and change life direction through reflective withdrawal and re-entry” (p.213).

During the second year of study, the same forty MSA students completed comprehensive, yearlong, full-time structured internships at different school sites. The cohorts met weekly for a corresponding, integrative, reflective seminar, a six credit hour course taught by the same researcher. Conducted in a seminar format at various locations in the field, this course was designed to help adult learners engage in reflective practice and apply internship experiences to current and future challenges of educational leaders. Throughout this experience, the study participants completed a weekly reflective analysis journal (40 students x 20 entries each = 800+ journal entries). Each reflection cycle contained approximately 500 words and followed the five steps outlined by Brown and Irby (1997)—select, describe, analyze, appraise, and transform. Reminded by Pajares (1993), that “the process of accommodating new information and developing beliefs is thus gradual, one of taking initial steps, accepting and rejecting certain ideas, modifying existing beliefs systems, and finally accepting new ideas” (p.45), students were routinely encouraged to engage in a critical examination of their experiences, of the assumptions underlying their experiences, and of their interpretations of those experiences.

The act of journal writing is a rigorous documentary tool that makes invisible thoughts visible (Janesick, 1999). The review of journal entries is an informative, unobtrusive data collection method rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants. As such, data for this study

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Data for Participating Graduate Students**

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White 17 (43%)</li> <li>• Black 20 (50%)</li> <li>• Asian 1 (2%)</li> <li>• Hispanic 0 (0%)</li> <li>• Other 2 (5%)</li> </ul>
<b>Gender</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male 13 (33%)</li> <li>• Female 27 (67%)</li> </ul>
<b>Age</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 26-30 years old 13 (33%)</li> <li>• 31-35 years old 6 (15%)</li> <li>• 36-40 years old 8 (20%)</li> <li>• 41-45 years old 6 (15%)</li> <li>• 46 and older 7 (17%)</li> </ul>
<b>Level of Teaching Experience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elementary 12 (30%)</li> <li>• Middle School 5 (13%)</li> <li>• High School 14 (35%)</li> <li>• Central Office 4 (10%)</li> <li>• Other 5 (12%)</li> </ul>

n=40

were gathered from these journals. Through the lens of transformative learning theory, qualitative content analysis was used to analyze, describe, and interpret the more than twelve hundred entries. What did pre-service administrators learn and how did or didn't they apply this knowledge? Can an openness to issues of diversity be successfully taught and developed in adult learners during the process of preparing for the principalship? What role, if any, did the centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse play in promoting and developing more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understandings of adults' experiences?

Analysis of the data involved repeated readings of all the journal entries. Aside from being a weekly requirement, students were given a lot of leeway regarding actual reflection content. They were simply asked to complete reflective analysis journals throughout the course of their graduate program as a way of charting personal reactions to class and course meetings, readings, discussions, activities and experiences. As a result, structural uniformity of responses was limited. Also, although study participants were encouraged to think contextually and reflect critically, actual responses ranged from short, superficial descriptions of very specific events to deep, highly analyzed scenarios. Of the 1,200 entries in the complete data set, only a very small sample of vignettes are actually included in this study. Reported learner responses specifically relate to the transformative learning activities described herein. They focus primarily on evidence of the impact of these andragogical strategies on adult learners' awareness, acknowledgment, and action. A code (a number indicating the student's age, ethnicity, and gender) appears at the rear of each verbatim journal entry to identify the source.

### Results: The Learning Process

For one to claim that transformational learning has occurred there must be evidence of change. Cranton (1992) argued for three kinds of change—change in assumptions, change in perspective, and change in behavior. Implicit in Cranton's transformational outcomes is a change in self. Boyd (1989) concurred, stating that "the process of perspective transformation results in a fundamental change in one's personality" (p.459). Results from the data analysis indicate that all 40 of the study participants did change in some form or fashion as a result of participating in the adult learning activities. While not all of the students' thinking, values and behaviors were transformed, every participant did find and express value in at least one of the eight strategies. By reflecting critically on their assumptions and beliefs and by completing the andragogical strategies described, many of the adult learners were able to adjust their "meaning schemes" and transform their perspectives. They enhanced their "emotional muscle" and began to appreciate their own agency.

Reminded by Pajares (1992) that "as a global construct, belief does not lend itself easily to empirical investigation" (p.308), the "kind," extent, and longevity of these changes are unknown. However, indications are that most students' awareness and acknowledgement of their beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions increased significantly. Data analysis actually includes over 40 verbatim journal entries from at least 24 of the 40 participants. During a two-year period, students wondered, questioned, and hesitated. They stretched themselves, pushed their boundaries, grew, and developed. Many of the learner responses were emotionally laden. At times, they were amazed, enthralled, awakened, and grateful. At other times, they were afraid, stressed, angry, and guilt-ridden. Some of the students described the strategies used as growth-inducing, perspective-shifting, and life-changing. And, while

certain experiences were meaningful to certain individuals for certain reasons, of the eight adult learning activities employed in this study, the educational plunges, diversity panels, and cross-cultural interviews seemed to have the biggest transformative impact on the majority of the students, perhaps because they were the most difficult.

Due to space limitations, this article reports only journal findings specific to these three strategies. First, the importance of Mezirow's (1990) centrality of experience is reiterated and then examined through students' experiences in educational plunges. Second, the impact of critical reflection is explored through students' exposure to and participation in diversity panels. And third, Mezirow's notion of rational discourse is considered through students' active engagement in cross-cultural interviews. An overview of each concept, a description of each andragogical strategy, and a summary of learner responses follows.

### Centrality of Experience

If the field of educational administration is really serious about preparing leaders capable of being responsive to social justice and equity challenges, then the current models of preparation are not up to the task. Embedded within this section is an instructional approach that moves far beyond knowledge acquisition at the formal cognitive level. Developing leaders for social justice requires a deep-seeded commitment on the part of preparation programs. It also requires a fundamental rethinking of content, delivery, and assessment. Courses must be fashioned and infused with critically reflective curricula and methodologies which stimulate students to think beyond current behavioral and conceptual boundaries in order to study, research, and implement leadership practices that will fundamentally and holistically change schools in ways and in manners which are consistent with an equitable, inclusive vision. By participating in educational plunges, adult learners actively engage in experiential learning.

### Educational Plunges

*Description.* The purpose of this assignment is to provide adult learners with an educational experience of cultures different from their own. Based on their own self-assessment regarding level of experience, comfort, awareness, and knowledge, students decide which activity would be most beneficial to them in terms of furthering their awareness. The goal is for adult learners to select an activity that will challenge them to move beyond their present level of comfort, knowledge, and awareness, and yet not be so uncomfortable or threatening that they are unable to be open to the "minority experience." This direct contact plunge involves a cross-cultural encounter "up close and personal." Students are instructed to visit an educational setting unlike any they've experienced (e.g., private, Catholic, charter, magnet, single-sex schools, religious institutions, training centers, literacy councils, ESL programs, prisons or tutoring services, poor urban or wealthy academies, Head Start to college level, traditional, alternative, vocational or technical, etc.). Criteria for a plunge are: (a) The majority of the people there are from the focal group; (b) Adult learners are on the educational turf of the focal group; (c) A type of experience students have never had before; (d) The plunge takes place after the course begins (no credit for past experience); (e) The plunge lasts at least one hour; (f) The plunge pushes students' "comfort zone;" and (g) Students have face-to-face interaction with people from the focal group. In their follow-up reflection paper, adult learners describe the experience, their reasons for selecting the experience, their assumptions and biases about the focal community members and how they were challenged by this experience (if they were), their emotional response to the plunge (e.g., before,

during and after, such as fear, anxiety, surprise, shock, disturbed, comfort/discomfort, joy, elation), the value of the experience (e.g., lessons, understandings, changes), and the relationship of experience to specific class readings and discussions, including implications for them as educational leaders for social justice and equity.

*Learner Response.* Analysis of the journal entries revealed that most students were hesitant in the beginning and grateful in the end for the experience. While few in number, the following vignettes are representative of the larger sample:

An eye-opening day. I appreciated the assignment because it gave me an opportunity to go someplace I would not have gone otherwise (35WM).

Another adult learner added:

I'm really glad we were assigned this activity. I have always wondered what adult ESL classes look and feel like. This assignment gave me an excuse to go. Wow! I will never be the same as a result. My admiration for people who don't speak English has increased 100%. I will never look at them the same. This experience has given me some firsthand knowledge that I can share with others who are ignorant or prejudiced (38WF).

A third entry following a student's visit to an educational facility for severely handicapped children revealed the following:

Plunge is the right word for this experience. I was so tentative going in. My heart was pounding. After the initial shock, I was actually able to relax and quickly realized that kids are kids and I need to treat each of them with dignity and respect, regardless of race, creed, or disability (32BF).

#### *Critical Reflection*

Reflection is at the heart of transformative learning. The development of critical thinking and open-mindedness requires a critical stance toward established paradigms and an openness to alternative viewpoints. Dewey (1910) noted that "the essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment; and the essence of this suspense is inquiry" (p.74). Reflection, according to Mezirow (1991), is "the process of critically assessing the content, process or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (p.104). According to Cranton (1992), reflection follows a logical progression from awareness and examination of assumptions through examination of sources and consequences of assumptions to questioning the validity of the assumptions themselves (critical reflection). In this section, exposure to diversity panels was the andragogical strategy used for raising consciousness, stimulating transformative learning, and developing future leaders for social justice, equity, and action. By learning how to learn, adult learners improve their ability to identify ontological and epistemological assumptions, to understand multiple perspectives, and to expand their "worldview." Through self-reflection, critical inquiry, and the completion of reflective analysis journals, students begin to question and modify previously taken-for-granted frames of reference.

#### Diversity Panels

*Description.* Together with others in the class who have chosen the same non-monolithic group to study in depth, adult learners conduct the class on a given day. Students are expected to assign and distribute additional readings so that they can present the history of that group's educational experience in the U.S. (including the circumstances that brought or made them inhabitants of the U.S.), and how they were treated. The main objective is to help class members understand how the group has been treated in this country and how the history lives

on and affects the present (e.g., philosophically, economically, politically, socially, and culturally). Adult learners' presentations include: (a) information regarding the values considered representative of the majority of people in that group; (b) a discussion of their schooling experiences; and (c) any other issues that they deem important (e.g., stereotypes, inequitable treatment, successful pedagogical strategies). As part of the class, students also have a one-hour panel presentation from at least three people from that group. Panel members introduce themselves, engage in a sharing of their educational experiences, and participate in an informal question and answer session with all members of the class. Cultural values, lessons taught, schooling experiences and misperceptions experienced are discussed, as well as suggestions in working more effectively with students from all cultures.

*Learner Response.* Findings indicated an increase in awareness and acknowledgment for most students as they reflected on what they heard, learned, and felt during the diversity panels. Representative insights included the following:

I know these presentations are very beneficial to my understanding of becoming "a needed change agent," but they surely cause me a lot of stress! Presenting these groups in isolation gives me a broader perspective on the same injustices going on today that have traveled through history with certain groups (41BF).

To a certain degree, the information that I heard was painful. History is becoming more and more insufferable. My ancestors did this damage to these people. The effect is still being felt today. I have a responsibility to help correct the situation. I need to research, read, dig for information in all aspects of other races to help understand how I will be able to make the greatest impact as an administrator (25WM).

The panel really had an impact on me today. Like Janeka, I too struggle between the Malcolm X and MLK Jr. response. I realized that her poise in handling the racist teacher accomplished a lot more than my knee-jerk anger would have. I must remember this often, especially as an administrator (34BM).

This last response is a good example of how one student tried to synthesize and integrate new insights throughout both his personal and professional spheres. He learned from the panelist, an African American female high school administrator, that redressing social injustices and developing enduring educational practices takes transformation of self and deed.

#### *Rational Discourse*

Rational discourse involves a commitment to extended and repeated conversations that evolve over time into a culture of careful listening and cautious openness to new perspectives, not shared understanding in the sense of consensus, but rather deeper and richer understandings of our own biases as well as where our colleagues are coming from on particular issues and how each of us constructs those issues differently. Educational psychologist Jerome Bruner (1988) suggested that people are able to process complex information much more easily when it comes in narrative form. Given this, participation in extended and repeated discourse about justice and equity can provide unique opportunities for learner growth, transformation and empowerment. According to Shields et al. (2002):

As we struggle to understand how issues of race and ethnicity affect the educational experiences for all students, we must work to overcome our prejudices by listening carefully to those whose backgrounds, perspectives, and understandings differ from our

own. We must examine popular assumptions as well as the politically correct stereotypes that educators often use to explain what is happening in today's multicultural society and its increasingly ethnically heterogeneous schools. Engaging in socially just leadership requires us to maintain an open conversation, to examine and reexamine our perceptions and those of others, constantly looking beneath the surface and seeking alternative explanations and ways of understanding ( p.134).

Rational discourse validates meaning by assessing reasons. It involves weighing the supporting evidence, examining alternative perspectives, and critically assessing assumptions. Discourse is the forum in which "finding one's voice" becomes a prerequisite for full free participation. According to Senge (1990):

The discipline of mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny. It also includes the ability to carry on "learningful" conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others. (p.9)

Establishing a dialogic context, however, is complicated, difficult, and frightening for students and professors alike. Unlike conversation in which genial cooperation prevails, dialogue actually aims at disequilibrium in which "each argument evokes a counterargument that pushes itself beyond the other and pushes the other beyond itself" (Lipman, 1991, p.232). Dialogue focuses more on inquiry and increasing understanding and tends to be more exploratory and questioning than conversation. Acknowledgement is a necessary step in linking awareness to action. Through rational discourse, awareness is validated, refined, and focused, and motives leading to social action are cultivated.

Rational discourse can be stimulated through an array of techniques, including class discussions, "provocative declaratives" (see Vavrus, 2002), critical incidents (see Flanagan, 1954; Tripp, 1993), controversial readings, and/or structured group activities. Believing that no curriculum is neutral, Freire's (1970) pedagogy gives priority to the use of dialogue. The use of questions and a dialogic teaching approach gives the learners more control over their own experience; it allows them to become the teachers of their own experience and culture and to apply those insights to their own leadership practice. Students questioned:

How will I make the changes happen that I know need to occur? (38WF)

Do my ideas represent the school's populations, even those who are not in the majority? (32BF)

Will all the silenced voices be heard? How in the world will I advocate for everyone that needs it? Will I remember and apply what I've learned? Will I be bold enough?" (44BM)

How do I totally erase the guilt and move forward? (25WM).

Questions such as these sprinkled the pages of the students' journals. In moving from increased awareness through experiential learning and critical reflection to increased action through rationale discourse, they reflected on their ability to be change agents.

Action, according to Cranton (1992), is the litmus test of transformative learning; it is evidence of changed perspectives. By increasing their tactical awareness and acknowledgement of what "is" and what "ought to be," adult learners build a confidence and ability to work

for collective change. Analysis of the data revealed an increase in their willingness to engage in and facilitate critical, constructive inquiry regarding issues of social justice and equity. Through rational discourse and the completion of cross-cultural interviews, students were able to realize their own agency and increase their commitment and ability to validate the cultural, intellectual, and emotional identities of people from underrepresented groups.

### Cross-Cultural Interviews

*Description.* This assignment involves a one-on-one encounter with an individual who is different from the adult learner in ethnicity/race. The purpose is to help students develop a greater understanding of alternative worldviews, to increase their comfort in discussing differences and similarities, and to better appreciate the educational experiences of someone from a different background. Adult learners select an individual who is 18 years of age or older, who attended school in the United States, who is different from themselves in ethnicity/race, and someone who will push their comfort zone (sample questions provided by the instructor query interviewees' cultural values, importance of education, experiences of racism, etc.). The face-to-face interviews are conducted in a mutually agreed upon safe, private place. In an effort to build rapport, adult learners are instructed to engage in some self-disclosure so that the interview is not totally one-sided. For example, students might talk about what they have been learning about themselves in class, as well as any new understandings they have gained about oppression and discrimination. In their follow-up reflection paper, students describe the experience, give an overview of the interviewee (e.g., ethnicity/race, family background, cultural values, salient attitudes/beliefs/experiences, racial identity development, schooling details, etc.), and summarize the central issues concerning the interviewee's educational experience.

*Learner Response.* When describing their emotional response to the cross-cultural interview, along with the insights/lessons gained, a number of students described it as:

A tough but quite valuable assignment (25WM).

Others added:

It pushed my boundaries, forced me to go beyond what I'm familiar with, helped me see my blind spots, tested the amount of fortitude that I had within myself, and made me have to stretch myself so thin I thought I was going to have to go into therapy just to debrief (28WF).

Another described the experiential value as:

Loved it and hated it. Loved it because it forced me to recognize my own biases, misconceptions, and ignorance. Hated it for the same reason. Definitely the most memorable (and probably the most valuable) experience this entire semester (30WM).

### **Concluding Discussion: Learner Praxis**

To foster transformational learning and a critical examination of beliefs, educators need to be active facilitators and colearners who go beyond simply meeting the expressed needs of the learner. Through a wide array of roles, methods, and techniques, they need to take on the responsibility for growth by questioning the learner's expectations, beliefs, and actions. As shown here, transformative learning is a process of experiential learning, critical self-reflection, and rational discourse that can be stimulated by people, events, or changes in context which challenge the learner's basic assumptions of the world. Transformative learning leads to a new way of seeing. "Values are not necessarily changed, but are examined—their source is identified, and they are

accepted and justified or revised or possibly rejected” (Cranton, 1992, p.146). This in turn leads to some kind of action. Dunn (1987) suggested that there is an ontological link between personal beliefs and public behaviors—that the true test of connection between personal understandings and individual and/or collective public responsibility is the degree to which any of the talk we engage in about social justice prompts us to a different kind of activism.

Praxis is a Greek word that means moving back and forth in a critical way between reflecting and acting on the world. Because reflection alone does not produce change, Freire (1970) advocated for the necessity of action based on reflection. Learner praxis involves inductive and deductive forms of reasoning. It also involves dialogue as social process with the objective of “dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent both in education and society” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p.383). As stated earlier, a number of scholars have argued that we need educators who enter and remain in education not to carry on business as usual but to work for social change and social justice (Ayers, Hunt & Quinn, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 1998; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Unfortunately, Rapp, Silent X, and Silent Y (2001) found that 90% of educational leaders, both practitioners and professors, remained wedded to what Scott and Hart (1979) call technical drifting—a commitment to emphasize and act upon the technical components of one’s work above the moral. Technical drifters fail to validate the cultural, intellectual, and emotional identities of people from underrepresented groups; they avoid situations where their values (e.g., sexist, racist, class, generational, religious), leadership styles, and professional goals can be challenged and dismantled, and they use their positions of power to formally and informally reaffirm their own professional choices.

Given this disturbing reality, courageous, transformative leadership is needed. According to Mezirow (1990), “Every adult educator has the responsibility for fostering critical self-reflection and helping learners plan to take action” (p.357). Increasing adult learner awareness of how we are all agents of change as educators is a vital part of development. We need to help future leaders set and implement goals in terms of behaviors, boundaries, alternatives, and consequences. In learning about themselves and others, adults in our principal preparation programs need to be invited to think independently, to observe, to experience, to reflect, to learn, and to dialogue. If they have engaged in experiential learning, critical reflection, and rational discourse regarding their underlying assumptions about practice, the next logical step is to integrate these assumptions into an informed theory of practice (i.e., social action). Future research needs to document the “kind,” extent, and longevity of these changes, as well as the barriers and supports needed for sustained action. What does leadership for social justice actually look like, and how can it be fostered (initially, as well as through ongoing development)?

Educational activists need to be attuned to the complexities of changing demographics and must be willing “to engage in and facilitate critical and constructive inquiry” (Sirontnik & Kimball, 1996, p.187). In an effort to develop the risk-taking, political, and human relations skills necessary to do this, leadership preparation must expose future administrators to critical social theory and its influence on the purposes of schooling. This recommendation is consistent with Astin’s (1993) finding that on campuses where faculty stated that a goal of their institution was to promote student social activism, more positive change was seen in student interest and valuing of activism.

In the forward of Capper’s *Educational Administration in a Pluralistic Society*, Sleeter (1993) draws on Giroux’s (1988) description of the type of administrator she would like to see advocating for equality and social justice in schools: “These are transformative intellectuals who are both active, reflective scholars and practitioners,” [who] engage in political interests that are emancipatory in nature” (p. ix). The strategies described herein can help future leaders develop such skills. Reminded by Freire (1998) that: “It is true that education is not the ultimate lever for social transformation, but without it transformation cannot occur” (p.37), leadership preparation has a responsibility to foster an emancipatory ethos by implementing a transformative framework and andragogy. The goal of full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs cannot be attained without it.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Please note that the male pronouns "he" and "his" have been removed from these five assumptions in order to eliminate gender bias in the text.