A Phenomenological Study of Learning Experiences of Leaders Within A Social Movement

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was the prevailing source of new thinking.**

Introduction and Purpose

Urban conditions, characterized by economic disparity and segregation, have prevailed through various political agendas (Katz, 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1996). For significant social change to occur in America's inner cities, the people who live there must decide their future and take an active role in making those changes (Cevero and Wilson, 1994). Emerging as a strategy to combat persistent inner city problems, social movements are being organized and taking action in numerous major urban sites across the United States. One social justice movement extends the boundaries beyond the faith communities to express faith beliefs in civic action. Recruitment among faith-based communities assembles people for the social justice advocacy and embodies opportunities for leadership development.

Social action is essentially an organized use of force or coercion and is only justified when the force is democratic, with meaning derived from intelligence and reason (Horton and Freire, 1990). Confronting policies and practices responsible for the degenerated conditions of inner city life, grass roots components of this social justice movement engage prospective adult learners operating in the midst of multiple learning opportunities.

Lindemann's (1926) perspective of adult education's role in the social context suggests that adult education becomes the most reliable instrument for social actionists. He said, "If they learn how to educate the adherents of their movement, they can continue to utilize the compelling power of a group and still remain within the scope of democratic behavior" (p. 11). However, social movements with components of learning and leadership development are uncommon (Cunningham, 1993; Cunningham and Curry, 1997). Adult educators are infrequent participants in the milieu of social movements, providing educational services, consultation or guidance of the learning and leadership development.

Organized in urban inner city sites, the social movement's action(s) hold the promise of generating substantial social change. Typical membership is comprised of multicultural populations for whom traditional leadership models are inadequate, inappropriate, or irrelevant (Armour, 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Rogers, 1998; White, 1997). This study was engaged to obtain a clearer understanding of the experiences of persons who develop leadership capacity in a social justice movement organized in urban faith-based communities.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

The conceptual framework for this research is the constructivist paradigm with the research methodology grounded in a phenomenological framework to explore the learning experiences of community leaders. With origins in philosophy, sociology and psychology, phenomenology is the study of exercises in the every day world. The search is for the essential or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasizes the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning (Creswell, 1998).

This inquiry was framed with the overarching research question: **What are the learning experiences that contribute to the development of leaders in social justice movements?** The inquiry focused in three areas: 1) history of participant's leadership and organizational relationship 2) participants' leadership experiences within the organization and 3) participants' meaning making of experiences.

Purposive sampling with a snowball strategy yielded eleven participants, obtained from the forty-six congregations representing 60,000 members (Merriam, 1998). Although ten met the recommended standards, the cultural and gender composition of the organization was more thoroughly represented with eleven participants. Included were seven men and four women. Five African Americans, four whites and two Hispanics represented the ethnic diversity.

Data was obtained with three 65 - 90 minute interviews with questions organized in three areas. This methodological approach uses description, interpretation, some self-reflection and critical analysis to explain the meaning of the phenomena and to understand the lived structures of meaning. The narrative of each participant's experiences was analyzed for revelations of uniqueness to obtain personal meaning of the experience before intersubject analysis, and then by analyzing the role of the context in the process. Clusters of meanings and patterns of themes occurring and reoccurring among the participants were transformed into a general description of the experience, the textural description of what was experienced and the structural description of how it was experienced.

Results

Findings from the inquiry are presented in two overarching themes. First is the learning context, crucial to the learning processes. Second, individual leader's experiences are revealed.

The local entity, ACTS (Area Congregations Tackling Systems) is affiliated with a national organization and other coalitions around the country. The tenets of operation are simple, known

and articulated by all members and reinforced as they are practiced. Emphasis was placed on self-interest, emerging from self-awareness accompanied by the conscious acknowledgement of oppressive life experiences. Advocated with dogma-like rigidity is the development of personal power through relationships, developed with one to one conversations. Leadership opportunities are abundant within the organization and leaders are agitated to take action. Participants are encouraged to experiment with leadership, taking risks and relying upon the assurance of backing by other leaders.

The work is active but focused around a well-defined purpose, expressed with clarity. "Acting our way into a new way of thinking" guides the action, dialogue and reflection (Freire, 1970). Conspicuous is the effect of reflectivity, albeit engaged without formal instruction or strategies for practice. For many of the leaders, a critical event, providing substantial transformation and reflective material, is the residential weeklong leadership training program offered by the Gamaliel Foundation for all the affiliates.

Occurring within the framework of actions impacting the environment, in turn, the behavior of the leaders was influenced (Bandura, 1986). Action was paramount. The participants were seeking to transform their communities of residence; while the consequences of their actions contributed to individual transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Illustrating the process:

> *We were down at Bible Baptist Church and the tension in that room as I was facilitating the event with him [Tom Brokaw] and the challenge, here's a man that's in power; and we have our own agenda. He says he's in a hurry to catch a plane.. He wanted to come in and get right out. I turned and looked at Pastor Ellis and I said, 'This is our agenda, not his agenda, so he will wait until we give him time.' That's what happened. But people were surprised; it created some tension. I think he [was] agitated. Because he's a big time celebrity, and here's a little group called ACTS saying no to him. He watched and his agitation went away, and he began to transcend into where we were and took on the role of agitating legislators [and] school board members. When he did his piece a few weeks ago, I think he had learned something. He learned something about ACTS too. And I learned, I grew there because I learned that I can stand up and be myself in spite of, and not be intimidated, because of who you say you are.*

The ACTS leader's transforming learning experience changed his personal perspective while demonstrating the organization's power in action. Apparently the news reporter also benefited.

Revealed in the data is the significance of the community for learning, where the relationship exchanges are the sources of development and growth. Within the context, basic tenets were reinforced and members were permitted the opportunity to act on their beliefs in a consistently demanding, although supportive environment.

> *I think for a lot of folks this is a chance and it's a community where they're important and valued. I think most [excuses for not acting on beliefs] just come down to fear, 'Somebody's not going to like me, somebody's going to get mad at me, I'm going to make a fool of myself.'..... What we're creating a place where*

> *people have a sense of safety, but also have a sense of, 'Well, if I fail, I'm still going to be here and there are people around who are supportive. I'm not all by myself; I'm not odd.' Our goal is to move people into the public arena, not to represent them. It's to get people to act on their own behalf and in concert with each other.*

The individual actions are unified with the organization's mission in a tight weave. Meetings and public actions follow a consistent design, appearing seamless in the delivery. The organization, composed exclusively of faith-based communities, advanced a common value for social justice. The unity in mission energized the individual leaders while strengthening the organization. A tenet of the organization, power relationships, established with one-to-one conversations, focused on the accretion of power.

The power energized the actions that challenged unjust polices and practices in the larger community. Recruiting and permitting affiliation only to faith-based organizations, the climate reflects the nature of those organizations, predictably a place of caring that is trustworthy.

> *Obviously one of my deep understandings about what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a pastor is that I should be walking with people at the edges, just as Jesus did. I should be doing more than just praying for them and petting them on the head. I should be trying to bring about some changes in whatever systems are oppressing them and us. If they're oppressed, then I'm oppressed with them. ACTS gives me the opportunity not only to walk with people but to bring about some change that would be for the good of people at the edges.*

Expressing his faith in solidarity with the oppressed has been lifelong work for this white Lutheran pastor engaged in the civil rights work from the sixties at his first assignment in Selma, Alabama. Like other white leaders, living and working in multicultural inner city environments, the "walk" that will create an integrated society more rapidly than legislation was action.

In the margins, where new ideas are exposed and tested, is where the leadership action learning site was situated in the inner city. The work was problem centered, focusing on issues of concern to the membership. Included were dilemmas impacting education, health, safety, housing, immigration, labor and wages that were crucial for day to day survival of the constituency.

> *What we have seen is, people's lives have changed in terms of becoming homeowners, they've gone to work in the corporate area, in the industrial area, they've become responsible citizens, not that they weren't before. But they've become responsible [participating] citizens and I think they have in many ways become role models for some of the lazy Americans that we've got.*

Illustrating leadership successes and long range benefits, the gentle African American pastor explained the impact of the social justice work. The leader of a congregation with many needs disclosed his motivation for social justice that powered the energy of leadership and the actions of the coalition.

The importance of the faith affiliation to leaders was the common driving factor. A simultaneous merit of ACTS was the characterizing ecumenical and multicultural characteristics of the organization and its developing leaders.

> *Because I think almost any other experience in the church for me is a lie. Unless it's really rooted in genuine community that crosses racial and class boundaries, I don't get the point. I don't know what the church does other than reinforce oppressive elements of the culture. This is very exciting because it's, it's very, very rare to see. That's a real gift and that's why I get so nervous about our need, to really continue this way. It's the most real experience for the church.*

Faith for this pastor, with a lengthy history of labor and activist work, meant actively expressing gospel values. The experience of church was manifested in the authenticity of relationships and work that crossed racial and class boundaries, adding meaning and dimension.

Beliefs about leadership, integrated with the individual's sense of capacity were merged with challenges to assume the power of leadership. Successful leaders did not allow perceptions of leadership, influenced by history and cultural influences or leadership experienced in other arenas to restrict their actions. A leader who whose entry into the United States was undocumented revealed her transformation through active engagement and the benefit of a role model that provided a revised image of herself (Bandura, 1986).

> *Coming to United States, being a female, in the Mexican culture, being a sister, having older brothers, having a father who is very dominant, and realizing that this is something of a struggle. This is something that I want to fight, in order to get where I want to be. Being at the leadership training, everybody was there for the same reason. They were from other congregations, sharing the same issues and I'm thinking, wow, I did not know that these issues were happening everywhere. So this is where I started to come out with how I was feeling with my oppression. And you know, they said, 'Politicize your anger, tell your story and politicize your anger.' I heard Maria Guiterrez tell her story and the moment she was done, I said I want to be just like her. And this is where I overcame that oppression that I've been trying to fight my whole life.*

Becoming empowered to take action, having the opportunity to act on her new beliefs and to reconstruct her self-image has led the young woman to assume power and leadership within the local organization and national, as well as in her local community.

The leadership development was nurtured with mentors and role models, often culture-specific. With the objective of developing greater leadership potential, emerging and seasoned leaders among their peers continuously engage agitation. The leaders relied upon support of other leaders and members within the organization.

> *One that sticks particularly in my mind is the very first time I did anything public. It was regarding youth programming and youth development on the near south side. We had a big public meeting where we had about 400 people there. I was*

extremely nervous and scared and the mayor was there in the front row. I had utilized information from a document that had been published for the city. I used a quote by the mayor and the Public Policy Forum to really agitate the entire crowd. I remember being very nervous before the meeting and Pastor Griffin, the president of ACTS, pulled me aside and he asked me if I was all right. I said, 'You know I'm a little nervous.' He pulled me aside and we did a very quick prayer. [He] reinforced what the organizers had told me and agitated me around; that I had no reason to be scared and if I was doing the right thing, just to go with it. I did, and it was probably you know the biggest the hump I ever had to get over as, as a leader.

Empowerment from a veteran leader, customized to the immediate needs of the Puerto Rican young man propelled his development. As a college student, eager to have responsibility, the opportunity to agitate the crowd expanded his leadership capacity to a greater level than he could have ever imagined possible.

In the process of actions, a relentless and healthy organization has been constructed, valuing and modeling a working multicultural and ecumenical environment. Characterized by actions for social justice, faith values provide the meaning perspective. The learning processes occur within the community of leaders, actively engaged, where there is persistent agitation and reliable encouragement. Success will be cultural transformation, of individuals, congregations and the urban landscape, accomplished with changes in unjust policies and practices.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The urban context represents a site of concentrated need for adult education, especially among multicultural populations, composing a constituency with voices underrepresented or unheard in social policy decision-making processes. Extending the resources that promote adult learning to the wider, often marginalized populations of urban sites holds the promise of renewing social change.

Recommendations for further research and study include: (1) Studies expanding current knowledge of leadership styles that have been developed in the margins and provide functional alternatives for leaders in nontraditional settings; (2) Understanding the role of faith which is frequently the vehicle for those with social, political and economic concerns to influence civil society; and (3) Utilizing the opportunity to learn from the phenomena in organizations like ACTS and the affiliates of the Gamaliel Foundation.

Recommendations arising from the research emphasizing practice include:(1) Strategies for greater application of adult learning theory into practice and avenues of exchange between higher education and community adult learning sites are essential; (2) Identification of and partnerships with community based adult learning sites, in formats that accommodate, not only specific needs of the local population, but also are appropriate mandates for institutions offering adult learning programs; and (3) Development of learning materials, appropriate for leadership learning in the active sites of social movement work, that would facilitate the expansion of the opportunities for leadership development and personal responsibility.

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