

Obama's Educational Policy: Disposition of Authenticity or the Politics of the Emperor's New Clothes

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ABSTRACT: The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States of America resulted in a resurgence of hope for educators, desperately needed to counteract the deleterious effects of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Since the election, hope has dissipated as American educators have observed the contradictions between Obama's rhetoric of hope and authenticity and his policies and actions, including his appointment of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education. The author, an immigrant, who has served as teacher, principal, superintendent, and now university professor, believes in the American Dream and remains hopeful that if President Obama's leadership is informed by courage and authenticity, hope will re-emerge.

RESUME: L'élection de Monsieur Barack Obama en tant que Président des Etats-Unis d'Amérique a réveillé beaucoup d'espoir chez les enseignants qui, désespérément, avaient besoin de neutraliser les effets pernicioeux de la loi fédérale "*Aucun enfant laissé de côté*." Depuis l'élection, l'espoir s'est bien dissipé puisque les enseignants ont remarqué les contradictions dans l'authenticité de la rhétorique de Monsieur Obama, dans sa politique et dans ses actions et, de surcroît, avec la nomination de son Secrétaire à l'Education, Monsieur Arne Duncan. L'auteur, un immigrant qui a exercé successivement en tant qu'instituteur, proviseur, administrateur en chef dans le système scolaire et aujourd'hui professeur d'université, croit dans le Rêve américain et reste optimiste considérant que si l'aptitude à diriger de Monsieur Obama est motivée par le courage et l'authenticité, l'espoir renaîtra.

A cet article, une réponse fait suite ainsi qu'un dernier mot de l'auteur.

Introduction

With the campaign and election of Barack Obama as President of the United States of America, came a sorely-needed resurgence of hope in our country, one we had not seen in decades, perhaps, not since the days of the Kennedys and their Camelot and the idealism of the 1960s. That hope was founded on an expectation that Obama possessed the disposition of authenticity, and that it would result in actions reflective of that disposition.

Like so many fellow Americans, I, too, felt that hope again and in some ways, perhaps, more deeply, as an immigrant whose parents came to the United States to pursue the American Dream. Our parents brought my brother and me to Gary, Indiana, when we were nine and seven, respectively. Our mother and father left their native country, Greece, when they were in their late 30s. It took great courage to leave behind family, friends, and their language to come to a country they had never even visited and with two young children in tow. To add to that hardship, our father was separated from us for three years until the immigration lines re-opened, and we could join him. I am often asked why our parents made that decision. The answer is simple and, to me, obvious; they wanted to pursue the American Dream for themselves and, especially, for my brother and me.

And for me, the American Dream has been all about commitment to education, fueled by passion and always about effecting change in students' lives and making a difference in our society. Since the age of seven, I knew I wanted to teach. Indeed, I have spent my entire professional life in education, first teaching high school English; then serving as a principal and a superintendent; and, now, teaching future principals as a university professor. In the past year the hope that Obama's campaign and election generated has been quickly dissipating for educators (Giroux, 2009; Dionne, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). And it is my own personal history that causes me to feel the disappointment differently, at least, if not more poignantly, as we watch our nation and the American Dream threatened by policy makers who dismiss deep learning in education; exhibit neither vision, nor even common sense; and often engage in the singular pursuit of money and power. Contrary to what policy makers claim, it is not public education that is endangering our nation, but their own foolish and simplistic notions, at best, and greedy, divisive tactics, at worst – in other words, political decisions reflecting the absence of the disposition of authenticity.

One of the areas upon which these policy makers have focused is that of deciding who should teach and who should lead schools. The lack of respect for education (Bracey, 2002; Giroux, 2009; Kozol, 2005a, 2005b) is reflected in their idea that anyone – any businessman, for example – can walk in and teach or be a principal or superintendent. However, only school leadership that understands the complexities of education (Foster, 1986; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Heifetz, 1994; Kanpol & Yeo, 2000; Winchester, 2007) will succeed. Personally, I chose to move through each of the leadership chairs, so that I would have a better understanding of educational leadership. And each step was invaluable in gaining deeper insight, which, in turn, inspired creative ideas, such as: an alternative school founded on the ethic of care and student leadership, a Teacher-on-Special-Assignment initiative to include the voice of teachers in curriculum leadership; an Education Foundation to draw in community and to support teacher creativity and innovation through small grants. Most of my colleagues have similarly chosen to move through each of the leadership positions. How absent common sense that one who has never been in a classroom is now going to lead a school or district or even all schools in the nation – and how indicative of the lack of respect for educators, mentioned above, that seems to permeate our society.

But, in these tumultuous times facing education, policy makers continue to move to dismantle public education, to insist on instantaneous perfection¹ (Batagiannis, 2007), to push for privatization, and to focus on high-stakes testing and narrow standards (Bracey, 2002; Ravitch 2009b, 2010). In the cacophony of policy makers' attacks and these demands for quick, superficial, and misnamed reform, the deeper issue is often missed of who is qualified to work with children in the classroom, to lead a school, or to provide leadership as Secretary of Education or President of the United States of America. And that deeper issue consists of the dispositions which leaders possess or lack.

In examining the dispositions of President Barack Obama, I will focus in this paper on the disposition of authenticity. Integral to this disposition are: honesty and integrity, the valuing of public education, commitment to a democratic community, and policies and practices consistent with authenticity. This disposition seems to be the fount of the powerful hope of those who elected Obama. Its absence, however, is the source of equally strong frustration for some of these same constituents, including the educators who now observe his actions which seem in direct contradiction to his words. If the rhetoric is only that and

nothing more, Obama will be one more typical, albeit, very articulate, politician. If his dispositions are instead authentically reflected in both his words and his political actions, the promise of hope may be fulfilled. However, Obama will have to act differently than what we have observed to this point in his presidency, and time is critical if he is to stem the dismantling of public education.

In this paper, I discuss the importance of dispositions in leadership, all necessarily founded on courage and analyze the disposition of authenticity of President Barack Obama as reflected in his words and his actions. I go on to analyze contradictions to Obama's disposition of authenticity in his words and his policy: deep vs. technical issues in education, education as a private or public good, individualism and politics or community, and the ultimate contradiction: his choice of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. I conclude with "Descent into Cynicism or Re-Igniting of Hope," the necessary future congruence between the disposition of authenticity and leadership actions if President Obama is, in fact, to re-ignite the hope for education and our nation that he promised as a candidate.

Dispositions Defined

Dispositions are not easily defined (Bogen, 2007; Turkmen, 2009; National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education (NCATE, 2006a, 2007), but they are critical to leadership nonetheless. Ritchhart and Perkins (2008) stressed that, "good thinking is not only a matter of skills, but also a matter of dispositions" (p. 58). Sockett (2009) defined dispositions as: "the property of the agent, manifest only in intentional action, and [functioning] as predictions about human actions" (p. 292). Perkins (1995) termed dispositions, "the proclivities that lead us in one direction rather than another within the freedom of action that we have" (p. 275) and even, "the soul of intelligence, without which the understanding and know-how do little good" (p. 278). The Council of Chief State School Officers (1996) emphasized that, "knowledge, dispositions, and performances – belong together" (p. 8). L. Usher, Usher, and Usher (2003) concluded about teachers, and, I contend, this applies to school leaders, as well, "to understand the dynamics of teacher behavior and its effectiveness we must direct our attention to the nature of the practitioner's personal meanings or dispositions" (Teacher Dispositions, para. 1). NCATE (2006b) defined dispositions as: "The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect

student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth" (p. 53).

As critical as these definitions all deem dispositions to be, it would seem that dispositions would not be an issue of debate and contention, but not so. Dispositions in education have been the subject of debate since being formally implemented in the field: Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) in 1992, Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for educational leaders in 1996, and NCATE in 2002. As states began to include dispositions for teacher licensure, objections arose and debates began (Bogen 2007). NCATE backed down from the debates and objections, particularly about social justice and diluted the definition in 2007. The ISLLC Standards for educational leaders, adopted in 1996, initially showed insight in including dispositions in the expectations for school leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). However, in 2008, the dispositions were excluded in the revision of the ISLLC Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). The elimination of dispositions was purported to be the result of simplification, but the focus, both overt and covert, was clearly now on policy, and narrow at that, not the practice of leadership. The omission of the dispositions reflected, in part, the current trend of policy makers to usurp the role of educational leaders almost entirely and to substitute technicians for leaders, assessed only by easily quantifiable standards.

With all this in mind, I contend that the insistence on recognizing the importance of dispositions only if they can be identified precisely and measured in quantitative terms focuses on the intellect alone and contradicts the very essence of dispositions. Dispositions are founded not on Likert scales and other quantitative measures, but on who we are as educators, leaders, and as human beings deep in our hearts. Human beings have minds, intellect to be developed. But they also have hearts – and the emotions and needs that accompany them (Ringe, 1950; Noddings, 1984) which ultimately create the foundation for the intellect and deep learning. I move next to the definition of the disposition of authenticity, including the implications of inauthenticity. These concepts will be the focus of the remainder of the paper.

Disposition of Authenticity Defined

Underlying all leadership, including that of President Obama, courage is requisite, which I have discussed in earlier work (Batagiannis, 2007). Without courage, one can manage, but one cannot lead at any level. The

disposition of authenticity and courage are also inextricably linked as courage is the very foundation of each of the dispositions.

The origin of authenticity is the Greek, *authentikos*, meaning *genuine* (*Compact Oxford English*, n.d.). The disposition of authenticity is defined by Vannini (2006) as the, "properties of genuineness, realness. ... pragmatic, social, psychological experience of feeling *true to one's self*" (p. 236). He concluded that this sense of self and actions are intertwined, "we should believe that the meanings that an individual has associated with his/her sense of self will significantly shape his or her action, and the meanings associated with action will shape the sense of self" (p. 237). Nixon (2004) defined authenticity as, "[the] public face of truthfulness and respect" (p. 250). Obama (2008), himself, speaks in his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, of how we crave authenticity, "we long for that most elusive quality in our leaders – the quality of authenticity, of being who you say you are, of possessing a truthfulness that goes beyond words" (pp. 79-80).

Authenticity requires honesty about issues, rather than hiding behind unsubstantiated claims, dishonest use of language, blame, and politics, which, unfortunately, has become today's norm. Our world has evolved into a global society and economy. All entities, including education, need to evolve, as well. Sagor (2005) reminded us that perfection has not been attained at any time in history and is not likely to be reached by schools today (p. 2). However, perfection and instantaneous perfection, at that, while not possible, are nonetheless being demanded. The graduation rate is a perfect example of such inauthenticity in the demands of policy makers (High school graduation rates in Washington, 2005). In the Industrial Age, society expected and demanded a different goal when it came to the high school graduation rate. At that time, society wanted a work-force to man the factories; policy makers and business, therefore, did not want all children to pursue post-secondary education. Now, the expectation has changed as those jobs have disappeared – some because those industries no longer exist and some because business found it more profitable to take the jobs overseas. With the changes accompanying globalization, policy makers now demand instant, perfect results and a one hundred percent graduation rate. They label anything less a failure of schools.

"No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), too, has heaped blame (Kozol, 2005a; Ohanian, 1999) and demands for instantaneous perfection on educators and is yet another example of inauthenticity. The title of the legislation is a powerful euphemism, but the substance of the legislation

stands in dark contrast. Kozol has strong criticism of NCLB for its attacks on educators, "[NCLB] is basically driven by the concept that teachers have an inherently perverse attraction to mediocrity, that we entered this career because we just love mediocrity, and only if we're scared out of our wits will we aspire to excellence" (p. 33). Even Dianne Ravitch, currently a research professor in education, after initially supporting NCLB and serving as Assistant Secretary of Education under the first Bush administration in the 1990s, has now rendered a harsh, yet candid critique of NCLB (Ravitch, 2009, 2010; Merrow, 2009). She stated,

We know from the National Assessment of Educational Progress that actual improvement has been less in these past seven years than in the years preceding the passage of NCLB. In the meantime, schools have become test-obsessed in a way that is not conducive to good education. (para. 2)

The only point I would disagree with Ravitch on is that *schools* are "test-obsessed." It is policy makers who are so obsessed and threaten schools with their very existence if they resist or fail to comply. Reflective of the disposition of authenticity, Ravitch (2009) also pointed out that NCLB demonstrated no substantive results, but only a "rhetorical benefit" related to narrowing the achievement gap. In her best-selling book, Ravitch (2010) talked about her surprising change of heart about NCLB and explained her objection to seeing public education replaced by "something market-based" (p. 13).

As for President Obama on educational matters, he has contradicted himself time and again, suggesting inauthenticity. In the next section I will address Obama's authenticity or inauthenticity reflected in policy contradictions, specifically as related to the following topics: deep vs. technical issues in education, education as a private or public good, individualism and politics or community, and the ultimate contradiction in his policy – his choice of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Obama's Dispositions and Policy:

Articulated Authenticity vs. Contradictory Action

Obama (2008), in defining authenticity, discussed in the previous section, spoke candidly of the risk of inauthenticity among politicians, "there is a constant danger ... that a politician may lose his moral bearings and find himself entirely steered by the winds of public opinion" (p. 79). In contrast, he cites the example of Senator Paul Simon describing his authenticity in the eyes of the people, "that he lived out

his values: that he was honest, and that he stood up for what he believed in, and perhaps most of all that he cared about them [his constituency]" (p. 80). And this authenticity, defined and analyzed by President Obama himself, is the very disposition that we continue to hope to see in him.

But the disposition of authenticity in the political scene requires a broader vision and a different culture than does the market mentality currently touted to be the answer to all issues – and seemingly supported by President Obama – at least in education. That market lens is entirely different from one of authenticity and is founded on contrasting dispositions. For example, the person who purports to be an educator, but whose only view concerning students is that of customer and business provider, can offer surface learning, but not authentic school reform. The changes this individual suggests will be narrow, at best, because his or her priorities are not founded on the powerful disposition of authenticity and what is morally necessary or educationally sound, but only on profit.

The lack of authenticity of policy makers immersed in the market mentality is affecting schools today. School leaders are now expected to listen to the last best solution of the policy-maker who wields the most political power. While policy makers profess to be research-based in educational decisions, too often that has come to mean applying that label when it is politically expedient to do so. Leaders are to accept these opinions, absent authenticity, as fact, even research, and dutifully reject their own knowledge about children and learning gained over years of study and experience. This distasteful and disrespectful blend of inauthenticity and politics is quite reminiscent of the fairy tale we read as children, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In that tale, people claimed to see the emperor parading down the street in his new finery, even as they watched him marching along in his underwear. The only ones who spoke the truth were the little children:

"What handsome new clothes the emperor has! How beautifully they fit him!" Nobody would admit they saw nothing, because they were afraid to appear stupid. "But he hasn't got anything on!" cried a child. ... And the emperor walked on still more majestically, and his aides walked behind and carried his imaginary train, which didn't exist at all. (King, 1996, p. 15)

To reiterate, many policy makers lack the courage to be authentic and to lead by speaking the truth. In addition, they expect school leaders to be equally inauthentic by *seeing* – like the emperor's subjects – only what the policy makers define as *reform* or risk reprisals or the

withdrawal of funding. For example, Indiana is preparing to retain third graders if they are not reading at grade level. This decision is contrary to the research on retention and contrary to recent similar retention experiences, including those in Chicago and in New York (Goldberg, 2005). Yet policy makers are moving forward without thought or wisdom and expecting educators to be inauthentic by developing and implementing a plan they know is not educationally or morally sound. The *Race to the Top* is another clear example of the latter. Last week a capable and reflective future principal whispered in my office her concern about just this issue and wondered out loud, though in hushed tones, if her superintendent believed what he was forced to verbalize in order for his district to be considered for additional monies. Goodlad (2007) relates a similar experience with several principals,

They feel guilty in trying to defend the policies and practices they are called upon to support. ... They are torn between coming out into public discourse regarding their concerns on these difficult questions and supporting the district's need to comply with federal law. The dilemma keeps them awake at night. (p. 57)

And that is every educator's struggle today. Should he or she voice a position about learning and students based on education and experience, or should he or she instead remain silent, and thus, appear to agree with what the educator actually opposes in order to pursue the financial carrot. Our nation, founded on the right to free speech, has withdrawn that very right from educators responsible for educating the next generation of citizens. Not only are the voices of educators thus being silenced, but so will be those of future citizens – today's children.

Giroux (2009) candidly challenged President Obama's authenticity by comparing Obama's actions related to education with those committed to the market and seeking to undermine public education:

Regarding the purpose and meaning of education, Obama's views do not differ significantly from those of many conservatives who have attempted for the last thirty years to undermine public and higher education with market-driven rationalities. Obama consistently argues that the relevance of education lies primarily in creating a trained workforce that will enable the United States to compete in a competitive global economy. (p. 257)

Giroux (2009) then identified a list of issues Obama supports, reflecting an anti-public schools disposition:

Obama's support for vouchers, charter schools, merit pay for teachers, the use of financial incentives to reward students, privatization, limiting the bargaining power of teacher unions, and

high-stakes testing schemes appears incompatible with his postpartisan view of education. (p. 259)

Disappointingly, too, when President Obama visited a school in America's capital, he chose a charter school. Again, the message appears clear as to his dispositions related to public education and in contradiction to his words. Authenticity is not reflected in his actions, and words are not enough.

As for the narrow content insisted upon by policy makers, how did policy makers decide that students, and society generally, need an education that is comprised of narrow bits of information, reflective of the old Back to Basics movement? The latter raised questions of merit even in the Industrial Age; it is even more incongruous in the Information Age. This narrow, myopic view of education does not begin to reflect the breadth and depth of learning offered by the Information Age, which more than ever needs teachers who embody both the science and the art of teaching. Globalization, a term on the lips of every policy-maker, will not be served best by scripted teaching and unrelated pieces of information substituted for a cohesive curriculum founded on higher-order thinking skills. Interestingly and appropriately, Zhao (2009) wonders at the oddity of educational decisions being made in the United States, which are contrary to what other countries, such as China, have observed in our educational system in the past and are now emulating, "but most vexing is why Americans, who hold individual rights and liberty in the highest regard, would allow the government to dictate what their children should learn, when they should learn it, and how they are evaluated?" (p. vii).

For years there has been an effort to privatize education, the last "billion-dollar industry," (Bracey, 2002) and now the proponents of privatization seem to have President Obama's support as reflected in his policy decisions. Obama has continued the dismantling of public education at an unexpected level that continues and exceeds the efforts of Bush in the previous eight years (Ravitch, 2009b) – because Obama has now thrown money at his plan. By doing so, while states are withdrawing financial support of public education, he is silencing the voices of educators as they are forced to seek "Race to the Top" funding. In other words, educators are forced to pursue money in return for being silent and/or even being part of the dismantling of public education, the move to privatization, and all that these two moves portend. With the dissolution of public education, as stated earlier, will come the further widening of the achievement gap and the further reduction of our

country to the "haves" and the "have nots," the "American apartheid," of which Kozol (2005a, 2005b) speaks. And those of us who elected Obama believe he should know better.

Public schools at the P-12 level and now higher education continue to be under attack. Merrow (2009) interviewed Ravitch, who quoted Mike Petrilli of the Fordham Institute, a conservative fortress: "If you found No Child Left Behind prescriptive, just wait till you take a look at this baby [Race to the Top]" ("He's using the money," para. 1). Even a year ago, some of my graduate students, as we read Bracey's (2002) *The War Against America's Public Schools*, argued naively that there was no political agenda against the public schools. This year, the same students are silent as they look on at the fast-moving, impending dismantling of public education.

Education seems always to have been the scapegoat in America. Berliner and Biddle (1995) speak of their "outrage" once they became aware of "powerful people ... pursuing a political agenda designed to weaken the nation's public schools. ... [and] prepared to tell lies, suppress evidence, scapegoat educators, and sow endless confusion. We consider this conduct particularly despicable" (p. xii). Bracey (2002) also points out the blame that has consistently been heaped on schools for our society's problems, "each time the United States faces a social crisis of some kind, the schools gets blamed for it. They took the hit for letting the Russians get into space first. They were faulted for not integrating the nation ethnically" (p. 44). And now the schools are being blamed for the economic meltdown our nation has experienced. Contrary to what policy makers purport, educators are not responsible for the economic issues and woes of our nation today. The policy makers are, in fact, the ones who made those economic decisions.

Certainly, the global economy has allowed them to make such decisions. However, policy makers have the responsibility to protect our nation's economy. Instead, their policy decisions have been advantageous in growing the wealth of a few and their own power. Yet it is baffling how these same policy makers then blame educators for the economy they themselves created. For example, by blaming educators entirely, they have removed themselves from any role of responsibility in addressing poverty, but poverty has been identified by the research as a strong predictor of failure in children's learning. While educators should never use this as an excuse for inaction, neither should policy-makers. It is policy makers' responsibility to address the plight of children in poverty, who live in drug-infested, violent neighborhoods,

parents unable or unwilling to take care of their children during non-school hours, abuse in the homes, inadequate food or health care – even as educators focus on helping all children to learn. Policy makers have allowed steadily increasing legal immigration (Nowak, n.d.) and rampant illegal immigration. Thus, schools have been overwhelmed with large numbers of children without language skills, but with little or no support, only blame, when these children do not achieve on tests at the same level as native English speakers.

There are deep-seated issues with the changing ideology of our nation over which schools have no control and which policy makers choose to ignore. Bracey (2002) pointed out this ideology:

The United States is the most economically stratified nation in the Western developed world. A 1994 study found that the top 1 percent of American families controlled 43 percent of the wealth, compared to 18 percent in Great Britain, the next most stratified country. That study also found that the salary ratio of the top 10 percent of workers in most countries was somewhere between 2:1 and 3:1.

In the United States, it was 6:1. (p. 42)

What possible educational change can erase the effects of this economic ideology and the concomitant culture it nurtures? And while policy-makers pound their podiums demanding educational change that will improve job options in the future, they ignore the fact that the majority of jobs are becoming low-paying service jobs (Bracey 2002, 2006). Bracey (2002) pointed out the illogical connection demanded by policy makers of student performance in schools with a nation's economic state, citing, for example, the fact that Japanese students performed well on tests, while the Japanese economy declined (pp. 8-9).

In an earlier work, I defined courageous leadership as comprised of wisdom, passion, and hope (Batagiannis, 2007). But today, school leadership has been weakened, even as educators struggle to maintain it. The capacity exists for teachers, principals, and superintendents to lead substantive change in education, using their experience, research, and, most importantly, the dispositions of authenticity and care about children and learning. But that is not being allowed to happen. It is a challenge to remain hopeful in the face of state and national attacks on public education with *Race to the Top* and, for example, *Fast Forward* [Indiana's response]. Sadly, the excitement of bright graduate students studying to be future leaders is being smothered and replaced by trepidation, fueled by the negative effects of policy makers' attacks on teachers and public schools. It is, indeed, heartbreaking to listen to their

words about the loss of teaching creativity that has already been perpetrated on teachers and leaders and their honest consideration of leaving the field. It is disheartening to see aspiring leaders reduced to managers in the short span of time since the passage of NCLB. And so, we run the risk that many of the most effective current and future leaders will be pushed out, leaving only the technical managers, who quip, "Just tell me what to do." The latter are the ones the policy makers are courting.

Myopic policy makers and those who do not demonstrate an authentic care for children or learning are ignoring their own inauthenticity. To use Obama's (2008) words, "and sometimes our ideological predispositions are just so fixed that we have trouble seeing the obvious" (p. 72). The widespread insistence that we follow the business model and subscribe to the claim that the market will solve all ills raises the question: How are those demands reconciled with the economic catastrophe we are experiencing, resulting from those very same business models?

As discussed earlier, policy makers have increasingly chosen to ignore the dispositions of teaching and leadership. They reject dispositions because they are not easily quantified or reduced to simplistic assessment and technical terms – and because they do not reflect the market mentality espoused by policy makers. However, Darling-Hammond (2009), flirting with hope once again, touched on the essence of dispositions and related the disposition of authenticity to Obama and his potential, "I believe Obama's administration has the opportunity to transform our nation's schools. The reasons have as much to do with the president himself as with his plans, as comprehensive and strategic as those might be" (p. 210). But the accuracy of her hopeful conclusion is dependent on the disposition of authenticity, the level of courage, and if Obama has both. As discussed earlier, what he professes – if not reflected in his actions – is mere rhetoric. The rhetoric of the presidential campaign still echoes in the wings, but action is now necessary. Thus, while Obama has the intelligence to wordsmith and to speak eloquently, he must have the courage to act authentically on his own words. Continuing to raise doubts, however, are his actions and those of his staff, specifically those of Arne Duncan, which will be discussed in a later section. Once again, these actions are in direct opposition to Obama's promises and his expressed dispositions, including authenticity, that Americans believed were reflected in those promises.

Educational Policy: Deep vs. Technical Learning

Kanpol (1994) warned that teachers should focus on *educating*, not *schooling* their children. Yet, particularly in the past decade, technical schooling is what is increasingly demanded of schools. Now, teachers are evaluated not on whether they are good teachers, as any reasonable person might define the term, but rather on how obediently they follow the schooling curriculum. Giroux (2009) summarized the seeming narrowness of Obama's views on this subject:

Obama's largely instrumental view of education appears to overlook the legacy of the nation's most prominent educational leaders and philosophers, including Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, John Dewey, W.E.B. Dubois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Jane Addams, who valued education as a preeminent force for preparing young people to be socially responsible, critically engaged citizens in a democratic society. (p. 258)

This instrumental view reflected in policy is in contradiction to Obama's (2008) articulated claims, which actually acknowledged deep, complex issues and railed against the simplistic and the technical, "after all, the problems ... are not simply technical problems in search of the perfect ten-point plan" (p. 254).

Accompanying the reduction of education to the simplistic and the technical, educators, too, are unappreciated; they are insulted and demeaned at every turn by policy makers. Reflecting this attitude and, at best, the technical, a governor dubbed pedagogy as "mumbo jumbo" as he pushed hard for his political agenda diminishing or eliminating the requirements of pedagogy and licensing for educators, reducing learning to teach to just passing a test, and eliminating the stable funding of public education ("Stormy times ahead," 2009). It is such hard-nosed politics that should lead one to ask: Have we lost the democracy of which we were so proud? Should a politician be able to dismiss entire bodies of knowledge and learning, for example, the pedagogy of teaching and learning, by virtue of the power of a political office? Giroux, too, reminds the Obama administration that, "[it] must understand ... that the crisis in education is not only an economic problem ... but also a political and ethical crisis about the very nature of citizenship and democracy" (2009, p. 262).

As discussed earlier, Obama has dashed educators' hopes of changing NCLB and its deleterious effects on learning with his response of *Race to the Top* linked to money desperately needed by public schools to survive. Obama's current actions belie very different dispositions from

those his rhetoric led us to expect. Perhaps, in part, this is a reflection of his desire to break the stronghold of partisanship. However, he can only be successful to a degree. He cannot eliminate the ideology behind certain partisan positions. Compromise is sometimes a good thing, but not when it requires that one sell one's soul. And there rests the dialectic of compromise/reducing partisanship and the absence of courage and authenticity in leadership. Obama (2008) seems to have forgotten once again his own words, "to distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised," (p. 51). Giroux (2009) pointed this out, as well,

The issue that Obama seems to miss in his concern with educational reform is that all educational ideals are not the same. Some ideals are well worth fighting for, and others should be rejected because they are at odds with any viable definition of schools as crucial democratic public spheres. (p. 256)

Giroux (2009) focused on the heart of the problem and the apparent absence of the disposition of authenticity reflected in Obama's actions,

[There is] a serious disconnect between Obama's emphasis on education for public service and social responsibility and the neoliberal policies at the heart of the reform efforts he supports. This disconnect has distressing implications for how education policy will play out – or perhaps sell out – during his administration (Educating for what?). (para. 9)

Obama's book (2008) and his rhetoric indicated a disposition for change, for collaboration and a respect for the voices of all, and for closing the achievement gap. What then is at the root of these multiple contradictions and Obama's failure to act? Has his effort to appear bipartisan caused him to remain on the fence and to miss leadership opportunities? Dispositions and lack of authenticity are not the reasons – if one believes what he told us – however, at least the absence of courage seems to be. A prominent, retired university educator, who although she campaigned hard for him, recently described him as lacking courage.

Dionne (2010) encouraged Obama to discuss his beliefs to avoid confusing voters in his effort to be bipartisan and attempted to address the "contradictions of Obamaism," pointing out he is "avoiding arguments over philosophy and ideology" (para. 7), contrary to his own words:

A second, more intimate theme to this book – namely, how I, or anybody in public office, can avoid the pitfalls of fame ... and thereby retain that kernel of truth, that singular voice within each of us that reminds us of our deepest commitments (p. 15). ... It is

the language of values that people use to map their world. It is what can inspire them to take action, and move them beyond their isolation. (p. 64)

But authenticity both of beliefs and actions is necessary and sadly seems lacking in President Obama. His own words again confirmed the importance of authenticity, "after all, talk is cheap, like any value, empathy must be acted upon" (p. 83). How then does he ignore the effects of policies that lead, for example, to the even more onerous scripting of teaching and leading, which, in turn, contributes to the deskilling of teachers and school leaders (Karpol, 1994, 2002) to the detriment of children, especially children in poverty, who are most adversely affected?

Educational Policy: Private or Public Good

Education is not a private good, but a public one (Bracey, 2002; Giroux, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). The dispositions reflecting the desire to move away from any interest in community and the public good are motivated by individual, selfish interests. Bracey (2002) criticized the privatization of education and the focus on jobs which supports privatization, "given all this emphasis on jobs, it is not surprising that many people have stopped viewing education as a public good. ... and have started viewing it simply as another market to be exploited (p. 15). Obama (2008), himself, strongly denounced privatization:

But over the long term, doing nothing probably means an America very different from the one most of us grew up in. It will mean a nation even more stratified economically and socially than it currently is: one in which an increasingly prosperous knowledge class, living in exclusive enclaves, will be able to purchase whatever they want on the marketplace – private schools, private health care, private security, and private jets – while a growing number of their fellow citizens are consigned to low-paying service jobs, vulnerable to dislocation, pressed to work longer hours, dependent on an underfunded, overburdened, and underperforming public sector for their health care, their retirement, and their children's educations. (pp. 175-176)

Policy makers have supported charter schools as what appears to be an interim step before total privatization of education. While they cannot fund one set of public schools, they have created a second one, which they also choose to call *public schools*. When pressed for evaluation of their programs, the charter school managers often decry their problems, which sound no different than the challenges experienced by public

schools (Bracey, 2002; Ravitch, 2009). Merrow (2009) reported Ravitch's comments on the direction of Washington reform, including charters, specifically:

To me, the problem here is obvious: What if Washington doesn't know best? What if the "reform" ideas are wrong? As I said before, the CREDO study at Stanford – which looked at performance in half the nation's charters – found that 80% or more of charter schools are no better than or worse than their neighborhood public school. Why replace struggling public schools with worse charter schools? There is a ton of evidence that evaluating teachers based solely on student test scores is a bad idea. (He's using the money, para. 2)

Clearly, policy makers have been wrong in the blame they have heaped on schools in order to avoid their own responsibility. Authenticity would require them to admit that schools and educators are not the ones who are responsible for the multitude of social problems of poverty, violence, drugs, and so forth, for which schools are blamed. Educators are, in fact, the ones who have always taken on every social problem because it affects our kids. Good teachers and leaders have gone into education in the past, not because it was a job, but rather a mission, a way to improve the lives of children and society. Instead of appreciation in this nation for their dedication and hard work, they are criticized and demeaned for not fixing all the ills that are not about education, but social ills for which policy makers refuse to take responsibility. Policy makers should be reminded of the subjects that have become the responsibility of schools over the years, in addition to learning: drug education because policy makers could not eradicate it from the community; feeding children because policy makers could not resolve the growing issues of poverty; violence, not because it began in the schools, but because policy-makers could not address violence and the poverty that fed it in the community; sex education because parents were not addressing it in the home; health issues, medical services, and counseling services because children needed them, and there were no community provisions. And the list goes on.

And of the market, Obama (2008) said, "there is the absolutism of the free market, an ideology of no taxes, no regulations, no safety net" (p. 46). Giroux (2009) points to the contradictions, "the puzzling disparity between Obama's call for curbing the excesses of free-market fundamentalism in the realm of economics, while at the same time supporting the use of market-driven protocols to structure his

educational policies, needs to be brought to light and challenged if a more democratic political culture has hope of taking root in the United States" (Educating for what? para. 9). So one cannot help but ask: Where is this Obama now who is permitting Duncan to march the nation in the direction of privatizing education – and the very America of which Obama's words warned us?

Policy: Individualism and Politics or Community

Privatization is strongly linked to overly-exuberant individualism and the neglect of our national community. Being authentic about education requires understanding the purpose of education, including its relationship to democracy and community, acting on those beliefs, and resisting the conflicting and often inauthentic battles of individualism over education. Long before the era in which we now live, Goodlad (1979) in *What Schools Are For* concluded that as a result of individualism, "the democratic community is at risk. ... we sacrificed social capital to financial capital, making the latter more and more the goal of heightened individualism" (p. x). He then criticized policy-makers, even at that point in our history, for focusing on individualism and no longer democracy and, thus, thwarting the role of schools:

And the rhetoric of federal and state educational policy and reform massage and assuage this rampant individualism, making it even more difficult for local schools to serve the democratic purposes for which they were and, presumably, still are intended (p. x).

Obama (2008) in speaking of values also addressed the disposition of commitment to community, "all of which raises the question: What are the core values that we, as Americans, hold in common?" (p. 63). And he identified "our communal values, our sense of mutual responsibility and social solidarity" (p. 77). Finally, he acknowledged that there is a dialectic between individualism and community, "in every society (and in every individual), these twin strands – the individualistic and the communal, autonomy and solidarity – are in tension" (p. 67). And Obama continued, identifying the necessary balancing of the two,

Our individualism has always been bound by a set of communal values, the glue upon which every healthy society depends. . . . And we value the constellation of behaviors that express our mutual regard for one another: honesty, fairness, humility, kindness, courtesy, and compassion. (p. 67)

And quickly, he even pointed out the pitfalls of forgetting this fact that we are a society and a community and allowing individualism to prevail,

At times our values collide because in the hands of men each one is subject to distortion and excess. Self-reliance and independence can transform into selfishness and license, ambition into greed and a frantic desire to succeed at any cost. (p. 69)

Obama also pointed out the loss of community that can result from power, an extension of individualism, particularly in the political scene: "I was reminded of the dangerous isolation that power can bring, and appreciated the Founders' wisdom in designing a system to keep power in check" (2008, p. 56). And he pointed out the selfish interest imbedded in the seeking of power, "I'm reminded that the actions of those in power have enormous consequences – a price that they themselves almost never have to pay" (p. 59). And Obama criticized Congress, "in the world's greatest deliberative body, no one is listening" (p. 19). Yet he, himself, is not listening to educators.

Policy makers have dismissed educators and their concerns, claiming we are afraid of change. That is not so. I cite my own experience as one example of the inauthenticity of policy makers in addressing change in education. The prevailing agenda in the 1990s for every political candidate was to become the educational congressman, governor, or president. School improvement became the new "buzz word." Yet when, as a new superintendent passionate about school improvement, I asked a candidate for State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1992, what resources would be available, I was told, "None." When I called the Indiana Department of Education in 1991 with a plan for English-as-a-Second-Language students, the person responsible for the program applauded my ideas. When I naively asked about resources as a new superintendent in a district already strapped for money, I was told there were none. Yet, now, educators are attacked by policy makers, who scurry to claim credit, as though educators have had no vision and made no such attempts to effect change. Since policy-makers are enthralled with international comparisons, they should examine the respect with which educators and education are treated in Finland and Japan, for instance.

And of politics, generally, Obama concluded, "politics today is a business and not a mission" (p. 31). And yet he is allowing education to be reduced to a business, as well, and educators to be degraded and, ultimately, chased away – educators who indeed entered the field as a mission – to use Obama's own words. Thus, as discussed throughout this paper, Obama (2008) has expressed the dispositions that resulted in his

election, including deep authenticity, and acknowledged the value of dispositions:

At the core of the American experience are a set of ideals that continue to stir our collective conscience; a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences; a running thread of hope that makes our improbable experiment in democracy work. (p. 11)

But his actions remain contradictory and, therefore, seem to be inauthentic.

Ultimate Contradiction in Policy:

Obama's Choice of Secretary of Education – Arne Duncan

When Obama considered Linda Darling-Hammond for the position of Secretary of Education, hope surged among educators. She is an educator and a respected educational reformer. The tide seemed to have turned indeed; the voice of educators was actually to be included. As Obama considered whom to select as Secretary of Education, some warned him not to pick one who would support the "status quo," "weaker" reform, or "superficial" reform (Kohn, 2008). But those so warning Obama quite simply did not want an educator appointed. The self-proclaimed reformers were those who supported the privatization of education. Is it any wonder that both Rod Paige and Margaret Spellings applauded Duncan's selection as Secretary of Education? Margaret Spellings pronounced herself "thrilled" with the selection, while Rod Paige called Duncan "a budding hero in the education business" (Kohn, 2008). Chester Finn, long-time critic of public education, also applauded Duncan. After all, they, too, share some of, what I term, deficient dispositions when it comes to education, and which were characteristic of the last two Secretaries of Education and are now exhibited by Duncan, as well.

And so, hope began to evaporate with the appointment of Arne Duncan. Doubts were founded on his dispositions and his history, and the introduction of Race to the Top confirmed these doubts. In analyzing the authenticity of any leader, honesty in their leadership actions is expected. Former Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, claimed that, as the Superintendent of the Houston Schools, he had led his district to improved achievement, yet that did not prove to be the case when the claims were questioned. The Texas Education Agency audited Houston records and concluded:

Some 3,000 of 5,500 students who left school in the 2000-2001 school year, or 54 percent, should have been reported as dropouts, but were not. That year, the 212,000-student Houston system reported a dropout rate of 1.5 percent. ... that contributed, along with climbing test scores, to the city's reputation as a showcase for the "Texas miracle" in education. (Schemo, 2003, para. 6-7)

Now, Duncan is in that same national leadership position. Diane Ravitch (2009) asked,

If Arne Duncan knows exactly how to reform American education, why didn't he reform Chicago's schools? A report came out a couple of weeks ago from the Civic Committee of Chicago ("Still Left Behind") saying that Chicago's much-touted score gains in the past several years were phony, that they were generated after the state lowered the passing mark on the state tests, that the purported gains did not show up on the federal tests, and that Chicago's high schools are still failing. ... Chicago continues to be one of the lowest performing cities in the nation on the NAEP. (Tell me more, para. 1)

So we have been led in the past and are currently being led by individuals who did not achieve what they have demanded of schools. It also seems, not only was the purported achievement absent under their leadership, but so was honesty. Furthermore, how can policy makers demand what they found impossible? The answer, it seems, lies in the problematic emphasis of current public policy on, "the three horsemen of the new apocalypse – management, money, and marketing" (Eyre, as cited in Nixon, 2004) – and the resulting inauthenticity among policy makers.

As for Arne Duncan – what does he bring to the table that makes him omniscient? Power does not equal wisdom, after all. And on what basis does he dismiss all educators as incompetent? Trite as this challenge may sound, it truly might help if Duncan and other non-educators who wish to lead would enter the classroom as teachers, not critics from afar. That would provide an opportunity for them to model their demands and to be evaluated on that basis.

Duncan is not an educator; he has never taught. What are his educational qualifications? A mayor appointed him, and then a president. That makes him a politician. He had no preparation or experience as an educator when he was appointed to lead the Chicago Public Schools. Our current times reflect one of the worst eras for the inauthentic use and abuse of language in an effort to harness the power of words. Thus, although he has only political appointments, Duncan is

suddenly also touted to be an educational reformer by some of his supporters. One must examine the reasons for that definition, who so defines him, and their own dispositions.

Duncan does not support public education as evidenced consistently by his words and actions. He is, in fact, an avid supporter of privatization, and his definition of reform is narrow, superficial, and reflective of his personal agenda. As one example of his philosophical stance, Giroux (2009) points to Duncan's organization of a symposium, "Free to Choose, Free to Succeed: The New Market in Public Education." The guests consisted of business representatives, proponents of privatization, and conservative think tanks; there were no educators invited (para. 6). Duncan talks about the arts, but then does not support schools in anything but the technocrat's language of "laser-like focus on academics," which leaves no time for the arts. He speaks of closing the achievement gap, yet fails to reconcile the contradictions when urban schools have been reduced to scripted teaching. Years ago when I was teaching English as a new teacher in a school, I reviewed the curriculum for non-college-bound students and was horrified that we were allowing students to graduate with more of the *basics* deemed important, but without reading one work of drama. We quickly corrected that error, but today a narrow curriculum, defined by such as Duncan, is not only becoming universal, but is designated not as an error, but as *reform*. Yet Obama (2008) criticized the straying away from the disposition of authenticity by misusing language, "we know how high-flying words can be deployed in the service of cynical aims, and how the noblest sentiments can be subverted in the name of power, expedience, greed, or intolerance" (p. 12).

Duncan exemplifies these words. He verbalizes what seems to indicate appropriate leadership dispositions and appears politically correct, as, for example, in talking about teachers and altruism, but, he quickly reverts to comments, and without qualification, about how "bad" schools are – painting all schools with a broad brush. In analyzing a video presentation of Duncan (2009) in which he addressed the topic of recruiting teachers, my graduate students pointed out that he identified multiple potential sources for teacher candidates, but made no mention of one: current teachers, indicating once again his lack of respect for them.

Having the power to close and re-open schools and to implement a militaristic model, as he did in Chicago, does not make Duncan a reformer. And it is no surprise that Duncan cannot focus on authentic,

deep reform. After all, he lacks the experience, study of education, and resulting understanding of children, learning, and education to do more than tinker with reform. Since he has the power to make changes, but lacks the necessary understanding, any change has equal merit in his eyes as he adopts one quick fix after the other. Duncan lacks the *wisdom* of courageous leadership. Instead he is proud of the fact that he is doing "stuff," but there is nothing remarkable in implementing superficial ideas, some in direct contradiction to the very research he claims to espouse. In fact, it is dangerous to education and to our American society.

In contrast, Darling-Hammond (2009) commented on Obama's presumed disposition of authenticity and vision, "I was pleasantly surprised by his appetite for comprehensiveness rather than a quick-fix approach bound to be partial and inadequate" (p. 211). Yet Duncan personifies the contradiction to those very words in his race for instantaneous perfection. Giroux and Saltman (2008) criticized Duncan – and Obama for appointing him:

Not only because Duncan largely defines schools within a market-based and penal model of pedagogy, but also because he does not have the slightest understanding of schools as something other than adjuncts of the corporation at best or the prison at worse [*sic*]. (para. 2)

And Ravitch, too, (2009b) pointedly criticized Obama for appointing Duncan:

However, based on what I have seen to date, I conclude that Obama has given President George W. Bush a third term in education policy and that Arne Duncan is the male version of Margaret Spellings. ... We all know that Secretary Spellings greeted Duncan's appointment with glee. (para. 3)

Thus, Duncan's dispositions show beneath the "hem" of his political attire. One must wonder if President Obama, too, will continue, contrary to his own dispositions, to support the last best, superficial magic bullet disguised as reform, the more-of-the-same, thoughtless action. President Obama now must determine if hope or cynicism will be the hallmark of his leadership in education discussed in the concluding section.

Conclusion:

Which Road Will President Obama Choose – Descent into Cynicism or Re-Igniting of Hope?

In conclusion, we now stand as a nation and a citizenry in the fork in the road, reminiscent of Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*. We can take "the one less traveled," the road of authenticity, which reflects honesty, the truthfulness of the children in the fairy tale who didn't hesitate to say the emperor was not wearing any clothes. This road will re-ignite hope in our nation. The other choice is the easier, more frequently traveled road of inauthenticity; it represents the descent into cynicism and is symbolized by the non-existent clothes that all were expected to see in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. It is the one currently traveled by so many policy makers, but paid for by citizens.

The road of inauthenticity will lead us to more of the same: increasing privatization; growing commitment to individualism; worshiping of the market, continuing to allow obscene amounts of wealth to be amassed by a few at the expense of the American society; identifying and discarding those unable to maneuver and survive the market; emphasizing technical schooling over education and increasingly controlled by policy makers; deskilling teachers and educational leaders; increasing punitive measures in order to control citizens. At the end of this road of inauthenticity, our democracy is at serious risk of failing.

If President Obama leads us down the road of authenticity, that road will be one of a democratic community in which we value and respect each other as human beings; education will be valued and supported as a public good, offering opportunity to every student; education, not schooling, will be the emphasis; educators will be respected for their work, not blamed for social ills beyond their control; educators and policy makers will work together to meet today's new challenges, focusing on the overarching goal of teaching children to love learning, to problem solve, to think deeply and critically, and to be good citizens. At the end of that road, though it will not be an easy one, our democracy, founded on public education, will remain strong.

This manuscript indeed has contrasted President Obama's professed authenticity with the contradictions in his actions and policies. He, himself (Obama, 2008), summarized these challenges as he reflected on authenticity and politics, the pressure of inauthenticity, and the reality of those in politics who have ultimately succumbed to inauthenticity.

While, he cannot lead without courage and authenticity, it is time that President Obama also remember that he did not say "I," but "We," when he spoke of change. He should reflect on his original invitation to the nation when he challenged us to work with him to effect change. Indeed, we do not expect him to do this alone. We accepted the invitation and stand ready to work with him. Together, Yes, *We Can* travel the road of authenticity.

I remain hopeful that the American Dream my parents pursued and deeply valued will remain part of our nation's present and future, as well as its history. I supported the election of President Obama and believe that his leadership founded on his authenticity and courage can indeed re-ignite hope in our nation and re-commit the nation to the American Dream founded on public education.

NOTE

1. Instantaneous perfection is a term I ignited in education to reflect the demands of our society for quick and perfect solutions that translate into simplistic searches for magic bullets.

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