The Hope of "Yes, We Can": A Road for Courageous, Authentic Leaders

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Dialogue With the Reviewers: The American Dream and the Market Mentality

I appreciate the positive comments of Sriraman, Øystein, and Kristiansen on my article: *Obama's Educational Policy: Disposition of Authenticity or the Politics of The Emperor's New Clothes.* I view this as an opportunity for dialogue with representatives of other nations as we all struggle with some of the same issues. On one level, the reviewers' comments are about United States policy and politics related to education, President Obama, and the American Dream. However, although "*Yes we can,*" were the words of hope of President Obama, hope is universal to all nations.

Sriraman, an immigrant, has lived the American Dream as I have, and so he discusses the article from the lens of the immigrant. He reflects on his two decades in the United States in both higher education and as a public school math teacher. Unlike Sriraman, while I argue that public schools stand in contrast to the market mentality, I disagree with his designation of public schools as *socialism.* Quite the opposite, public schools are a reflection of and the foundation for the American democracy – or a democracy in any nation for that matter. Education as a public good supports democracy and, therefore, must be available to all.

The two graduate students from Norway, Øystein and Kristiansen, support the issues that I raised in my article: the demeaning of education and educators, the market mentality with self-serving interests, the demand for privatization and profit, and the absence of courage and the dispositions necessary for educators and leaders. I do, however, disagree with the first paragraph of Øystein and Kristiansen in which my words are either not quoted or misquoted, most likely inadvertently, as a result of language, but important enough to mention here. For example, it is policy makers who believe that "any businessman ... can walk in and teach or be a principal or

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superintendent." I disagree vehemently. What I believe is that *not* everyone has the dispositions to teach and to lead schools.

Øystein and Kristiansen use the article as a springboard to analyze the market mentality of their own nation epitomized in TeachFirst Norway, which parallels Teach for America and Teach First United Kingdom.[1] There is merit in their ideas concerning TeachFirst Norway. They point to the commonalities in the three nations' unwise educational policy. This exemplifies a universal bandwagon, if you will, that is corrupting learning in a number of countries and is motivated and exacerbated by globalization and its financial turmoil and fear, the speed made possible by technology, and the lack of wisdom of policy-makers in addressing these issues.

Øystein and Kristiansen criticize TeachFirst Norway with its link to privatization and profit and the resulting enticement of candidates who wish to work for the most popular business in Norway, Statoil. Teach for America (TFA), established 20 years ago, has the disposition of elitism attached to it, as well. As Labaree points out, "TFA is a marvel at marketing, offering elite college students a win-win option," one with, "an aura of status and selectivity." These programs do not reflect respect for the profession of teaching, but rather the opposite. They consist of a mere two-year stint, not a long-term commitment, and use as a recruiting strategy that these programs will have a positive impact on the graduates' future career goals. How does that show respect for teaching if it is to be only a transient profession? These "teachers" are little more than long-term substitutes, ultimately focused on what is lucrative, or at least of personal, professional benefit to themselves, that is, reflective of the market mentality. Yet they are treated by policy makers with greater respect than educators whose dispositions of helping children and making a difference in our democratic society lead them to commit a lifetime to the teaching profession.

Thus, Teach for America – and TeachFirst Norway – fail the authenticity test on multiple levels. They are not about attracting the strongest teacher candidates to the teaching profession, but rather about enticing individuals who do not view teaching as a respectable and permanent career. As Labaree (2010) concludes, "TFA's shortcut to teaching discounts the enormous complexity of teaching as a professional role" (p. 52). As for the claim of filling the need of urban schools for qualified teachers, that, too, is inauthentic. It fills those positions with inexperienced teachers – first and second year teachers

– who lack pedagogical training other than a meager, five-week summer training.

Øystein and Kristiansen's examples of TeachFirst Norway and its counterparts reflect the impetus for inauthenticity among policy makers which the latter falsely define as "reform."

Silent Voices and Deafening Inaction

If wisdom prevails in school reform, policy makers will not continue to silence the voices of educators, and, in turn, educators will take action and lead. With the inception of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), came the total silencing of teacher voices. Not only were they not included at all in the drafting of this legislation, but educators have faced attacks if they dared to critique NCLB. Darling-Hammond (2000) points out that reform instead, "will require the involvement of the higher education community, educators in the K-12 community, and policy makers to invent new models of schools that are focused on learning and that support teaching and higher level learning" (A system for another time, para 4).

Including the voices of educators will maintain the focus and valuing of the American Dream. I still believe that it is a unique gift offered by our nation and so refuse to accept its demise. As an immigrant, I am thankful to the United States and to my parents for giving me the gift of the American Dream through education. On my desk is the anonymous quotation reflective of that appreciation, "*La reconnaissance est la memoire du coeur*" ("Gratitude is the memory of the heart"). Yet, my concerns about what policy makers are inflicting on public education go beyond just the perspective of immigrants to include all educators and the entire citizenry. It is imperative that courage and the disposition of authenticity related to education become universal among all American citizens.

Beginning with educators, perhaps we are allowing ourselves to be hegemonized by the institutions in which we work and by policy makers, leading us to efface our own authenticity. In other words, we are actually living the very inauthenticity against which we chafe, silently granting permission to policy makers to act in ways that are deleterious to children, learning, and our nation. Being part of any organization forces compromise in the name of cooperation, something we have heard uttered by President Obama, as well. However, being hegemonized causes us to pretend to see the "*Emperor's New Clothes*" (King, 1996) in

whatever guise they exist in our own organizations. We do what is politically correct, but inauthentic; safe, but not courageous; reflecting hegemony, or worse, cowardice.

So, while critiquing policy makers, we must pause and examine our own actions. We have to ask how authentic are we in our actions and in our beliefs as educators? As teachers, principals, and superintendents are we authentic? As academics do we entirely live up to authenticity? Are we allowing ourselves to be primarily bureaucrats and politicians in all of these roles? For example, as superintendents we give in at times to board members and pressure groups, and we compromise with politicians. In my first year as a school superintendent, when our Congressman announced in a public meeting, "*We know our schools are failing, now what are we going to do about it?*" I did the politically correct thing and challenged him privately, rather than publicly. Perhaps I would have had more of an effect on the community if I had done so publicly. So I examine my own authenticity in that situation and others.

Now, in conversations with principals or in my students' interviews of principals, we listen to many who claim NCLB has not changed their schools even as they admit that the demands for perfection[2] are impossible and even ludicrous. By giving up their authenticity with such contradictory statements, they are being politically correct, avoiding media criticism, and protecting their positions. Some of my students ask why educators, specifically, are silently accepting the dismantling of public education. One reason is that, sadly, many still refuse to acknowledge that this is a political agenda, and that it is happening. Many indeed ask why we remain silent, wondering who will speak for children and learning if educators are silent? Strauss (2010) reported the story of a school superintendent in Georgia who recently returned the *Race to the Top* money ($1.3 million). In so doing, Bill Mathews did speak and take action. More need to follow his lead.

Next, I discuss hope, viewing it differently than does Sriraman.

Hope Reflective of Courage and Authenticity

Those of us who believed President Obama's message of hope saw it not as Sriraman, who speaks of "removing the rose-colored glasses." While looking at action and not just one's words is important, hope must not be discounted. It is critical and integral to vision, not only that articulated by Obama, but that hoped for by all citizens. Hope cannot be

dismissed as unrealistic – it is what transforms vision into reality. Thus, hope is substantive. Sergiovanni accurately concludes that, "hope is grounded in reality, not wishful thinking" (2005, p. 78). And in an earlier work (Batagiannis, 2007), I defined hope as one of the critical components of courage.

In my article being reviewed here, I reference the Kennedys and the idealism of the 1960s. That idealism and its underlying dispositions: authenticity, commitment to human rights, and a belief in our shared destiny as a nation, also serve as the foundation of hope. The 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's 1961 *Inaugural Address* is a reminder of hope, courage, and authenticity. In his speech he defined hope as powerful, referring to the "revolution of hope." In his speech, President Kennedy spoke, too, of authenticity, reminding us that, "sincerity is always subject to proof." That is the very thing we expect of President Obama and policy makers, and what we should expect of ourselves as educators and of all citizens.

I find Sriraman's metaphor of the sheep ranch intriguing. He compares those with a market mentality to wolves and concludes that any Montana rancher knows what will happen if they are permitted to run the schools, which he compares to sheep ranches. While the analogy of the wolves is easy to see, I go further and wonder what that says of educators if they are described as sheep. On a positive note, perhaps they are perceived as gentle. More significant is the negative connotation, however, that educators are silent, docile, harmless even, and waiting to be led. I contend that instead educators need to demonstrate the courage to speak, to act – that is, to lead.

The Road "Less Traveled"

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.[3]
Robert Frost

In conclusion, if we are to be authentic and pursue the road "less traveled," with all its struggles, but also with its rewards, we all must have the courage, not only to challenge others, but also ourselves. As

West (2008) stated, "it takes courage to interrogate yourself" (p. 9). So to continue my original article, we expect President Obama to be authentic and to lead us on that road. However, we must not only ask why President Obama takes the actions he does, but also why we do – or do not. Critical to our individual and collective authenticity is the development not only of the intellect, but of the heart, to care enough to nurture the dispositions that support authenticity.

Darling-Hammond (2010) reminds our nation, too, of the value of education and how high the stakes are in the survival of both, as she comments on our road or "path:"

> If the political will and educational conditions for strengthening teaching are substantially absent, I do not believe it is an overstatement to say we will see in our lifetimes the modem-day equivalent of the fall of Rome. I argue here that colleges of teacher education have a major responsibility for which path the nation travels – and that getting our act together – finally, seriously, and collectively – is essential to the nation's future. (p. 35)

President Kennedy's (1961) often-quoted words in his *Inaugural Address*, "*Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,*" remind all Americans of their responsibility. And his words, "*Let us begin,*" demand action. There is no room for silent by-standers or the "sheep" in Sriraman's metaphor. Unless we have the courage to nurture the dispositions to support our democracy and to be individually and mutually authentic, education and, therefore, our democracy and nation are at great risk. As stated earlier, we should expect nothing less from President Obama. This brings us back to President Obama's words, "*Yes, we can*" – with the caveat that we require not only of him, but of ourselves as educators and citizens courage and the disposition of authenticity.

NOTES

1. TeachFirst Norway, Teach for America, and Teach First United Kingdom were created to entice candidates from other disciplines to a two-year commitment to the teaching profession as a way to progress in their own careers. Specific training in pedagogy is limited generally to five or six weeks.
2. NCLB mandates that one hundred percent of students will achieve proficiency in reading and math by 2014.
3. Stanza from a poem by Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken.*

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