Making all children winners: confronting social justice issues to redeem America’s soul

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Abstract

Purpose – “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound with mine, then come, let’s work together”. These words of Lill Watson, an indigenous activist, frame the context for this article. The purpose of this research was to examine the historical evolution of “grassroots movement leadership” model and its incarnation in the present time. A corollary purpose focused on how this model can transform urban schools by focusing on “movement” efforts of one large urban school district that espouses the values of this form of leadership. As part of a larger reform effort, the district engaged students, parents, teachers, school leaders and communities in becoming equal partners in urban school reform in an effort to co-create schools and communities that might lead all of us toward liberation and learning.

Design/methodology/approach – Theory and practice come together through the lens of three researchers who operate from a similar philosophical stance for educational transformation, best described in the words of grassrooots leader Ella Baker, who said, “We are the people we have been waiting for”. Qualitative research procedures (i.e. interviews, field notes and observations) were used to generate data on a “movement model” for grassroots leadership. This model is best demonstrated in various youth-oriented initiatives (i.e. Student Exhibits, Action-Research Projects, Algebra Project) within a local urban school district. This model, influenced by Civil Rights legend Robert Moses, has implications for educational leadership and urban school reform and simultaneously grounds our scholarship and research in liberation epistemology.

Findings – It is argued that children are often the victims of ideas, structures, and actions that come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained, and working for their own good, when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves those interest. The words of Ella Baker epitomize the authors’ struggles to steer away from models of hierarchal leadership in education and stay connected to the practice of excavating community wisdom through the “Movement Model”.

Originality/value – This study bears a substantive argument for community leadership efforts that focus on “grassroots leadership”. It further fosters new insights and propositions for future research in the form of a “Movement Leadership Model”.

Keywords Leadership, United States of America, Social justice, Students

Paper type Research paper
When the work is done
The task accomplished
The people will say
“We have done this ourselves?” (Lao Tsu, 700 BC).

Many ancient cultures, even before the time of Lao Tsu, may have operated within the context of his wisdom about leadership. However, the model most evocative of this wisdom that we’ve been lucky enough to witness is found in the African American community, a leadership model crystallized in the Southern Freedom Movement (Harding, 1997). The grassroots leadership piece of that movement was defined as radical by Ella Baker, mentor and advisor to many in the Movement (Ransby, 2003). Taught by Baker to young people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), this “radical” grassroots model is one honed by Bob Moses, who, the noted historian Cornel West said, “is the towering activist/intellectual of his generation — a grassroots freedom fighter of quiet dignity and incredible determination” (Moses and Cobb, 2001).

Robert Moses, Civil Rights legend, MacArthur Genius Fellow, Eminent Scholar at the Center for Urban Education and Innovation at Florida International University, has brought the Movement model into the educational arena. He founded an organization, the Algebra Project (AP), which uses the experiences, strategies, and wisdom learned during his Civil Rights work in Mississippi to organize disenfranchised communities to demand quality education as a civil right.

Thus, we cannot think, talk, or write about leadership and social justice without referring to the Movement Model and Robert Moses — and not just because of the men and women or the honors bestowed them, but primarily because of the profoundly different model of leadership that they offer in these dark days of war, national and international bullies, betrayers of human rights, and degraders of our small planet, earth. Through observing Moses and other Movement leaders, we’ve come to think about “leadership for learning” as both an ancient and new way of being in the world that resists hierarchal relationships, that is rooted in the collective experience, and that seems to suggest that all leadership should be connected to the practice of excavating community wisdom. This paradigm is so alien to the hierarchal models that most of us were raised, educated, and now operate within that it seems to sometimes escape our full grasp. We know it when we see it demonstrated by Moses and others, but when we try to emulate it, like sticky paper, we sometimes can get caught in old leadership paradigms. Therefore, attempts to explain it may be doomed to oversimplification and misinterpretation and may risk distorting the complexities of it. We know, however, that it is a model that all educators should dig into. In some inexplicable, intuitive sense, we believe that it offers “a way out of no way” (Young, 1996) for dysfunctional schools and educational systems. For that reason, we want to alert educational leaders and scholars across the continents that are not familiar with this grassroots organizing model to run as fast as they can to discover it.

The purpose of this research was to examine the historical evolution of this “grassroots movement leadership” model and its incarnation in the present time. A corollary purpose was to demonstrate how this model can transform urban schools by focusing on “movement” efforts of one large urban school district whose recent efforts espouse the values of this form of leadership. As part of a larger reform effort, the district engaged students, parents, teachers, school leaders and communities in a student exhibit/performance initiative as part of a strategy to engender pride and
motivation for low-performing schools. As a strategy for future learning, a second initiative in the form of youth-action research was a multi-institutional partnership, led by Robert Moses, as a vehicle for social change. By engaging these stakeholders in becoming equal partners in urban school reform efforts we can co-create schools and communities that might lead all of us toward liberation and learning.

**Historical context**

Vincent Harding, a Southern Freedom Movement historian and participant, suggests that “the story of the African-American struggle for freedom, democracy, and transformation is a great, continuing human classic whose liberating lessons are available to all those who are committed to work and sacrifice for the creation of a better country, a more hopeful world” (Harding, 1997). A number of books have been written detailing the stories of this visionary but tough model of leadership that helped shape American history in the twentieth century (Branch, 1988, 2006; Carson and Garrow, 1991; Forman, 1985; Grant, 1988; Harding, 1997; Henry and Curry, 2000; Hogan, 2007; Moses and Cobb, 2001; Payne, 1995; Ransby, 2003). Anyone interested in experiencing the process, the effectiveness, the historical and present value of it must hunker down and read these books; then, must find and follow the people who continue to live this process. For the model is not a manifesto or a dogma that can be regimented and rigidly adhered to, but seems more an organic process, that, like life, demands diversity and an openness to the wisdom manifested in the small and the intimate in life. A poem discovered a long time ago often comes to mind as we watch Moses lead:

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To look at any thing,
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say
“I have seen spring in these
Woods”; will not do – you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences
Between
The leaves,
You must take your time
and touch the very peace
They issue from (from “The Living Seed” by John Moffitt, 1961).
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The intention, the “small silences”, the patience is palpable whenever one sits in any space where the Movement Leadership Model operates, whether it be in circles of children, parents, teachers, professors, community leaders, or donors. The implications for education of this particular practice are huge. In other cultures, in other countries, and especially in indigenous cultures around the globe, the Movement leadership model may not be such an anomaly. Certainly, leaders like Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, Cesar Chavez, etc., engaged in similar practices. But in the fast-paced, over-stimulated, over-caffeinated, efficiency-driven American leadership culture, this way of being in a room is daunting. It creates a space where the least powerful, the most often silenced, can speak and be listened to. It seems to “take [its] time and touch the very peace they issue from”.

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Taking that time and waiting to touch that peace is powerful poetry but sometimes painful practice because many of us hail from a vastly different model, one of “sit down, be quiet, and let’s hurry and make this happen”. We’ve often been either victims or perpetrators of leading from the top while using rhetoric that suggests democratic process; it’s a rather peculiar American schizophrenic conundrum. Most institutions in America, a country that espouses democratic, collective practice, are actually administered and led within a context of a “chain of command” that capitalizes on competition and individualism, ignoring the “folks at the bottom” (Wynne, 1999). Therefore, when sitting in a room with people who might look tattered and torn and sound noisy and inchoate, we can become quite uncomfortable with the silence needed to wait for their words to emerge, for their ideas to be formed, for simple responses to shape themselves into group-imagined, owned, and driven directives toward action. Building trust in a community of people quite different from those typically seen in the halls of academe is labor-intensive, long-term, and full of back-and-forth failure and success, a very inefficient path. It is counter to the US culture’s passion for the cost-effective mode of operation. Such a careful model offered by the Movement, though, creates a container for courage to unfold in a room, where the concerns, knowledge, gifts of the people who have been shoved to the bottom of the societal rung can spring forth. The People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee in New Orleans created a poster that reads “Nothing about Us, without Us, is For Us”. That insight seems to us to succinctly go to the core of one of the key principles of the Movement model of “grassroots leadership”. The people with the least amount of power must be central to the decision-making process that impacts their everyday personal and political lives, but especially their educational lives. If we do, indeed, honor that philosophy when we think of ourselves as “leaders of learning communities”, can we legitimately continue to work in isolation to conceptualize, design, and determine the educational curriculum and course of other people’s children (Delpit, 1995)? And do we dare allow legislators, district administrators, school principals, university presidents, deans, textbook publishers, corporate test makers to unilaterally make decisions about one of the most important journeys a human takes? A biographer of Ella Baker suggests that her “radical approach of situational democracy meant [she] had to constantly assess and reassess the power dynamics in any given situation and then tilt the leadership scales in the direction of the least powerful” (Ransby, 2003, p. 368). This is the disciplined practice that seems to consistently emerge and shake the walls of leviathan educational structures wherever Moses brings his Movement principles. This way of being with people carries tremendous promise for educators who want to “tilt the scales” in favor of a just and equitable educational system. Yet again, it is not an efficient model. It takes more time, more listening, than many leaders are willing to give.

**Compelling components of the Movement Model of leadership**

Many educational leaders in the USA want the nation’s best for marginalized families. Some of us have spent decades advocating for significant reform that would create schools of excellence for our society’s neglected children. And, yet, what we have not grasped is the wisdom that sets the Movement | Model apart from all of the rest of reform, the knowledge of the absolute necessity for disenfranchised communities to
demand for themselves a quality education. During at least the last four decades, advocacy has been impotent because it disregarded this essential component. Without children and their families at the center of school change – at the decision-making, policy-making tables of influence – meaningful and sustainable school reform will always be an elusive dream.

In addition, a huge barrier to that dream of change is the societal myth that families of color who are forced to live in poverty do not value education, a myth that AP dispels at every turn. We believe that advocates for change must shatter this myth through a total surrender to the collective wisdom that emerges from actively listening to and working alongside students and parents who have been ignored and blamed for the “sharecropper” education that is delivered by this nation.

As we have researched the history of the Movement Model of leadership and witnessed its practice through the work of Bob Moses and the Algebra Project in schools in Mississippi and Miami, we see the following as its most compelling and crucial components (Moses and Cobb, 2001, pp. 15-22):

• The disenfranchised are brought together in small circles to discuss, understand, and demand what people say they don’t want – a quality education.
• Students and parents who are “at the bottom” of the educational system are urged to make demands on themselves first, then on the system.
• Educational reform advocates learn how to engage in community organizing, understanding that it is a process, not an event. The process includes a continuous series of meetings inside and outside schools with the people in the local community whose children are being deprived of a quality education.
• Families are made central to the educational process, assisted in devising their own means to changing the system.
• Educators value and understand the collective experience and wisdom of the community.
• Educators believe that young people have the energy, the courage, the hope to design the strategies to change their schools.
• Educators believe that reform requires young people to take the lead in changing the system, instead of just having their needs advocated by well-meaning radical reformers.
• The effort is for the “whole”, not just a chosen few.
• “You [the educational reformers] are working with and against various structures. You’re in them, but you’re working against them at various levels” (p. 17).

Review of literature
From other educational research, we’ve learned that large urban districts teach a disproportionate number of American children of color and those from low-income backgrounds. According to the Council of the Great City Schools (2002), 64 percent of America’s urban districts, those districts that are members of the Council of the Great City Schools, compose less than 1 percent of all districts but enroll 15 percent of the nation’s public school children and about 32 percent of the nation’s English-language learners. Nearly 70 percent of the students in these districts are African-American or
Hispanic, and 62 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Most of these districts are in crisis, as indicated by the graduation rates that consistently paint a bleak picture for these large urban school districts. Too often fewer than 50 percent of ninth graders graduate from high school four years later (Balfantz and Legters, 2001; Swanson and Chaplin, 2003). In assessing public education, academic underachievement is most pronounced and prevalent in urban school systems where underserved students have been trapped for generations.

The ills that plague underserved populations of students are not totally the responsibility of public schools, but are the responsibility of the whole society. Yet, the public schools have a major role in addressing the problems. The educational experiences and the support services afforded to what the literature refers to as “marginalized” students (Goldberger, 2006; Jensen, 2004; Meier, 2002) could play a major role in helping to reverse dismal school attendance and high rates of suspension and expulsion, failing academic performance, the alarming drop out rate and students’ subsequent journey from a life of promise to a life at risk. Traditional school structures often inadvertently foster low performance. The use and organization of time, the deployment of human resources, the organization of a school building, existing rules and regulations, district feeder patterns, administrative alignments, the politics of governance, and poor constituent relations consistently inhibit efforts to transform urban schools (Fullan, 2006; Noguera, 2004).

**Urban schools: engendering pride and motivation**
Reforming urban schools continues to be one of the most significant challenges facing education in the USA today (Noguera, 2005). These schools are often associated with low test scores, high dropout rates, high teacher turnover, low expectations and a host of environmental factors that schools have little control over, such as poverty, poor social services, and political disenfranchisement (Kozol, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). For instance, the dropout rate exceeds 50 percent for low-income Black and Latina/o students in the USA (Orfield et al., 2004; Swanson, 2004). In schools where faculty, students, and communities expect failure and where educational and societal neglect permeate, often little energy and few resources are expended to find ways to engender pride and motivate those who are marginalized and disenfranchised toward successful work (Pagan and Dutton-Stepick, 2006). Consequently, attempts to engender pride in the face of formidable social and cultural obstacles often get thwarted due to layers of administration that provide questionable learning opportunities and experiences – opportunities that are tepid at best, and seldom involve the communities in which the students live and learn. Dropout research shows that historically large urban high schools often function as dropout producing factories, poorly able to engage the most vulnerable students and provide an adequate opportunity to learn (Fry, 2003). Despite these challenges, educators concerned with social justice must continue to chip away at the ills of historical neglect and find ways to forge “pockets of hope” within these communities (De los Reyes and Gozemba, 2001) and find ways to include the voices of those most affected – the students and communities.

**Youth-action initiatives**
Engaging Black, Latino and other underserved young people in action research initiatives in school is a small but growing movement across the USA (Brown and
Rodríguez, 2007). While scholarly work has included student voices, an onslaught of research, initiatives, and creative pedagogies has pushed not only for the inclusion for students’ voices in research, but actively creating opportunities to engage young people in the research process itself (Cook-Sather and Youens, 2007; Nygreen et al., 2006; Nygreen et al., 2006; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2001; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Thiessen, 2006). This approach is often referred to as participatory action research (PAR) and its use with young people has been given considerable attention over the last five to ten years. According to Minkler (2000, p. 192), PAR work is “systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change”. Such research suggests that engaging young people in the process not only provides unique perspectives that are often overlooked, particularly among historically marginalized students of color in the USA, but also challenges fundamental principles of power, knowledge and consciousness that exists in scholarly research and practical work with young people.

Some research suggests that the voices and experiences of students themselves can and should inform the work of researchers, reformers, and policy-makers, particularly when making critical reform and policy decisions affecting urban education (Howard, 2002; Lee, 1999; Noguera, 2004). According to Levinson and Holland (1996) youth action-research initiatives can be used to transform the dynamic from voice to agency by repositioning students as “subjects” rather than “objects” of the school reform and educative process. That is, such initiatives can provide opportunities for students to become the “expert” on their own experiences whereby they create their own knowledge, develop their own theories that explain their experiences and disseminate their knowledge to various stakeholders, all for the purposes of devising solutions to the challenges facing their schools and communities (Freire, 1970). One of the ideologies that these initiatives challenge is the deficit-perspective that often pervades the psyche of educators and the institutions that serve historically underserved communities. These initiatives seek to create the “funds of knowledge” with the people themselves – knowledge that is created by and with the students, school and community (Moll et al., 1992).

**Deficit-oriented perspectives**

The reasons why low-income students of color have been excluded from the reform process is expansive. Most education research and reform processes have subtracted the experiences of students by either ignoring their perspectives all together or assume that students from particularly low-income racial minority communities do not have a voice worthy of hearing (Flores et al., 1991). Deficit-oriented perspectives typically characterize communities of color as deficient because of their cultural beliefs, parenting styles, language practices, and value systems (Valencia and Solorzano, 1997). Such deficit views typically clash with the white middle class norms and values of schools and society and therefore are used as the standard by which practices and policies are carried out (Solorzano and Yosso, 2001). Deficit-oriented perspectives emerge when institutions subtract the knowledge, experiences and expertise that communities of color bring (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and often assume that schools are places that impart knowledge upon its students – a knowledge base that can only be extracted from teachers and textbooks.
Research method
Based on the methodology of standard ethnography, our research design was two-pronged. Following qualitative research procedures (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1998), first, we conducted a semi-structured interview with Robert Moses, jotted field notes at informal meetings and gatherings, personal communication, and recorded notes from observations made during several formal events. We followed Moses into classrooms where he steadfastly teaches mathematics to America’s forgotten children. We have followed him into the homes of those children to visit their parents, into churches where he teaches adults eager to learn enough mathematics to help their children with homework, into meetings with school superintendents, into seminars with university professors and graduate students, into conferences where he keynotes, and into meetings where he describes quality education as a Civil Right to potential donors for the Algebra Project (AP) and Center for Urban Education and Innovation at FIU. In addition, we have participated in similar circles with other Movement leaders like Vincent Harding and Curtis Muhammad. In all of those diverse contexts, we have experienced the same principled, respectful, humble, yet radical model of grassroots leadership reflected in the words of Ella Baker, Cornel West and Lao Tsu.

A second source of data collection helped us make connections made between the work of the Algebra Project and a Youth-Action Research Initiative (described later in the article) as a piece of a robust effort of school reform in one of the largest school districts in the USA. That system’s school leaders and constituents also engaged in a massive reform effort called the School Improvement Zone (SIZ), an initiative involving 39 of the system’s low-performing schools servicing approximately 45,000 students. As in many other urban school districts, the majority of students district-wide and in the SIZ schools are Black and Latinas/os. Moreover, those students in the SIZ schools are from lower socioeconomic groups. And, in a trend increasingly visible throughout the USA, immigrants and the children of immigrants compose a growing proportion of the student body. The district is both relatively poor overall and characterized by a number of inequities such as housing, health care, and employment.

At a time when there is a fervent emphasis on high-stakes testing, the SIZ administrative personnel and school-based leaders in this district envisioned a student exposition as an event that would shift the focus from student scores on the State’s high-stakes exam to the more personal and informative nature of student work. One of the ideas behind the student expositions was to emphasize success and achievement in schools where there had been a prevailing culture of failure and/or low performance and expectations. Thus, at the end of its first year of reform (June, 2005) SIZ schools organized a two-day exhibition of student work for the last week of school. Its purpose was to provide opportunities to engender pride among students, school personnel, parents and the communities – even in the face of formidable societal obstacles. During the time spent observing the activity in seven of the SIZ schools, we made brief jottings on note pads of the events, activities, performances, exhibits, and comments from various participants. After the day’s observation period, these jottings were expanded into extensive notes to flesh out the details of that day’s observations.

Findings and discussion
In this section, we present an analysis of the findings based on observations, field notes, and personal communication with participants from the student exhibits by
making connections to the work of Robert Moses. Next, we present Moses’ notion of “earned insurgency” and how this notion plays out in the voices of urban school children. Then, we provide a brief discussion about some of the “movement” activity currently taking place as a result of youth action-research initiatives and the Algebra Project. We conclude with some reflections on how the “movement” efforts and its insurgency can create educational systems that are socially just and equitable where students engender pride and motivation toward successful work under the leadership of those who believe and act in support of social justice, access and equity.

Student exhibits
The student exposition was an entreaty on the part of the Deputy Superintendent and the Zone school leaders to focus public attention on “the real work: teacher-student relationship, student-led work, teacher judgment” (Pagan and Dutton-Stepick, 2006, p. 2). While this event functioned to capitalize on the essential aspects of teaching and learning, this message manifested itself differently within each school. Of the seven schools observed during the exhibits, two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school were in full exhibition mode on the two days scheduled for the student expositions. The other three schools (two high schools and one middle school) were in the process of dismantling their exhibits and were clearly not expecting any visitors. Of the schools with their exhibits up and awaiting visitors, one elementary and one middle school lacked either an internal or external audience. Still, the few students who were encountered at these schools were eager and proud to explain their exhibits. For one elementary and one high school the celebrations continued in the absence of an outside audience. At the elementary school, students and staff formed appreciative audiences for performances and exhibits. At one high school students were observed proudly and enthusiastically appreciating the exhibition in the media center. Their teachers were equally proud and admiring of the student work. Many of the exhibits were impressive and creative and amply demonstrated successful work performed by students (see further elaborations by Pagan and Dutton-Stepick, 2006).

In other Zone schools, teachers and students demonstrated a vibrant sense of pride and joy with the effort, quality, and aesthetic presentation of student work produced for the student exposition. With the particular success enjoyed at the senior high school, many teachers were more than willing to share their thoughts on why the student exhibits developed into such a positive experience. Several teachers verbalized how excited they were to see the tremendous effort put forth by the students. Many teachers and principals voiced their pleasant surprise at how everything came together. Most of all, teachers and principals displayed an immense pride in the way that the students had made every effort to research independently and creatively display the products of their research. One principal noted (personal communication, June 8, 2005):

There is a perception in the community, that every Zone school is an “F” school – a failing school – and the state is ready to take them over. That is not the case for many of us, but the parents and community don’t know all of that. We are not all “failing” schools – we are “challenged” schools who have students who need to move.

Even though the district conducted a coordinated mass effort of promoting and publicizing the student exposition using every available media channel, the paucity of parental participation in the event, and the absence of community and business
organizations, is still a discouraging reality. Although there may be several reasons why more parents did not attend, from ambivalence to employment, the use of students to deliver newsletters beckoning parents to take part in the celebration of student work was clearly ineffective. As suggested by a teacher, “it would have been more constructive had each school reached out to parents individually”. Others suggested that the larger community should have picked up pace to increase support for the students efforts. What might have happened, we wondered, if the district had chosen more strategies from the Movement Model, with personnel from each school taking the time to go to the students’ homes, to sit with parents or other family members to explain the work being done in the classroom by their children, and, then, to invite the family to come and see the work of their students at the exposition.

The most impressive student exhibits and presentations were successfully managed by a common theme that was relevant to the students, their backgrounds, and the unique history, environment, and setting of their school. The theme fostered a personal connection with the students and their communities. As a result it elicited an effort and energy from which vibrant student exhibits were generated. Essentially, such practices reflect heavily on “grassroots” organizing – input from the students, the school leaders, teachers, parents and communities. These successes suggested that when a group of individuals take responsibility for coordinating, organizing, and overseeing events of this nature for children, sensitivity to input from the students, teachers, and the community is critical. Since all constituents play an integral role in the work and achievement of students, it is imperative to address their inclusion as well as their parents as leaders in the process of celebrating student work and achievement.

Similar to what Moses (Normore, 2006, p. 22) indicated about the Civil Rights Movement, schools must incorporate community process more directly into the vision, logistics, and content of not only student expositions but all matters that involve the education of the community’s children. We propose that for future student demonstrations of work, though, community constituents should be encouraged to share their ideas and be included in all stages of the exposition conceptualizations, facilitating a greater commitment and enthusiasm in the preparation, planning, and production of the student exhibits. Further, more personal efforts ought to be made to elicit parental and community involvement. Specifically, an investment at each school needs to be made to individually contact each parent or caretaker, informing them of both the celebratory vision of the student expositions, and the opportunity for student, parent, and community input. As Moses insists, “Educators must learn to locate the vast resources in communities that seem impoverished and paralyzed at first glance” (Moses and Cobb, 2001, p. 21).

Observations made at the student exhibit indicated that even for the expositions that were relatively fruitless, some students were observed taking pride in their work where formerly low achievement, complacency and failure were expected. Research indicates that students have great agency in defining school environment, including interaction with teachers and school leaders (Cook-Sather and Youens, 2007; Nygreen et al., 2006; Lodge, 2005). They also come to school with orientations toward education that can, hopefully, facilitate any school reform initiative by teachers or school leaders. Other research asserts that the most silent voices in school reform may be that of students. Decisions and assessments are made about them and for them, but rarely by them (Nygreen et al., 2006; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004). Regrettably, students in
low-performing schools are those who seem most shut out of the shaping of changes in their schools. In the mainstream culture they are often portrayed as dysfunctional illiterates who need a “dummied down” curriculum and a climate of control where “sit own” and “shut up” strategies are the instructional norm. Nevertheless, some scholars (e.g. Goldberger, 2006) have come to understand and argue that listening to and involving students creates opportunities to develop new skills for students as well as the adults in the learning community. Moses (Normore, 2006, p. 21) clearly supports the need to incorporate student voices in education when he makes a comparison between students in our present day school systems and the “grassroots” leadership movement of the late 1950s and the 1960s:

I think of these students as the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the “sharecroppers” we worked with in the 60’s in Mississippi. Despite winning the right to vote back then, these children are still engaged in a life and death struggle with sharecropper illiteracy – present day sharecropper education, and its inevitable poverty and isolation.

Urban school districts have a major responsibility and role to play if they have a sincere desire to offer the best education possible for all students in racially integrated schools. The elimination of the condition of low performance and underachievement can only occur with unique, aggressive, and focused leadership that includes parents, families, and communities. The denial of a quality public school education in urban and rural communities throughout this country is an issue as urgent as the denial of voting in Mississippi was in 1961. To solve this problem may well require much the same kind of community organizing that changed the South in the 1960s and Moses’ notion of “earned insurgency”.

The notion of “earned insurgency”: a principle from Robert Moses

During the civil rights movement, Robert Moses led and organized Southern Black voters to acquire political access by engaging communities in direct action. Because Blacks were facing institutional racism through literacy tests, poll taxes, and other forms of physical and symbolic exclusion from the political process, civil rights advocates used voting as an organizing tool to catalyze the sharecroppers – those that were historically disenfranchised from the political process through economic and political exploitation. Using grassroots community organizing as the vehicle, Moses and other civil rights advocates sought to realize the principles outlined by the 15th Amendment of the Constitution by getting Black communities to earn their right to vote (Normore, 2006). Earning the right to vote would serve as a vehicle to challenge this historic structure of exclusion and mobilize their political voices for social change. Since then, Moses has been traveling across the USA recounting his role in the struggle for voting rights and connects that struggle with the work of the Algebra Project and math literacy.

Moses insists that “It is getting people at the bottom to make demands, on themselves first, then on the system, that leads to some of the most important changes” (Moses and Cobb, 2001, p. 20). He uses the term “earned insurgency” to explain to his Algebra Project students their need to make personal sacrifices to earn their right to compel society to deliver quality education for all. Those sacrifices, he suggests, include studying instead of playing basketball or watching TV at night; paying attention in class; taking 90 minutes of mathematics everyday, five days a week for four years; attending six week pre-college summer institutes; engaging their parents in
their educational journey; and taking responsibility for what goes on in their schools so that school reform becomes their agenda, not just the adult agenda. Moses explains to these AP students that their plight is connected to that of the Mississippi sharecroppers who made personal sacrifices to get their voting rights, standing in long lines day after day to register to vote; risking their homes, their jobs, their lives; being beaten, jailed, or killed, yet persisting until their people gained their constitutional right to vote. When interviewed about leadership in American schools, Moses stated (Normore, 2006, p. 20):

It’s not only about challenging systems and structures but also about challenging fears. Students, parents and communities locked into “sharecropper” education must similarly establish a voice to demand a quality public school education as a civil right. This will require a willingness to face the history of slavery and Jim Crow (a system worse than caste) and “to establish a culture of intellectual courage”.

Thus, the change, the “tilting the scales” is simultaneously at the bottom and the top. The Movement Model both challenges the fears, at the bottom, of assuming power, of speaking their truth to power; and, at the top, challenging the fears of educational leaders in relinquishing power and privilege. Held within those two fears are the challenges of making all children winners in an educational system that is fraught with social injustice and inequity. Urban schools have been the focus of school reform for decades, yet the issue of injustice in education is much larger than that. For all children are at peril when any children are left behind. In a country where the mantra is freedom and justice for all, we have to be clear that none of our children are free until all are free of inferior education, health care, and living conditions. All students must learn social responsibility, what it means to be a citizen of the nation and of the world. Children segregated into suburban schools, if disconnected to the issues facing their counterparts in urban schools, will never understand the complexities of the democratic system they belong to. Being isolated, they might never understand the consequences of their demand for power and privilege on the society as a whole. For, we must all come to see the “rotting shack” of urban schools as “a rotting America” (Payne, 1997, p. 5). The problem of urban schools is not the problem of the city, the problem of people of color; rather it is America’s problem.

The Algebra Project (AP) and youth action-research initiative
Using the AP as the vehicle, Moses has spent the last 20 years organizing interested stakeholders nationally in efforts to realize the constitutional right to an education in all 50 states in the USA. Within the AP, math literacy is used as an organizing tool by uniting community organizers, parents, teachers, youth groups, university-based mathematical research scientists, and researchers. The AP targets low-income Black and Latina/o students who attend substandard schools and aims to make students math ready so that math is not a barrier to college. The goal of the AP is to encourage students to “earn their right to an education” by seeking educational and economic access, particularly for the descendants of sharecroppers. The notion of earning a right to an education is a principle that guides the action research initiative in this large urban setting.

As asserted by De los Reyes and Gozemba (2001), educators concerned with social justice must find ways to create “pockets of hope” in communities that have been historically neglected. One such pocket is a multi-institutional partnership in this large
urban context that has connected colleges and universities, the school district, private community organizations, and parents to collaborate for the purposes of building a sustained network of support and advocacy for the city’s most underserved students and families. Led by Moses, this initiative aims to provide ninth-graders with a high quality academic experience. However, the students targeted by this project come from one of the most notorious high schools in the city, known for its triple “F” status for several consecutive years (schools in this Southeastern state are graded on “A-F” scale based on standardized test scores). This school sits in the Little Haiti section of the county, serves mostly Haitian, African American, and Latina/o students, and is challenged by the realities of its social context – violence, poverty, and political disenfranchisement. Initially, the project was concerned with providing students with a rigorous preparation in algebra so that mathematics would not be a barrier to college by the twelfth grade. However, the urban initiative has also embraced a reading, writing and research component to its work.

With the goal of achieving an equitable education for historically underserved students and communities, this multi-institutional initiative uses youth action research to illuminate students’ voices for school and social change. Because underserved students have historically been ignored by the reform process and often have little say or involvement, this initiative seeks to actively engage students in a research experience that provides them with opportunities to study their lives, schools and communities. These experiences aim to provide students with the opportunity to develop a critical awareness and understanding of the issues affecting their lives so they can transform those conditions (Freire, 1970). Thus, the action-research initiative aims to directly engage young people in opportunities to name, understand, and seek solutions to the problems most salient to their lives both inside and outside of school (Cammarota, 2007; Rodriguez, 2004). Like the Algebra Project, the initiative targets students who have been historically excluded from an equitable education in the USA, namely low-income Black and Latina/o students who may be immigrants and whose primary home language is not English. Similar to the Civil Rights Movement using voting rights and the Algebra Project using math literacy to catalyze people, the research component of this initiative uses PAR to engage young people by earning their right to an education to both transform their schools and society. Aligning various institutions, the action research initiative aims to create educational opportunities that demand equity and justice in historically marginalized communities.

A vehicle for future learning
Over a period of several years, university researchers will partner with school-based educators to create opportunities whereby students engage in action research initiatives that have implications for schools, districts, and universities. Using the high school classroom as a vehicle, university researchers will negotiate time with school-based teachers and administrators to engage in the “work” that needs to be done. The goal is to integrate action research initiatives into an already existing high school academic requirement (i.e. English, history or elective courses) so that students can acquire graduation credits for their work with the initiative.

One of the goals within the classroom is to begin a process where students are exposed to research, theory, and policy that are written about the conditions of their lives, yet very seldom include their voices. Such knowledge will be used as base to
generate new knowledge where students are encouraged to draw connections between the material and their own experiences. Through this process, students are encouraged to use autobiography to tell their stories and make meaning of research, theory and policy that are affecting their lives and the lives of thousands of young people in public schools across the nation. Simultaneously, students will be encouraged to identify topics that interest them and will organize themselves into study groups based on topic. Students may take interest in zero-tolerance policies, school-to-prison pipeline, dropouts, or school culture among others. Students will be supported in researching a topic, designing a research study to better understand how such issues impact their own schools and experiences, and devise a set of solutions that may inform policy and practice at the school and district level. Students will also be given the opportunity to study and create multimedia to tell their stories. Using video cameras, Powerpoint presentations, and the internet, students will learn how to use and disseminate their research in various formats and to multiple audiences.

Throughout the process, students will also be required to present their preliminary findings to their school communities and other community stakeholders such as parents. Because students will have access to a university, one vital audience will be the university community. Teacher education programs within universities are responsible for developing thousands of teachers to fill this nation’s classrooms each year. Beyond the traditional student-teaching experience and required observation hours, most programs fail to connect pre-service teachers with students in any meaningful way. The student action research component of the larger initiative seeks to make a university-K-12 connection by forging a mutually beneficial partnership. For instance, during a summer component of the initiative, students will be able to present their research findings to various classes taken by pre-service teachers. Within these settings, dialogues will be created whereby pre-service teachers can ask questions and the high school students will be able to expand on the knowledge of their research topic and share their expertise. These experiences both broaden the university experiences of the high school students and model unique pedagogical approaches with young people. Because this action research is designed to legitimize the knowledge-bases and experiences that young students of color bring to the classroom, these university-classroom partnerships also seek to model different forms of pedagogical engagement with the students. While pre-service may read about or be encouraged to be creative with their students, the initiative also seeks to demonstrate creativity and risk-taking in the classroom.

A critical component of these university-classroom dialogues are also to urge both groups of students in the habit of dialoging with one another, particularly about critical issues facing their lives as students, and challenges facing future teachers. Such dialogues are particularly interesting when the high schools’ students are 100 per cent of color (Black and Latina/o) and low-income while the university students are about 80 students students of color but mostly from the middle class. The university-based pre-service teachers often bring unique ideological orientations to the classroom that may or may not be conducive to student learning and academic achievement. The purpose of the dialogues seeks to challenge any pre-existing assumptions pre-service educators may have about urban high school students and also give them the opportunity to learn and acquire advice from existing high school students. The high
school students also enjoy telling their stories, particularly in sharing best practices and experiences with previous teachers (i.e. why student relationships are critical).

Students involved in the action research will also present their work to their peers in schools across the city. A goal of this component is to disseminate their findings with young people like them in struggling schools and provide an opportunity to engage in critical dialogues about topics that resonate across schools. The goal is also to demonstrate to other young people and educators that engaging young people in school is possible and productive for student achievement, engagement and positive school culture. A final goal of this initiative may be to plant the seed of action research at other schools for the purposes of expanding the ideas of earned insurgency and student voice and research across the district.

Another key audience is educational decision-makers at the local and district levels. Because the student-researchers will be addressing critical issues that impact their learning, presentations and dialogues with key decision-makers may stimulate further discussions and actions among school and district-level personnel. Decision-makers will learn that in order to capitalize on the knowledge and experiences that young people bring, students themselves must be central to the process and they must be given the opportunity to share their knowledge and teach about their experiences. Decision-makers may learn about best practices that student engagement, the impact that meaningful classroom engagement may have on students’ dispositions in the classroom and school, and may better understand how engagement with action research can influence educational policy through school improvement efforts, curriculum creativity, and high quality academic experiences for students.

Reflections
It seems that while all children have a constitutional right to an education according to State law, not all children receive an equitable opportunity to learn, particularly for Black, Latina/o and other marginalized children in US society. Far less likely are opportunities for urban young people to engage in educational initiatives that create opportunities to study their experiences, share their knowledge and devise solutions that are most relevant to the realities facing their lives, both in education and beyond. In a policy climate that reduces students’ experiences to quantifiable outcomes and punishes students via high-stakes standardized tests, artifacts such as those gathered from grassroots initiatives (i.e. student exhibitions, Algebra Project, and action research initiatives) seek to challenge this paradigm by creating possibilities to foster “earned insurgency” among students. The “Movement Model” and its insurgency can create educational systems that are socially just and equitable where students engender pride and motivation toward successful work under the leadership of those who believe and act in support of social justice, access and equity. In the words of Lil Watson, an indigenous activist, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound with mine, then come, let’s work together”. These words reiterate the objective of the Movement Leadership Model, where students, parents, teachers, and administrators become equal partners in urban school reform efforts for co-creating schools and communities that might lead all of us toward liberation and learning.

Designs for education turnaround must include strategic and tactical activities that engage and communicate with parents, families, and community in ways that are
informative and transparent. There can be no surprises and no harm done to the most vulnerable. It is possible to attain school excellence if school leaders invite students, teachers and parents into the process to set and maintain high expectations for attendance, achievement, and discipline. Educational and community leaders across America have a moral responsibility to assure that all children, especially African American, Latina/o and other national minorities, are afforded the opportunity to a quality education in a diverse setting. Leaders at all levels of education, including school district offices, school sites, colleges, universities, and the broader communities, need to revisit the real purposes of education programs to include practical situations whereby people, young and old, rich and poor, male and female, black and white, can engage in public discussions about issues that affect them. As Moses indicates (Normore, 2006), such discussions should not be just theoretical. For example, powerful leadership programs, and those responsible for developing and implementing them, can create dynamic educational leaders (p. 19) “by engaging these leaders in critical discussions about social justice issues to include historical, legal, moral and economic aspects of a proposed constitutional amendment to guarantee every child a quality public school education”. These programs can have components that extend into particular communities, components organized around meaningful discussions that apply to lives of the communities in which these school leaders will serve so they are encouraged to establish their public voices in concert with the grassroots voices of the communities, always including the voice of students.

Though we who collaborated on this article focus on urban schools, we know that educators must address these issues wherever their mission calls them in the nation and in the world. Oppressive systems make prisoners of us all (Jensen, 2002). Thus all students, wherever they go to school, must learn problem solving skills to tackle the social injustices that cripple a nation. When a nation neglects any of its citizens, when 13 million of its children go to bed hungry every night (US Census Bureau, 2000), no child within its boundaries is a winner. No matter what cosmology we embrace, we know that on this small planet, all are connected to the whole. Thus, suburban, rural, and urban children share the same obligations in creating a just nation and in becoming stewards of the earth. As Moses reiterates the words of Ella Baker in the 1960s: “The process of changing any system must be thought about in radical terms […] We need to understand the root causes as to why things are as they are […] In order to see where we’re going, as educators and as a society, we not only must remember where we have been, but we must understand where we have been” (Normore, 2006, p. 22). We then need to figure out how to come to a consensus so that the USA can move in the direction it really needs to move to actually fulfill its promise.

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**Further reading**


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