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## *The Elusiveness of Critical Education A Fifteen-Year Roller Coaster Ride of Creating and Maintaining A Transformative Leadership Program in Neoliberal Times*

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### Abstract

*This autoethnographic essay captures fifteen-years of struggles and ephemeral victories associated with developing and sustaining a critical educational leadership doctoral program within a conservative college of education located in the Midwestern United States. Despite having to grapple with non-critical faculty members and neoliberal forces designed to increase enrollment and gut the transformative focus of our program, we were able to keep the program vibrant for over 12 years. To our surprise, the dismantling of the doctoral program began to unfold when one of the core members of the program, a self-professed radical scholar, became a neoliberal administrator obedient to the interests of a new administrative team. The essay provides critical fodder for thinking about the limits and possibilities of sustaining critical educational initiatives amid a sociopolitical context designed to commercialize knowledge, to depoliticize radical intellectuals, and to divide faculty in the struggle to build an egalitarian society.*



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## **Introduction**

Although one of the functions of institutions of higher education in the United States is tied to ameliorating injustice and building a new social order on the ideals of freedom, justice, and radical love (Freire, 1972), critical scholars and leaders who are committed to humanizing the world through generating academic programs, through instituting co-curricular activities, and through producing scholarship, often grapple with institutional constraints in their academic institutions as well as confront broader sociopolitical forces, which make it arduous to sustain a transformative agenda in the academy. For instance, conservative groups have engaged in surveillance tactics, including paying students to secure tape-record lectures of ‘radical’ professors (Kodama, 2006), in order to silence faculty who are committed to problematizing social practices and sources of knowledge leading to authoritarianism and oppression within and outside higher education. Since most college graduates find it arduous to find well-paying, permanent jobs amid a global economy predicated on gig work, service employment, and eliminating labor power through automation, many administrators are supporting the growth of academic programs that supposedly hone students’ skills to compete in the market place, while simultaneously jettisoning programs deemed ‘irrelevant’ for preparing students to become successful in the working world. In some scenarios, this equates to administrators casting aside coursework and faculty who are capable of guiding students to understand “different rules to govern labor, housing, and financial markets” (Allen, 2016), in favor of focusing on “STEM related matters.” (Synder, 2020).

Notwithstanding the stark environment that many critical scholars and leaders face when attempting to raise the consciousness of students, faculty, and staff members, when engaging in scholarly inquiry dedicated to eliminating human suffering, and when excavating educational practices responsible for breeding systemic injustice, there have been critical intellectuals who have found fissures amid the alienating, often hostile academic world. They have sustained their careers in the academy--successfully operationalizing social justice within academic programs, guiding students to challenge the status quo, and solving problems by crossing borders and engaging in cultural work with and for the ‘Other’ (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2018; Daniels & Porfilio, 2013; Malott & Porfilio, 2007; Manathunga & Bottrell, 2019). The purpose of this essay is to capture struggles and ephemeral victories associated with developing and sustaining a critical educational leadership doctoral program within a conservative college of education located in the Midwestern United States over last 15 years. Despite grappling with our colleagues devaluing critical forms of education and scholarship, grappling with administrators undermining co-curricular activities designed to promote critical understanding of systemic forms of oppression, and dealing with administrative surveillance over our teaching and our students’ doctoral research, we were able to keep the program vibrant for over 12 years. To our dismay, the dismantling of the doctoral program unfolded when a core member of the program, a self-professed radical scholar, became a neoliberal administrator obedient to the interests of a new administrative team.

Before we share our stories, we provide a cautionary note. Although we reveal reprisals encountered due to our critical stance in a conservative higher education institution, our experiences are not meant to inhibit you from holding a similar orientation. Rather, our stories are designed to provide critical fodder for confronting authoritarian and anti-intellectual forces, for confronting microaggressions, and for supporting programmatic and co-curricular initiatives dedicated to challenging systemic oppression within and beyond your academic context. Our stories are also designed for you to take inventory of when it may or may not be in your professional interest to challenge entrenched relationships in your academic setting. For other

readers, our stories are designed to provide a wake-up call about the impact neoliberal practices have in altering the values and behaviors of colleagues who profess to transforming the world through critical education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We engage the work of scholars who demystify the dominant ideology of higher educational institutions serving as a humanizing force dedicated to building a world on the foundations of justice, freedom, and equity (Chomsky, 2015; Giroux, 2002; Porfilio & Yu, 2006; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Vazquez & Levin, 2018). Rather than providing faculty the intellectual freedom and supporting coursework and learning experiences where students construct personally meaningful understandings of the world (Ross & Vinson, 2011), critical scholars have unveiled the chief function of higher education is to maintain the dominant social relations in the wider society (Chomsky; 2014; Giroux, 2002; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007; McLaren 2015). According to numerous scholars, the academy's metamorphosis from being a humanizing to a corporate force is tied to two major developments over the past thirty years. First, the corporate world is involved in numerous aspects of higher education, including running universities, controlling research projects, developing curricula and programs and providing resources for building state-of-the-art facilities (Giroux, 2003; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007; McLaren, 2015; Porfilio & Yu, 2006; Tuchman, 2011). Second, the proliferation of neoliberal ideologies of competition, rugged individualism, "managerialism, accountability, and surveillance" (Vazquez & Levin, 2018) are taking hold over academic life, including academic affairs, faculty and student relationships, and interpersonal relationships amongst faculty and administrators. Despite universities functioning more like an appendage to reproduce the corporate structures of power, critical scholars also remind us there is the possibility to resist corporate hegemony (Bottrell, & Manathunga, 2018; Manathunga & Bottrell, 2019; McLaren, 2017). Faculty and leaders have found fissures in the academy to create academic programs and support dissent movements designed to build an equalitarian social world.

### **Review of the Literature**

Over the past two decades, a substantial body of literature sheds light on how developments in the political economy have created a "corporate university industrial complex" (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Chomsky, 2014; McLaren, 2017; Oleksiyenko, 2018; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Tuchman, 2011; Washburn, 2005). The complex has had a deleterious impact on scholars, scholarship, and programs dedicated to bringing awareness to the relationship between self and 'Other,' to knowledge and power, and to higher education's role (or lack thereof) in promoting social transformation (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Giroux, 2014; Nocella, Best, & McLaren, 2010; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Washburn, 2005). Numerous critical scholars illustrate how the latest manifestation of capitalism, neoliberalism, is predicated on the state withdrawing support of public goods to its citizens, including health care, sanitization services, parks, and playgrounds, in favor of corporate conglomerates controlling activities, which were once deemed vital for improving the quality of life of the public (Abendroth & Porfilio, 2015; Chomsky, 2014; Giroux, 2014; Harvey, 2011; Hill & Kuma, 2011; McLaren, 2017; Saltman & Gabbard, 2010). Corporations seek to control all elements of social life because it increases their wealth, it conditions the public to turn to the market to solve problems, and it concentrates their power over knowledge production and the subjectivity of citizens (Chomsky, 2014; Giroux, 2014; Harvey, 2011; Hill & Kuma, 2011; McLaren, 2017; Oleksiyenko, 2018; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Saltman & Gabbard, 2010).

#### 4 *Critical Education*

With the ongoing penetration of corporatism in higher education, another body of scholarship has illuminated the pernicious impact corporatism has had on academic programs, faculty members, and intellectual disciplines, including the role neoliberalism plays in undermining the ability of critical scholars and leaders to humanize the world (Daniels & Porfilio, 2013; Davidson-Harden, 2013; Di Leo, 2019; Hartlep & Porfilio, 2015; Sukys, 2009; Tuck, 2013). For example, scholars have captured how colleges of education have been positioned by the creation of market-driven teacher education programs, some of which are managed by large-scale corporations, to excavate “disciplinary perspectives in educator preparation that give practitioners insights to address educational disparities, including the ability “to interrogate and oppose education injustice(s) disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx youth attending public schools in U.S. cities” (Warren & Chambers, 2020, p. 1). Due to the proliferation of fast-track teacher education programs, scholars have also questioned whether disciplines, such as the Social Foundations of Education, will no longer exist (Baez & Boyles, 2013; Dunn & Faison, 2015; Hartlep & Porfilio, 2015; Schubert, 2013; Schultz & Butin, 2013).

There is also an additional body of scholarship that documents how faculty members are facing reprisals, such as being denied tenure, being terminated, or being denied promotion for failing to fall in line with university officials’ desire to have faculty engaged in “research that serves either the warfare state, the corporate state, or both” (Giroux, 2009, p. 114). For instance, critical scholars have shared their narratives of confronting anti-intellectual and authoritative impulses within higher education (Hyslop-Margison & Leonard, 2012; Malott, 2006; Nocella, Best, and McLaren, 2010). They have demonstrated how political pundits, conservative faculty members, and government officials engage in smearing campaigns designed to remove faculty who challenge common understandings of what gives rise to human suffering in global politics. Two important examples of this scholarship were shared by Norm Finkelstein who was denied tenure at DePaul University and Ward Churchill who was terminated from the University of Colorado Boulder for academic misconduct (Churchill, 2008; Finkelstein, 2010). Moreover, other scholars have documented how corporate imperatives are paramount in driving faculty to harass, discredit, and abuse their colleagues (Petrina, Mathison, & Ross, 2015; Simmons, 2020; Wylie, 2020). They have detailed how academic mobbing is becoming prevalent in higher education, which occurs when a small group of faculty decides “to cast someone out on the pretext that he or she is threatening their interests” (Seguin, 2016).

A final body of literature has provided guideposts for how to “rethink, reconceptualize, act, and react within higher education to challenge and even demolish neoliberalism” (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017, p. 156). For instance, scholars have demonstrated how classrooms serves as emancipatory sites where faculty members and students can embrace values and develop social relationships in opposition to values and relationships supported by dominant social and economic leaders, and where faculty members can provide students educational experiences that help them understand what gives rise to entrenched power relations (Brennan, 2019; Cannella & Koro-Ljun, 2017; Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018; Feldman & Sandoval, 2018; Rogers, Sims, Bird, & Elliott, 2020). Other faculty have detailed how they generated collectivist scholarship and engaged in dissent movements in order to challenge institutional forms of oppression (Bottrell, & Manathunga, 2018; Chatterton, Hodkinson, & Pickerill, 2018; Ford, Porfilio & Goldstein, 2015, Kamali, & Jönsson, 2019).

## Why Autoethnography?

We decided to tell our story as a narrative account to dismantle the critical foundation of an educational leadership doctoral program within a traditional college of education because it provides us the space to discuss and analyze our personal experiences and struggles to expose and challenge the constitutive forces at play within most university settings across the United States. Working in an anti-critical, anti-intellectual, and authoritarian culture was demoralizing and frustrating. We had to protect what we started. Plus, we often faced reprisals from our colleagues and administrators if we challenged entrenched cultural dynamics responsible for lack of intellectual engagement, for the clinical and technical preparation of school personnel, and for a deferential attitude to those who held powerful positions in the College and across the University<sup>1</sup>.

Autoethnography allows us to focus on our emotions, intentions, and actions during this difficult time and connect our personal insights and knowledge to broader cultural and political conversations (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). We approach autoethnography as a way to use our insider experiences to call attention to the complexity of doing critical educational work as well as critique the norm of anti-critical educational preparation programs. We also recognize we are making ourselves vulnerable by exposing our insights and reactions, as well as the actions of our colleagues, but hope by doing so will provide a deeper understanding of our own beliefs and emotions and will inform our future work and the work of others. We do not want this experience lost and believe writing an autoethnography will be accessible to more audiences who are committed to critical education as well as to others who are interested in exploring new critical possibilities.

We are writing this autoethnography collaboratively since we both had similar frustrations about the experience even though we were not together throughout the entire span of this story. We recognize there are numerous criticisms lodged against autoethnography. Ellis (2004) and Morse (2002) remind us autoethnography is just not about us but includes the struggles, tensions, conflicts, and emotions with our colleagues. While we are trying to protect all parties by not detailing personal information, it is difficult to remove them entirely when sharing the story. Our intent is not to merely praise or find fault with the individuals in our story, but to recognize their work in a larger institutional system. Autoethnography involves examining memory in order to tell our story and a common question is if memory is a sound source of data. (Bochner, 2000). In our case, we do have each other to recall the experiences and we do have a variety of documents, including emails and reports, to assist with our recall. However, we continue to be aware there could be numerous interpretations and ways to approach the story, but we go into this type of inquiry with our eyes wide open to these potential limitations. We believe Jackson & Mazzei (2008) have it right when they state: “we should approach this type of research to “confront experience as questionable, as problematic, and as incomplete, rather than as a foundation for truth” (p. 304). At the same time, however, we are not apologetic for privileging our voice as we try to understand this complex experience.

Our story is a bit like a roller-coaster ride with numerous twists and turns and ups and downs and we try to write it in such a way to capture the unpredictability, non-linearity, and complexity of our ride. And while we both have many similar perspectives about what took place,

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<sup>1</sup> We used “University” as a pseudonym in order to protect the privacy of the faculty, staff, and administration where we served as scholars, educators, and leaders over the period of fifteen years.

we also process some of the experiences differently, which only makes sense given our different relationships with the individuals in the story and time employed at the University. Yet, these factors do not alter the overall storyline. We both maintain there are elements of surprise that emerges for us, which actually caught us slightly off guard as we worked through our collective experiences, observations, and insights. We truly did not know where the story would take us and learned a great deal about what people and higher education institutions may do in order to survive in neoliberal times.

## **The Roller Coaster Ride Begins**

### *The Tensions Emerge*

It started when my adjunct teaching at the University turned into a tenure-track faculty position. After two years, I was asked to take the lead in creating an Educational Leadership Ed.D. program—the first terminal degree program at the University. At this time the University considered itself a teaching institution such that teaching was the priority and research was essentially non-existent. Therefore, offering a doctoral program was quite a leap of faith considering there was not an infrastructure in place to support research, the library needed expansion of resources and the typical teaching load was 4 courses per semester which is not conducive to supporting scholarly inquiry.

However, the President of the University sought to change the focus of the institution. He was interested in establishing a doctoral presence on campus as part of a robust vision for the University, which included creating more doctoral programs, increasing enrollment from approximately 7,500 to 12,000 students, and further developing the campus with updated buildings. The University was a mid-sized private institution and not well known beyond the local region, but I felt there was potential to create and sustain a critically-informed educational leadership doctoral program due to the President's vision and the University's apparent commitment to an explicit social justice mission. I jumped at the opportunity with great enthusiasm and worked closely with the Dean, who was instrumental getting the whole process started and implemented, and had the full support of the President and Provost.

As the program design began taking shape it became obvious that while the University leadership was excited about the emerging program, the College faculty were skeptical and resistant. The faculty did not understand the program's theoretical foundation and challenged the idea of the program not being an endorsement program for school principals and superintendents. It is important to note that at this time many of the faculty members were former or retired K-12 teachers or administrators and were never exposed to critical theories.

I was shocked at their response because I honestly thought the College faculty would be proud to offer a doctoral program, as it was the first on campus. Sadly, I was wrong. For example, many of the College faculty were protective of the University being known as a teaching institution and felt quite threatened when the program established new ideas and policies. Many of the faculty were furious because the Dean supported changing the teaching load to 2 courses per semester for doctoral faculty. She recognized in order to support student research, and our own research, a four-semester teaching load would make it difficult.

The faculty did not openly share this understanding; instead, they vocalized their sentiments to the Dean and saw me as an elitist who was getting special treatment. Numerous

faculty were also angry when they were not allowed to teach in the doctoral program. They may have felt inadequate because they did not hold the academic background or scholarship record to do so. The doctoral faculty were also allotted additional resources to present papers at professional conferences. This policy also created more animosity towards me, even though most faculty were not attending conferences, anyway.

Luckily, the Dean, being highly aware of these mounting tensions, still maintained her support throughout the process of creating and launching the program. She was instrumental in paving the way for Higher Learning Commission accreditation by meeting with faculty across campus to explain the program, helping other Deans understand the process for program implementation, and working with the leadership team to build the infrastructure to support student and faculty research.

The program moved forward establishing strong cohorts of students and getting three full time tenure-track faculty lines after one year of program implementation. Although there were some early changes in the doctoral faculty, our story includes the faculty who have been the most relevant to the program. I was the search chair for all of the positions and I was deliberate in recruiting critical scholars from different but related educational disciplines. When my colleague applied, it was obvious he was a perfect fit and soon joined the program.

Once the program was established and as tensions heightened with the doctoral faculty playing a more predominate role on College and University committees and in educating leaders for K-12 schools, I made the intentional move to create a buffer between technical and methods-driving faculty and the Ed.D. faculty. I am typically a team player, so this tension disturbed me even though I knew that doing something critical, scholarly, and unique was not likely going to be embraced in a conservative context. To diffuse the tensions, when the College needed to move offices to make more space, we chose to have our offices moved to the “basement” area, which was far removed from the other College faculty. Our space was on the lower level and our offices were tucked behind the café and down a short hallway. The other education faculty were all on the third floor so this separation decreased the likelihood of connecting with people. This further separated us, which we knew was both good and not good. On one hand, we secured a dedicated space that buffered us from having to deal with tensions and conflicts, on the other, we were no doubt criticized for opting downstairs, but it worked just fine for us at the time. So, there we were—three doctoral faculty essentially removed physically from the college, doing very different work, and continuing to develop the program, which was completely, disconnected from the other education programs.

Throughout all of this, the Dean not only continued her support, but also encouraged the entire College to learn about critical pedagogy and dig deeper into critical theoretical perspectives. While it was phenomenal the Dean would take such a step, it continued to set the doctoral program apart and build even more animosity. One way the Dean tried to build a critical foundation across the College was to have the doctoral faculty lead a study group whereby select critical literature would be discussed. Some faculty resisted the idea of using the critical frameworks in their programs while others professed, they were implementing a critical education, which in reality was not the case. The study group disbanded after a few meetings and no doubt this attempt by the Dean, although well intentioned, was a catalyst to further view the doctoral program in an elitist light by the College faculty. Next, my colleague shares why he was attracted to join the critical leadership program as well as early experience with this College and study group.

*Differences in Critical Preparation Among Faculty are Revealed*

When I applied to become an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at this University, I was attracted to the position due to the College supporting a mission aligned with the critical tradition. The College's mission called on educating students to become multicultural educators, advocates for social justice, and critical researchers. After I accepted the position, I soon learned the person who directed the Ed.D. program and the other principal faculty member in Ed.D. program were the only scholars in the College who understood a critical view of what causes oppression in schools and society or engaged in research to understand what gives rise to social and economic inequality.

Upon entering the institution, I learned quickly the remaining roughly twenty-five full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty were unfamiliar with scholars associated with critical pedagogy, such as Freire, hooks, Darder, McLaren, and Giroux. For instance, during the first day of a College book club meeting, I learned most faculty had no exposure to critical theory, let alone were receptive to critical ideas. When a question was asked by the book club facilitator about how people felt about Kincheloe's *Critical Pedagogy Primer*, one of the faculty proceeded to get out of her chair and point and scream at me. She yelled "why is Peter McLaren trying to indoctrinate me." Naturally, I was shocked by her response. I stepped back and said "Actually, the book was written by my dear friend Joe Kincheloe who passed away last year, and believe me he would not want to indoctrinate you. I know Peter and he believes in an open exchange of ideas."

The Dean continued to support learning opportunities for the College faculty in order to develop their critical understanding. In turn, this the impetus to invite a number of critical scholars to campus. They provided courses, lectures, and conferences for College faculty and students. Some of the scholars included Peter McLaren, Christine Sleeter, Ira Shor, Bill Reynolds, Carl James, and Wayne Ross. Some faculty took part in the initiatives, but many did not and those who did not participate criticized the critical focus. This was quite discouraging, but not surprising. However, all of these attempts to build critical learning among faculty and students actually created enough of a backlash for me to stop providing this type of support. Since I was at the forefront of all of planning, I was also at the center of hostility. The fact that I was advancing professionally within in the college, as I did not yet advance to rank of full professor, may have embolden several faculty and leaders to thwart additional initiatives, such as developing new graduate programs and joint scholarly endeavors across the University, that they perceived may be a threat to the dominant anti-intellectual culture within the College as well as to their identity as 'experts' and 'leaders' of the academic unit.

Over time, faculty members would attempt to bully me because they felt inadequate with their collective lack of publication record. For instance, it was not a coincidence that the Chair of the College Tenure Committee told in me in a private meeting to remove all publications from my dossier as I made the case for early tenure. She did that, I later learned, because she did not want the Board of Trustees to deny her colleague promotion to full professor. Her colleague only had three publications during fifteen years as an academic.

Given the backdrop of the anti-intellectual and anti-critical culture of the College, I should have probably been able to predict most members of the College would be hostile or indifferent to supporting a critical media literacy conference that I launched with my colleague. However, given the fact that some faculty members (mostly at the behest of the Dean) and their students did engage with several progressive events given by me on critical-service learning, critical Hip-Hop studies,



and critical peace education, I had a glimmer of hope the conference would be a success. What was responsible for almost a unified negative response from leaders across the College as well as the University emanated from two developments. The first development was the departure of the Dean. This was the person who at least supported the mission of the College to be linked to critical education as well as allowed the Ed.D. program to put in place scholarly events.

In her place, an Interim Associate Dean was hired; she was a faculty member at the University for several years. She was good friends and colleagues with the vast majority of faculty in the College. Not coincidentally, she started to police the pedagogical and scholarly work that was generated in the Ed.D. program. For instance, she started to attend every Ed.D. dissertation defense as well as read every dissertation. She also began to put her friends on important leadership committees. She also required me to engage in discussion prior to any event I wanted to host connected with critical pedagogy.

The second development was tied to inviting Hip-Hop scholars to give a performance at the critical media literacy conference. The faculty members and larger administration—who were almost exclusively White middle-aged women—had little or no exposure to Hip-Hop culture. Therefore, they perceived Hip-Hop culture and the artists who were set to perform at the conference through a distorted lens—they embraced the hegemonic characterization of Hip-Hop where Hip-Hop icons of today often describe themselves as successful entrepreneurs (“hustlers in the game”) with their standpoint aligning closely with White male corporate executives who promote a materialistic, misogynist, homophobic, and violent image of Hip-Hop culture (Porfilio & Viola, 2012).

My colleagues and the larger administration’s reaction to the conference was debilitating. Numerous colleagues within the College and faculty members across the University stated they would attend the conference as well as bring their students to attend. They also agreed that having Hip-Hop intellectuals as performers was an excellent idea because so many college youths have been impacted by Hip-Hop.

Unfortunately, they were not honest with how they truly felt about the conference. Just five weeks prior to the event, I attempted to finalize a room request that gave the Hip-Hop pedagogues access to microphones and a tiled room. I was denied the request. The reason is that my Dean was not able to understand how the “Hop Hop performance connected with the conference title” (e.g., critical media literacy). My former Dean, who became a top-level administrator at the University, was also unable to find a space at the University or willing to “rent the microphone equipment, a portable floor and possibly chairs because she felt “that will run in the hundreds of dollars if not over a thousand dollars. The cost needs to be considered with how this benefits students and how many.”

In response to the University leaders’ lack of support, I decided not to call them out on being anti-intellectual or how their jaundiced decision-making was driven by the fear of the ‘Other.’ Instead, I made it clear to them why Hip-Hop culture is vital to critical media literacy. I stated:

It should be very easy to switch rooms so as to ensure the artists are able to perform. I am also disappointed that you don't feel that I hold the professional judgement (as a leading scholar and experienced educator) to understand the value of using art, technology, and hip-hop to guide educators to view youth in a new light

(as intelligent citizens rather as objects), to promote students' intellectual and emotional growth, and to promote a culturally-relevant education.

To most attendees of the conference, the event seemed to be successful. Over eighty students, faculty, and administrators attended the event, who appeared to be stimulated by the keynote presentations, the artistic performance and workshops. Clearly, I did not have this reaction. The event signaled I was (mis)led by colleagues and the larger administration that the conference was vital for honing students' and faculty's understanding of critical media literacy.

## **New Twists and Turns**

### *Recognizing Power Struggles and Minor Threats*

All was moving along in the Ed.D. program without too much intrusion except for the behind closed-door criticisms from the faculty, until we began to feel some rumblings from the Provost, our Department Chair, and the person who held a newly established position of Graduate Dean. The President continued his support and recognized the program was financially sound, recruiting solid numbers, and graduating students. However, the Provost began asking questions about the type of research our students were producing. She was interested in students generating quantitative research, and although she declared she was knowledgeable and supportive of qualitative research, this was not the case. She had conversations with the Dean about her concern. Our Dean did not capitulate to the Provost's demand. She defended our students producing qualitative research and assured her students' research was of high quality.

Although the Department Chair was generally supportive and understood our conflicts with traditional faculty across the College, she, at times, raised concerns about student enrollment when our numbers were absolutely fine. We were running three cohorts of students simultaneously, so even if one of the cohorts was smaller, the other cohorts averaged out the overall enrollment. Nothing ever happened with these concerns because there was always a strong defense and evidence that we were not only holding our own with enrollment, but actually doing better than some other programs in the College.

Now the newly established position of a Graduate Dean at the University enters the mix. I knew this could be a bumpy ride because the Graduate Dean was highly aligned with the Provost over many years working together at the University. As her work rolled out, it became clear she supported standardizing graduate education and research. While I understood the need to have policy for graduate programs and research, this was highly problematic for many reasons, but mostly because the Ed.D. program was the only program at the University doing dissertations. Therefore, a Graduate Dean called for a committee to standardize policy and procedures for masters' programs and the two doctoral programs. Due to lack of response from other academic deans and graduate faculty, the committee work was never formalized.

What did emerge was a subtle power struggle between the Graduate Dean and the College Deans. There was some brief discussion of the Graduate Dean being the one to sign off on dissertations and perhaps attend defenses, but that did not happen. What did happen was the College of Education Dean attending all Ed.D. defenses. There was now a new Dean and she generally supported the Ed.D. program. However, she did do things differently and one of them was to attend dissertation defenses. She did this for several reasons; to advocate for our research,

have a pulse on the topics being studied, and to monitor the work of the faculty. Although it is not normal for a Dean to monitor dissertation defenses, I did not find the behavior problematic.

These examples of some twists and turns were frustrating and annoying, but we stayed on top of everything, spoke up and pushed back, ran a sound program, and kept moving forward even as the neoliberal stranglehold was more visible at the University. While we knew all about what was happening across the country in terms eliminating humanities and critical education in favor of STEM, hiring adjuncts over tenure track faculty, controlling courses and content, and increasing teaching and service loads, this was not happening to the Ed.D. Program. We were continuing to develop the criticalness in the program even during these neoliberal times and maintained the support of the President, Dean, and Department Chair with only what turned out to be minor threats and for twelve years we were not derailed.

### *Growing Concerns*

On the other hand, I believed the precipitous declining enrollment within the College would serve as the impetus to rid the Ed.D. program of its critical bent. When I became a faculty member in the College, the enrollment was approximately 900 students. Due to a several factors, including declining K-12 school enrollments across the state of where the University is located, less resources for school districts to support professional development activities of school personnel, and a growing reality that being a teacher is bound up with preparing students to become test-polluted citizens, the College enrollment dropped to merely 150 students during my final year at the University. Despite the College Dean stating the Ed.D. enrollment was “fine,” there were hallway discussions amongst my Department Chair and several College faculty. The discussions centered on the Ed.D. program being redesigned or establishing a new leadership doctoral program within the College. Both options were designed to cater to students’ market-driven needs. Coursework in transformative leadership and the social foundations of education would be eliminated, and students would complete the doctoral degree without engaging in dissertation research.

Based on the fact that another comprehensive university situated only 15 miles from the University was able to launch a fast-track Ed.D. program and increase tuition dollars and enrollment for its college of education, I believed the Dean would also enter the fray of allowing market-driven impulses shape doctoral leadership studies. If that happened, I did not want to deal with the grim prospect of having to function as a critical pedagogue in a doctoral program more concerned with netting student tuition dollars than supporting students’ growth as transformative leaders and scholars. In the end, declining enrollment within the College of Education, grappling with reprisals from faculty and the administration for launching cultural and intellectual activities dedicated to diversity and social justice issues, and surveillance of students’ research all braided together to position me to leave the University.

### *New Administrative Team and Unknown Support*

Although the Ed.D. program continues to survive, what did begin to derail us was a new administrative regime from top to bottom—President, Provost, Dean, and Department Chair—and a complete structural reorganization of all of the Colleges and Administrative Offices. The Colleges were merged and Education was no longer its own entity, Department Chairs in

Education were reduced, and positions were not filled if open. Sizes of classes were scrutinized and threatened to close if a standard number was not achieved.

The new Department Chair, who was actually one of the doctoral faculty, was showing early signs of becoming a neoliberal administrator. He was obedient to the interests of the new administrative team and made program decisions based on numbers and tuition dollars. This may be seen understandable as a way to keep his job in a precarious situation, but his behavior was shocking given his previous academic critiques of neoliberalism. For example, one of his unilateral decisions was to create a Superintendent Ed.D. program that did not include a dissertation. There is nothing inherently wrong with a Superintendent Ed.D. program, but this particular design was more technical, less scholarly, and would perhaps be more of a draw over the current critical Ed.D. program.

While we were able to resist the previous Provost's attempts to flip the Ed.D. program into a technical program, the new Department Chair appeared to be on course to do just that. This abandonment from one of the key Ed.D. players has become one of the major disappointments for me on this roller-coaster ride. Working with the previous administrators was an ongoing challenge, but it was manageable because there seemed to be a common commitment to the mission of the Ed.D. program and, of course, it helped the program was consistently fiscally sound. Within a blink of an eye, however, when leadership changed and the neoliberal impulses caught hold on the Ed.D. program, the program has begun to falter. It is where were our stories take the most unpredictable turn.

The Department Chair, who was previously one of the doctoral faculty, becomes the Interim Dean of the College. He had already demonstrated his neoliberal tendencies and overall willingness to please the administrative team, so now the threats to the Ed.D. program no longer appear minor. The future is more uncertain than ever. The support of an administrative team is gone and the overall financial status of the University is unclear due to recent budgetary mismanagement and now the current outbreak of COVID 19. In addition, due to the murder of George Floyd, there is a much-needed demand for social transformation. The world all around is shaking and so are the emotions and responses at the University.

## **A Birds Eye View from Above**

### *Influence of Neoliberal Discourse*

Although the roller-coaster ride is still moving and there are more blind corners to come, this is already a 15-year story of what it took to maintain a critical Ed.D. program amid an anti-critical and anti-intellectual context during neoliberal times. The program recruited strong cohorts, was financially sound, and had a higher-than-average graduation rate for comparable doctoral programs across the United States. During the first twelve years of the Ed.D. program, the leadership team provided support by using its power to maintain the continuity of the program. The program consistently had resources to recruit new students, our three full time tenure track positions were maintained, and we managed to survive the threats that came our way.

Yet, the last three years of the new administrative regime were very different. They demonstrated little interest in the Ed.D. program as well as had a limited understanding of the work of the doctoral faculty even though the numbers and budgets were constant. Unfortunately, the

effects of neoliberalism have taken center stage where the focus is on dollars, numbers, and growth of revenue producing programs as well as student assessments and outcomes.

We learned several things from all of this. We learned that leadership matters in reducing some of the devastating effects of neoliberalism. The first twelve years of the program were certainly during neoliberal times nationally and internationally, but the leadership did not eliminate programs with smaller numbers, did not release faculty from programs with limited numbers, and actually instituted infrastructure for faculty to receive release time in order to conduct scholarly work. Naturally, they also scrutinized numbers, tuition rates, graduation rates, but worked with the Deans and our program to deal with any emerging issues.

In terms of the Ed.D. program, perhaps it was the overall commitment of the President of the University and the protection the Deans provided that made the difference in continuing the program with its critical and moral framework. From the beginning, the President wanted a doctoral presence on campus, he provided the necessary resources, and we did our part by providing a top-notch critical program that was both academically and financially sound.

We also learned how quickly things could change when the individuals in charge become neoliberal administrators. The recognition of the Ed.D. program dwindled within the first year of the new administration. For example, during the first year of the new administration, Laurie personally graduated several students at one commencement, and not one word was said about this accomplishment. The previous leadership team would have made a gesture recognizing this work by speaking about the achievement publicly in meetings or sending emails about doing such a fine job. Moreover, the Ed.D. program began to be lumped into the category of masters' programs requiring standardized processes and procedures for research and student assessment. While the Ed.D. program was not on the radar, there was significant attention given to endorsement programs in the leadership department most likely due to the increased applicant pool. Not once was there any attention given to the work it took to recruit Ed.D. students, to provide coursework that was relevant, and to chair huge numbers of dissertations.

Unfortunately, we have come to almost expect neoliberal behavior from the people at the top, but we were taken aback by how quickly it seemed the Department Chair and soon to be Interim Dean assumed these tendencies. This led us to question what it took for a self-professed radical scholar to transform into a neoliberal administrator so quickly. We do not have clear answers and only have our views on the matter, but suggest Foucault's (2008) concept of governmentality may be a helpful lens. Foucault refers to 'mentalities of rule'—the thinking which informs the governing of self and others and how becoming obedient to the government is rationalized. In this case, we think about how the neoliberal discourse becomes rationalized and internalized through techniques and procedures and becomes the way to control oneself and guide other people's conduct. It is possible the neoliberal discourse, which was highly endorsed by the new administrative team, was rationalized by the Interim Dean, and then used as the way to control his own behavior as well as others. He was formed within the neoliberal discourse and appears to have taken on the corporate ideals of neoliberalism. He appears to rationalize his own behavior in the process.

Foucault also refers to 'technologies of the self.' They are practices people take on in order to align with a particular discourse, in this case, neoliberalism. The idea of self-discipline is how individuals form themselves in relation to the discourse. Our former colleague was not only shaped by the discourse, but he also disciplined himself and exercised agency in relation to his own

behavior. Since the University was being reorganized and a threat existed to gutting the Ed.D. program, it was possible that he became the guy who agreed with the top neoliberal administrators, who appeared to not question neoliberal decisions, who befriended faculty across campus who were in positions of authority, established relationships for what appeared to be his own benefit, and began making program decisions that were not reflective of transformative education. He was also aware jobs in critical education programs were disappearing across the United States and he would struggle to secure another academic position.

Yet, we wonder if it is inevitable that a critical educator or leader would compromise his/her criticalness when confronted with neoliberal demands. We know it is not uncommon for this to occur. We have heard over and over how teachers and leaders succumb to teaching a scripted curriculum, administer an overabundance of standardized tests, and feel a lack of freedom to be creative in their teaching. This causes great inner conflicts and ethical dilemmas as they find their behavior regulated in ways they may not agree. In addition, leaders, even with preparation in social justice leadership, find it arduous to promote critical multicultural education, alternatives to evaluation based on test scores, and student led activism and councils. In some of these cases, they know what to do, but do not feel they have the agency or support to do so (Sullivan, 2009; Harvey, 2014; Mrozik, 2014).

It is an important to consider the possibility of maintaining a critical stance in education. We have both reflected on our own leadership histories and behaviors. We know it is difficult to challenge, offer critiques, and be skeptical when interacting with individuals who are promoting the status quo and we have come to recognize that our responses have at times been inconsistent or even complicit. While we certainly have challenged people and critical issues a fair amount, we also have withdrawn when we felt there was little chance for change. We are not sure if those were the right behaviors and we will probably never know. For example, for the last three years, Laurie found herself becoming marginalized within her own department as well as in the College. As a result, Laurie began withdrawing from any involvement in faculty affairs, since her input about programs seemed devalued. However, it is unclear what prompted this and there are so many possibilities and entanglements including her history in the Ed.D. program and perceived preferential treatment. We wonder if that just helped the neoliberal discourse become more dominant or did it matter at all. We also believe it is not inevitable that critical leaders will transform so dramatically as the Interim Dean appears to have done, but we do recognize how difficult it is to stay in the struggle when pushed aside. Therefore, we believe it is vital to explore how educators and leaders can maintain critical practice when it is deemed problematic to do so.

Maybe our experiences will help us remember how our lives and stories are so much like the roller-coaster ride that is unpredictable, complex and always in motion. For us it is crucial to continually consider who we are, what we stand for, and who we are becoming. This 'care of the self' (Foucault, 2008) promotes the importance of personal introspection in terms of becoming who we want to become. Even though we may falter at times, we do see ourselves in a constant state of learning and becoming and hope that will provide a strong guide for our continued commitment to critical education. Perhaps this is one of the practices we can all do to ensure we are not caught in the stranglehold of a pernicious discourse we do not support and are moving in a direction that disrupts the status quo.

*How Might We Respond Now? Would We Redo our Involvement?*

This autoethnography also pushes us to think about how we might respond differently to these conflicts, tensions, and pressures now. Although it is not clear if any different responses would have kept the critical Ed.D. program vibrant, some ideas come to mind. Since we were committed to sustaining a critical leadership doctoral program, we did not nurture relationships with faculty who questioned why the doctoral program was vaulted to an elite status in the College of Education or who did not embrace the theoretical foundation of the program. Instead, we relied upon each other to ensure the program was relevant to students, to maintain enrollment levels, and to showcase the value of the program to the administrators across the University. The fact the Deans associated with the College of Education as well as the President of the University supported the program for twelve years also blocked us from considering how widespread support of the doctoral program from our colleagues may prove vital for mitigating any eventual threats to devalue the program.

Within the first few years of Laurie's time at the University, the Dean was generous in her support and suggested Laurie should pursue a senior leadership position. Although it was a huge compliment, Laurie was not interested in engaging in many technical aspects of academic leadership, such as accreditation, compliance, marketing, and enrollment. Maybe not perusing a leadership position was a mistake. Laurie should have been more open to this opportunity because Laurie may have been able to garner additional support for the doctoral program across the University and establish additional programmatic offerings in the event new leadership frowned upon critical education programs. However, as it turned out, if Laurie held a senior leadership position, Laurie would have had a difficult time nudging the current leadership regime to get beyond valuing academic programs in purely neoliberal terms--whether they are economically viable and satisfy students' market-driven needs.

Clearly, upon further reflection, less judgment of the College faculty, more reaching out to faculty across the University, and more willingness to assume administrative positions probably would have been wise moves to maintain the vibrancy of the doctoral program. Yet, Bauman (2000) reminds our actions often have a fleeting impact on our social world because we live in a state of continual flux where "change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty (p. viii). As the doctoral program currently now has only one dedicated faculty member, there are changes in what counts as teaching load, the overall number of active cohorts is decreased, and there is an overall emphasis on certification programs, it is important to remember we live in a time of instability and ambiguity, and programs will change as well. Flexibility and openness to new possibilities will serve us well as we try to hold on to what we value while transforming into unknown territory.

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