



# Infusing gender and diversity issues into educational leadership programs

## Transformational learning and resistance

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to consider the impact of incorporating a set of readings focused on issues of gender, diversity, leadership, and feminist thought into the curriculum of a statewide educational leadership doctoral program.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based data from open-ended surveys, semi-structured interviews, and reflection statements, the article presents a qualitative analysis of how students react to, learn from, and resist social justice-oriented curricula and teaching strategies, particularly those related to gender issues.

**Findings** – The analysis of the data collected in this research suggests that, after a year of exposure to readings and written assignments about gender and other diversity issues, few students had undergone significant transformations in their learning regarding gender issues. Moreover, it was found that many students demonstrated resistance to reading, reflecting on and discussing gender issues.

**Originality/value** – Programs and professors that endeavor to prepare leaders who are transformative, require transformative teaching practices that assist in the development of such leaders. When content includes issues of diversity, our findings indicate that it is particularly important that faculty increase their knowledge of student responses to difficult content and transformative teaching strategies.

**Keywords** Leadership, Transformational leadership, Equal opportunities, Sex and gender issues, Feminism

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Inclusion of diversity issues in educational leadership preparation programs is important if current and aspiring educational leaders are to attain higher levels of cognitive learning such as transformational learning – defined for this article as learning outcomes that enable the learner to critically reflect upon, communicate, and shift, if necessary, pre-existing assumptions, biases, and paradigms (Cambron-McCabe *et al.*, 1991; Mezirow, 1990; 2000). However, only a handful of programs actually include such issues (Rusch, 2004). Instead, most educational leadership programs continue to espouse theory that is dominated by one (or a mixture of) four theoretical foundations: rational, mechanistic, organic, and/or bargaining models (Young and McLeod, 2001). Although such programs offer a necessary, but often thin, body of “core knowledge”, research (e.g. Marshall *et al.*, 1996) suggests that such narrowly framed curricula do not



encourage students to step outside of a structural functional paradigm to solve problems. In addition, anecdotal evidence from practicing administrators suggests that the role of educational leaders is far too complex for such limited training to be effective, particularly for leaders who are committed to advancing social justice within their schools and districts.

Due to these limitations of traditional approaches to educational leadership preparation, the importance of infusing transformational learning experiences into preparation programs, particularly experiences with diversity, recently has begun to gain attention (Larson and Muradha, 2002). Over the next decade, we are likely to see an increase in the number of educational leadership preparation programs that emphasize issues of diversity, ethics, and equity and utilize transformational learning to train leaders who will be better able to advance social justice in their schools and districts as well as in their communities and society at large.

Programs such as these that are redesigned for transformative learning, particularly around issues of diversity and social justice, may usher in a renaissance in curriculum and pedagogy for our field at both national and international levels. Initial research on programs redesigned for such purposes indicates that emphasis is being placed on critical reflection, problem-based learning, and the inclusion of critical theories and leadership literature that emphasizes ethics, diversity and social justice (Hafner, 2005). Furthermore, these redeveloped programs are highly likely to present new challenges for the faculty teaching in them.

One key challenge for leadership faculty in redesigned leadership preparation programs will be supporting student learning in the wake of student resistance. Transformational learning involves a reevaluation of personal values and beliefs. As a result, students respond in a variety of ways – from excitement to depression and from resistance to rage (Capper and Young, n.d.).

The purpose of this article, thus, is to explore this issue – student resistance to transformational learning around issues of diversity and social justice. The authors are currently engaged in a multi-year investigation of student learning within an educational leadership program that has been redesigned to support such transformational learning outcomes. Although the educational leadership preparation program that is the subject of this research has infused multiple diversity and justice issues into its curriculum – including race and social class – the discussion in this article centers on the program's efforts to engage students in transformational learning around issues of gender. We understand clearly that gender interacts in complex and complicated ways with other diversity issues, particularly with race, and we acknowledge that students' experiences of transformational learning about gender are necessarily intertwined with transformational learning in other areas. Nonetheless, it is simply not possible to study everything that is conceivably related all at once, nor is it possible to report it all in a journal-length article. Thus, our focus here is specifically on learning and resistance in relation to issues of gender. We were particularly interested in studying the results of the program's adoption of a gender-focused book, *Reconsidering Feminist Research in Educational Leadership*, as a required text. This book was used in several courses, but most significantly, it was used as the key textbook for the program's online discussion and reflection course.

This research has provided us with important insights into how students react to, learn from, and resist social justice-oriented curricula and teaching strategies,

particularly those related to gender issues. Within this article, we share reactions of students involved in the focal educational leadership program to social justice curricular content focused on gender. We begin by providing a review of literature in two key areas. The first identifies the conditions necessary for transformational learning to occur in adult learning environments. The second delineates several different types of resistance to transformational learning. Following the review of literature, we discuss our research project, provide a brief overview of the program under examination, and describe the intended learning outcomes, particularly those associated with diversity and transformational learning. Subsequently, we discuss our research methods and then present our findings.

### **Transformational learning and student resistance**

Much has been written about social justice and transformational learning. Thus, we have focused our review around two areas of the literature that we found particularly important: literature explicating the necessary conditions for transformational learning to occur and literature describing and explaining student resistance to instruction designed to support transformational learning.

#### *Necessary conditions for transformational learning*

According to Mezirow (2000), transformational learning is a high-level cognitive learning outcome in which students shift preconceived assumptions and biases about issues related to diversity and subsequently change their actual leadership behaviors. Mezirow's work articulates two learning conditions necessary for transformational learning to occur. The first is instrumental learning or learning from one's own experiences. The second is communicative learning, which stems from an interrelationship between a person's assumptions and socially constructed meanings embedded in a workplace culture. According to Schon (1987), shifts in students' assumptions and biases will only occur if students engage in intensive critical reflection on personal experiences and about the culture of the organizations they lead.

*Instrumental learning.* Instrumental learning is a necessary condition to transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990). It involves the development of a foundational knowledge base spanning personal and institutional boundaries. To support instrumental learning about diversity and social justice, programs must expose students to various types of diversity literature and must foster students' ability to synthesize the information. Information synthesis extends beyond having a working knowledge of a topic or idea to comparing and contrasting opposing views (e.g. views on social justice) and considering them on multiple levels (e.g. individual *vis-à-vis* institutional). Fostering instrumental learning will support students' ability to think more critically about the information, opinions, and anecdotes they encounter in their personal and professional lives. If instrumental learning is adequately supported, communicative learning is likely to emerge (Marsick, 1990; Schon, 1987).

*Communicative learning.* Communicative learning is another point of progression along the path toward transformational learning. Communicative learning involves a deeper understanding of the interrelationship between personally held assumptions and biases and socially constructed meanings. Marsick (1990) and Mezirow (1990, 2000) describe this process as making a linkage between personal meanings and socially created consensual meanings embodied in an organization's culture.

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Communicative learning can be supported by providing opportunities for both critical reflection and constructive dialogue related to challenging issues that are both grounded in theory and reflect different personal perspectives and contextual settings.

Communicative learning can lead toward transformational learning when students are provided opportunities to critically internalize theory and to reflect on its applicability to their practice and organizational settings (Mezirow, 1990, 2000, p. 23). According to Marisick (1990), "Having the time to critically reflect on our leadership behaviors and actions may seem like a luxury, but in fact, educators and CEOs who allow this luxury are beginning to understand the importance of this act on the livelihood of the organization."

### *Student responses to transformational learning*

Central to transformational learning is the reexamination of one's own belief systems and reflection upon the impact that one's assumptions and biases can have on others (Mezirow, 1990, 2000). Transformational learning provides a "process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). As such, supporting transformational learning among adults is a highly volatile area of pedagogy. As Marsick (1990, p. 38) points out, "When working with issues and concerns that touch on people's self-perception, powerful feelings and long-held distortions are bound to come to the surface."

Interestingly, little of the literature on transformational learning or social justice teaching focuses on student responses, though there are some exceptions. For example, Ladson-Billings (2001), found that resistance to learning about diversity may span several topics such as race, gender, or class or may emerge regarding a particular issue such as gender or race. Higgenbotham (1996) noted that student resistance falls within a range of behaviors from non-participation to vocal opposition. Others have suggested that such behaviors stem from deeper feelings of shame, despair, guilt, and anger (Chizhik and Chizhik, 2005; Lather, 1991).

Resistance is typically considered a negative characteristic that impedes growth; however, we consider resistance to be a natural response to transformational learning pedagogy, which can, if addressed, promote learning. It is not a reaction that faculty should fear or use as a rationale for avoiding the inclusion of controversial content in the curriculum. The fact that students resist indicates that they are engaging with the course material. Two of the most complete analyses of student responses to social justice teaching are provided by Adams *et al.* (1997) and Capper and Young (in press). Capper and Young described three overarching categories of resistance to learning about social justice – distancing, opposition, and intense emotions – each of which can support or impede learning.

*Distancing.* Capper and Young (in press) described distancing as a response students use to remove themselves from the negativity associated with prejudice and discrimination. Distancing allows students to discuss and analyze isms without having to implicate themselves. Capper and Young identify several distinct distancing behaviors. For example, some students will view "isms" (i.e. racism, sexism) as existing only at the individual level; thus, they will believe that institutions like schools or policies could not be homophobic or sexist. Another way students may distance themselves is by denying ownership of privilege. Typically, students who do this are somewhat willing to

focus on oppression and how it operates to the disadvantage of certain groups, but they are less- or un-willing to discuss how oppression advantages other groups, particularly those groups of which they are members. Another form of distancing involves creating a hierarchy of oppression. For example, even though faculty may include classism, sexism, and racism equally in their curricula, some students may think of social justice, diversity, and oppression only in terms of race. As a result these students, particularly if they work in middle- and upper-income communities populated mainly by Whites, may believe that social justice is an issue for other communities and for school leaders from racially and ethnically diverse areas only.

*Opposition.* Another form of student resistance to transformational learning posited by Capper and Young (in press) is opposition – individual student behaviors that undermine their own and their classmates’ or colleagues’ learning. Unlike distancing, which enables students to learn about an aspect of diversity though from a distance, opposition typically involves an active resistance to learning.

One form of opposition involves stating truisms, such as “slavery is over” or “women and men are equal, so we should just move on.” Such phrases not only indicate an unwillingness to engage with certain issues, but they also invalidate a group’s experience. A second form of opposition involves presenting personal anecdotes as generalized facts; in some cases, this can even lead to flipping an issue. Issue flipping occurs when students use anecdotes or questionable research to deny that a certain form of discrimination exists (e.g. sexism) or that the oppressor group is really the one that is oppressed (e.g. in the case of affirmative action, Whites are being oppressed). A third form of opposition involves refocusing the class discussion on the students’ own battles with oppression, effectively derailing class discussions. Here the student focuses on his or her own target group membership (e.g. a White male focuses on his social class) and uses past experiences as a member of this historically oppressed group to resist thinking about the privileges they receive from their current, dominant group memberships. A final form of oppositional behavior involves invalidating the faculty member or course content by suggesting, for example, that the faculty member has some sort of “ax to grind” or that the reading material is biased because the author had an “agenda”.

*Intense emotions.* Although intense emotions may be a necessary component of transformational learning (Marsick, 1990), intense emotions also can serve as a form of resistance that can both support and impede learning. Capper and Young (in press) describe three types of intense emotions that signify a student’s struggle with the material. The first is guilt about one’s own dominant group membership and the second involves anger about oppressive conditions. The third form of intense emotions associated with resistance to learning about social justice is “fear about being perceived as a bigot”. This form of resistance is evidenced by non-participation in class discussions or participation that is not authentic to the person’s actual behaviors and feelings.

Faculty should consider these forms of student resistance – distancing, opposition, and intense emotions – as a normal and accepted aspect of any course attending to social justice issues. However, as Mezirow (1990, p. 357) reminds us, “Educators who administer programs for the public have a professional obligation to foster transformational learning by offering challenging programs designed to encourage learners to critically examine internalized social norms and cultural codes in courses and workshops.”

## The research project

### *Context and participants*

Our research took place within a statewide Ed.D. program designed to prepare educational leaders for PK-16 educational institutions and to foster transformational learning outcomes (see, Mezirow, 1990, 2000; Mountford, in press). The program utilizes a cohort delivery format in which candidates (103 enrolled in the current cohort [60 F/43M]) are admitted as a group and take all scheduled coursework together over six contiguous semesters.

In 2003, the program's coordinating board agreed to alter the curriculum to formally include issues of diversity and social justice. This was accomplished by creating seminar courses that focused on diversity issues. These courses were specifically developed to expose students to literature and research on issues of race and gender and to engage them, year-round, in reflective exercises designed to evoke instrumental and communicative learning around these issues. The seminars ran concurrently with other face-to-face courses, but were delivered to all students online by faculty from the main campus. The face-to-face courses covered fairly traditional educational leadership topics such as organizational theory, leadership, program evaluation, and methods courses.

The objective of the redesign was to facilitate and foster students' ability to reflect on and discuss issues of diversity across course topics. Program designers made this change for two primary reasons. First, designers believed that student understanding of and discussions concerning educational leadership theory and practice would be enlightened and supported if students gained a deeper understandings of diversity and its implications for leadership. Second, results of the end-of-coursework program evaluations from three previous cohorts revealed that students rarely, if ever, mentioned issues of diversity or social justice as important components of the program.

Of the 103 leadership candidates enrolled in the cohort we studied, 28 volunteered to participate in our research. Of the 28 candidates that participated, nine were males and 19 were females. Four of these candidates were students of color. The cohort was approximately 50 percent female and male; thus, the participant group was not perfectly representative with regard to gender. However, the racial participation was representative.

### *Design and methods*

In our attempt to understand how the participants in our research perceived, talked about, and made use of the feminist literature on educational leadership that had been incorporated into their coursework, we designed a data collection process that we believe supported our participant's ability to communicate with us and to break their "silence on women's issues in educational administration" (Skrla, 2003, p. 107). Specifically, we developed a study that used a qualitative research design implemented in stages over the course of two years; it utilized open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Analysis of the resulting data enabled us to develop a rich understanding of the nature of candidates' reactions to and reflections on exposure to feminist literature in educational leadership.

Our project was initiated at the beginning of the semester in which the book *Reconsidering Feminist Research in Educational Leadership* was assigned to candidates as one of the key readings for the year-long diversity seminar. This book, as its title indicates, is a collection of feminist research focused on educational

leadership. Contributors to the book not only discuss issues such as women in the superintendency and educational policy from a feminist perspective, they also challenge the methods and epistemologies traditionally used to research such issues in educational leadership.

Before candidates were assigned readings from the *Reconsidering* book, though after they were aware the title of one of the assigned texts would be, we invited them to complete a short open-ended questionnaire regarding their thoughts on the assignment of this particular reading, the impact of gender issues in their lives, and women whom they have admired. Then, at the end of the first semester of coursework candidates were invited to respond to a second open-ended questionnaire. This second set of questions was parallel in format and focus to the first set, although not identical. The two questionnaires were structured in this way to capture any changes in the candidate's responses that might be related to their exposure to assigned readings and assignments.

At the end of the first year, we invited all students in the cohort to participate in a semi-structured qualitative interview. We encouraged the 28 students who had participated in Phase I of our project to participate in the interviews; 22 of the original 28 students as well five other students who had not participated in the first stage were interviewed for a total of 27 (18F/9M) interviews[1]. Interviews were designed to capture student perceptions of the development of their own learning concerning gender and women's issues in educational leadership.

#### *Data analysis*

The constant comparative method of data analysis was initiated soon after we completed the interviews. This process was facilitated through the use of critical partner dialogue, whereby team members met frequently to discuss ideas, themes and questions about the data, and through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). After unitizing the responses to the interview questions, both as separate sets and holistically (i.e. identifying units of information within candidate responses), we modified our coding. We continued this process until we found an "emergence of regularities" (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, p. 350).

Because the findings from our initial analysis suggested evidence of student resistance to learning about gender, as a secondary analysis, we deductively explored our interview transcripts for evidence of the various types of resistance posited by Capper and Young (in press) – distancing, opposition, and intense emotions. Comparative pattern analysis was used to illuminate recurring patterns in the data. We searched for patterns that converged into categories exhibiting "internal homogeneity" and "external heterogeneity" (Patton, 1990, p. 403).

#### **Findings and discussion**

Transformational learning is a high-level cognitive learning process that involves shifts in preconceived assumptions and biases and, subsequently, changes in one's behaviors (Mezirow, 2000). Change, then, is essential. Results from the analysis of the qualitative interview data indicate that most students believed that their beliefs had changed to some degree as a result of exposure to feminist literature, though fewer appeared to have changed their behaviors. Results also demonstrated the existence of student resistance to transforming beliefs and behaviors about gender issues. Finally,

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results also indicated that certain aspects of the Ed.D. program's design impacted student's learning transformations. Transformational learning and

We have organized our discussion of these findings into three sections:

- (1) transformational learning;
- (2) resistance; and
- (3) program design.

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Within each of these three sections we present both our findings and a discussion of our findings – our sense-making of the data. As much as possible, we use participants' own words to demonstrate patterns and to make our points.

### *Transformational learning*

At the beginning of our interviews, we asked students to define transformational learning; we wanted to make sure students would be able to understand several of our subsequent questions. Most students (19) demonstrated a fair understanding of transformational learning, suggesting most frequently that transformational learning changes the way a person thinks and acts. For example, it was not uncommon to hear definitions like Angie's[2]: "Transformational, to me means that you are taking ideas, internalizing, and being able to change your own way of thinking and your own actions in accordance with it." Others, like Max, expressed a more in-depth understanding of transformational learning:

It's, in my eyes, it's about looking at myself in the mirror and making sure that I am growing in different directions, positive and sometimes negative, because sometimes you'll look at yourself and say, "That's a dark area I don't want into," but you're forced to do that in the program. . . It's [less] about getting something that sits on a shelf or a document in a picture frame on the wall, but actually becoming something.

Unlike these students, a small number of others appeared to confuse transformational learning with transformational leadership and provided us with a definition for that concept.

Although the majority of students understood what was meant by transformational learning, when asked about their own learning transformations, not one student voluntarily mentioned changing ideas and/or behaviors specifically related to issues of diversity in general or issues of gender, specifically. Only when researchers probed about gender did a handful of students provide clear examples of how their thinking about such issues had changed as a result of being exposed to various readings on the subject. For example, Marcia said, "I didn't realize that you could approach research through a critical feminist perspective, and I didn't realize that that was even legitimate, and I do think that it is now." Whereas Marcia clearly changed her viewpoint on what "legitimate research" was, Amanda believed she had transformed her beliefs and assumptions. Amanda explained that she felt she had become more perceptive about herself and others. Amanda was not alone. A number of students believed their beliefs and practices had changed.

It appeared, however, that students' perspectives changed more than their behaviors. Few students ( $N = 3$ ) provided examples of how their leadership behaviors had or were changing as a result of being exposed to diversity literature. It became evident through our data analysis that most students had experienced instrumental



learning transformations but few had experienced communicative transformations, particularly with regard to gender issues.

### *Resistance*

In our deductive analysis of the data, we looked for evidence of the three types of resistance described by Capper and Young (in press) – distancing, opposition, and intense emotion. In the following sections we provide examples of different types of resistance to learning about gender and women’s issues evident in student interview transcripts.

*Distancing.* The most common form of student resistance found within student transcripts was distancing, specifically students tended to refer to sexism as something that existed but did not impact them personally and to deny male privilege. With regard to the former, seven female students asserted that those who really needed to change their attitudes about gender were the men. For example, when Becky was asked whether feminist material should be incorporated into the curriculum, she replied, “Certainly that literature needs to be brought up because my guess is they’re [men are] not going to read it on their own.” However, we found within the same interviews that these women expressed sexist opinions or, for example, referred to themselves as lucky “for having husbands who help out around the house.” Similar inconsistent comments were found in the transcripts of nine other women.

Another way in which distancing emerged involved denying that one had ever been personally impacted by gender bias or sexism. For example, one female student stated “I really don’t think about gender, I really don’t” and then went on to explain that she was “gender blind.” Another female student asserted “I have not experienced [sexism] myself. I understand that there are lots of ladies that have . . . I really think that in our district they are looking for the best person.” Later in her interview, this student provided an example of treatment that any civil rights lawyer would certainly classify as sexual harassment.

We found 13 examples of students who exhibited awareness of the existence and pervasiveness of sexism and gender bias, but deemphasized the role that dominant and subordinate groups played in maintaining that level of societal discrimination. Comments like “Yes, it is sexist to think that women are collaborative and men aren’t, but we really can’t blame that on anyone in particular can we?” revealed that some students were uncomfortable addressing the issues directly, preferring instead to intellectualize about them.

A final example of distancing was found in the transcripts of several males, who distanced themselves from White male privilege. Two, for example, pointed out that women were actually the privileged sex in education because they were preferred over men for administrative jobs. Another, described his professional wife and daughters as having all of the power in the home. Interestingly, five women made similar comments. These examples of distancing behavior demonstrate how students keep sexism and male privilege at arm’s length.

*Opposition.* According to Capper and Young (in press), opposition behaviors tend to undermine students’ own and their classmates’ learning. Among the various forms of opposition students can exhibit, we found that invalidating a group’s experience, protecting the dominant group, and invalidating the teacher or course content to be the most prevalent forms of opposition demonstrated by the students we interviewed.

Five men and eight women expressed the opinion that women were no longer oppressed and that sexism was something that rarely occurred. These types of comments, though subtle, invalidate the experience of women who have experienced gender bias and sexism and reveal a clear lack of understanding of the way sexism operates at multiple levels (individual, institutional, cultural, societal).

A more specific example of invalidating another's experience appeared in Diane's comments about on the chapters from *Reconsidering*:

The piece I did not like the most was the Chicana feminist piece. We bring baggage with us, and sometimes we can set our baggage down and sometimes we can't . . . I was grating the whole time – get through it, apply it, use what you can out of it, and then move on to the next piece.

In this example, the student seemed to be suggesting that the women described in chapter had no legitimate reason for expressing the concerns they did about sexism, and, instead, invalidated their concerns, referring to them as baggage.

Protection of the dominant group, another oppositional strategy, most frequently occurs when discussing issues of gender. We saw eight examples of women, for example, denying that sexism exists, and, as explained earlier, we also found examples of both men and women describing men as the real victims of discrimination in today's society. It was interesting, too, how some students talked about discrimination. For example, when Julia was asked if she had witnessed discrimination as a member of the cohort she responded by saying, "One of the [students], he never speaks to me or other women; he just speaks to the men. In my mind this is just a cultural thing, I don't take it personally." Another student, Dorothy, expressed discomfort about the focus on gender bias and sexism because of the way it made the men feel. She further shared, "I've heard discussions of some of the men, and they felt like the feminist literature was being pushed onto them."

Another example of oppositional resistance is invalidation of course content or the teacher. Nine of the 13 students who expressed negative opinions about having to read about issues of gender bias and sexism, suggested they had a problem with the course materials and/ or the person presenting the material. Five of the nine students were male. Clark, for example, responded somewhat cynically when asked about his feeling regarding the inclusion of diversity and social justice materials in the coursework:

I think that that was part of the problems or some of the frustration folks felt because they were having a tough time seeing the connection and wondering why we are even doing this. . .if this was one of the faculty member's agendas being pushed.

Clark raised suspicions about a hidden agenda by faculty members involved in the program suggesting that there could be no other reason for the inclusion of diversity in the program's curriculum other than somebody's preference (or axe to grind). Clark also expressed that he felt the topic of diversity just "didn't fit" into the program. Similarly, Barb stated:

I haven't lived around a lot of minorities, I haven't experienced a lot of gender issues, and I haven't especially been impressed by this book . . . how value added is that for this program? If we are really trying to teach educational leadership, does leadership have to have a gender? Isn't leadership more about action and what you do? . . . I would have rather focused on how to be a strong leader.

Another student invalidated the legitimacy of the readings by saying that she and other classmates found the feminist literature too difficult to read and to understand for

it to be of any use to them or to have any effect on their leadership style. For example, consider Sadie's response to about the inclusion of feminist readings in the program. She stated:

This has actually been one of my complaints – that it is very difficult to read; it is not easy reading. And I don't mean that like I want story books but it is a very...some of the articles are not the easiest to understand. So, the feminist readings are kind of a turn-off.

Comments like Clark's and Sadie's were representative of other students' concerns about including diversity issues in a leadership program.

*Intense emotions.* "Guilt, anger, fear – these are only a few of the intense emotions that students have reported feeling while studying about oppression and social justice" (Capper and Young, in press). Although, feeling and expressing intense emotions can be a sign that students are struggling with material, new ideas, and an expanded awareness, these intense emotions can also cause students to hold on to more familiar beliefs or express their emotions in unproductive ways.

Within the interview situation, students did not exhibit intense emotions themselves. Rather, they shared examples of intense emotional outbursts of their colleagues. Julia and Debbie both pointed to "others" as having the difficulty with the material. Julia, for example, stated:

There was some major negativity about the readings...when we were all together, those discussion were never held in front of [the instructor]...They were held in the back room... [one of the students] is a very, very, conservative real religious man... his perception of those readings... you would just not believe how he took them. He was highly offended. Highly offended.

Similarly, Debbie commented:

There are a lot of my classmates who resent the materials being assigned or who feel like there's too much of the feminist perspective in the classes and in the readings. And I see some anger occasionally in my classmates. I feel that some people who are expressing anger against gender issues being present are people who have never experienced discrimination.

Both Julia and Debbie indicated that comments like these made those in the vicinity uncomfortable, and either shut down helpful conversations or sparked what, in their opinions, were wrong-headed and biased discussions. The students described by Julia and Debbie were clearly angry about having to learn about oppression. Furthermore, outbursts such as these appeared to impede learning.

#### *Program design*

One of the chief complaints that students had about the program design was the lack of adequate time for reflection. This was closely followed by a similar concern – the absence of a forum for discussing the issues to which they were exposed in the on-line seminar. Additionally, although students completed writing assignments[3] about the readings, within which they were to provide concrete evidence of how they applied leadership and diversity theory to their individual leadership settings, a large majority of students interviewed ( $N = 21$ ) believed that writing about the relationship of diversity to leadership practices was inadequate. Consider the following comments, which are representative of this concern:

*Stacey:* I kind of cringed when we first got the book and realized that's what all of our writings were going to be about for fall and spring. . .because you had to make the ties yourself, you wrote a paper but you never talked about them. You never made a connection so it almost felt like busy work.

*Randall:* It doesn't matter what information we are dealing with, whether it is feminist research, ethical research, or whatever it is, the point is to allow people to take that information and grow with it. And if we are not talking about the information at our regional sites, we can't learn from other people.

These students' comments clearly indicate that they would desire an opportunity for conversation. Student comments indicate, however, that faculty teaching the face-to-face courses were not discussing the diversity issues raised in the online seminars[4]. Therefore, students were left to grapple with the materials primarily on their own and through writing assignments.

Students also expressed that their own busy schedules and the abundance of readings also made it difficult to reflect on the material. For example, Stu said, "There is only so much that you can read and at some point. . .you're reading to get read as opposed to comprehending the material."

Along the same lines, Cyndi said, "The struggle came with my desire to process the readings, and we didn't always have time to do that."

For students to undergo transformational learning, several learning components must be in place. First, student must be exposed to the diversity material so they have the tools with which to rethink their positions. Next, they must have a forum (which includes adequate time) to reflect critically on the issues. Finally, Marsick (1990) espouses that students must have a forum in which to converse about the issues if a transformation is to occur. Although students were exposed to diversity materials, it appears that many lacked both adequate time to reflect as well as a forum in which to dialogue and learn.

### Conclusion

In an ongoing effort to find successful pedagogical activities in educational leadership programs targeted toward transformational learning, particularly around issues of diversity, we examined responses from students involved in a program explicitly designed for this purpose. Our analysis of the data collected in this research suggests that, after a year of exposure to readings and written assignments about gender and other diversity issues, few students had undergone significant transformations in their learning regarding gender issues. Moreover, we found that many students demonstrated resistance to reading, reflecting upon and discussing gender issues. Although, most examples of resistance indicated that students were engaging with course materials, some students were practicing a less productive form of resistance – opposition – which could serve as a major barrier to learning if left unaddressed.

Importantly, a majority of the students shared that the lack of forums for conversation about the materials and inadequate time for reflection on the materials were key barriers to their ability to internalize the material and change personal and professional behaviors. This finding is important to program design. Although, on the surface, it may seem that the time the pedagogical components of transformational learning require (instrumental and communicative learning) outweigh the reality of time that many students who are involved in these types of programs have, there may be creative ways to provide students with the forums and time they believe they need.

Program designers may want to evaluate, for example, the time dedicated in all courses to discussing issues of diversity and social justice. It may be that, while these issues are emphasized in the online course, that they are not provided adequate time or attention in face-to-face courses. It would also be beneficial to evaluate the learning activities structured and required throughout the program. Learning activities, such as action learning projects that emphasize critical reflection, could be incorporated throughout the program to support on-going student growth.

“Every adult educator has the responsibility for fostering critical self-reflection and helping learners plan to take action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 357). We need leaders who are transformative, who are both active, reflective scholars and practitioners. We also need transformative teaching practices that incorporate issues of diversity and assist in the development of such leaders. However, as our data suggests, we cannot assume that simply because we teach, that students will learn. Faculty must increase their knowledge of student responses to teaching strategies and course content that support transformation learning around issues of diversity.

### Notes

1. Additional students were interested in being interviewed but did not contact researchers in time to participate.
2. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of our participants.
3. Connection Statements are written assignments for the online professional seminars in which diversity and social justice is the primary focus. Students begin by synthesizing the theory presented in the diversity readings with the readings assigned in their other face-to-face courses. Then, students apply the main ideas generated through their synthesis to a K-12, higher education, or industry organizational setting and discuss the implications of the synthesis at an organizational level. Subsequently, students critically reflect on and write how their newly assimilated knowledge has directed or changed their own personal leadership practice. In order for faculty to authenticate whether the student's new knowledge base is, in fact, impacting his or her practice (or that transformative learning is occurring) students must provide an “artifact” or evidence related to their perceived shift in practice from their own setting.
4. One exception was noted by two students. In one course, the instructor had the students discuss an article from *Rethinking Feminist Research in Educational Administration*, and the students found this to be helpful.

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### Further reading

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