

## **HARD PIVOT: COMPULSORY CRISIS LEADERSHIP EMERGES FROM A SPACE OF DOUBT**

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*July 2019. Twenty-five educational leaders begin the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, an executive doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania. Bonds are formed in its crucible of intensity. Eight months later, March 2020, we prepare to launch individual pilot research studies in our contexts of our leadership practice. The coronavirus pandemic strikes and waves of COVID-19 closures wash over everything.*

### **Orientation: 25 Strangers**

We sought this space. We sit in a circle: strangers. We know generalities: we are a collective, situated between leadership and scholarship. We represent every education sector and locale, a range of career trajectories, a cross-section of roles, and a spectrum of social identities. We are twenty-five education professionals working and living in locations across the United States, plus one from VietNam, with over 400+ years of shared experience. The average age is 43. We are fifteen women, ten men, fifteen people of color, and ten who identify as White. For the next 36 months we will deepen our understanding of educational organizations, instruction, and learning while continuing to meet the daily demands of educational leadership. The program is designed for diverse groups of working professionals, often at senior levels of educational organizations, aspiring to be more effective leaders while disrupting the status quo.

Yet, sitting in this circle, many experience doubt. Do I belong here? Will I be able to fulfill the program's demands? How will I fit this work into my overfull schedule? Will I make it?

To conclude the orientation and set the tone, the Director presents a cautionary tale. Early 20th century German forestry sought to order trees for efficient harvest but ignored the intertwining subterranean relationships of root systems. The result was blight. Too often, status quo, positivist relational rationality overlooks a potent space: the third space, the in-between, liminal space, from which support emerges and in which sustenance is nurtured (Bhabha, 2004). The parable is clear—we need one another if we are to survive, proliferate, and grow (Brown, 2017), if we are to thrive not only across these next three years but over the decades to follow. Efforts to create deep and lasting impacts within education is not a solitary enterprise. Our work begins.

### **Convergence: 25 Others**

The first week's intensity aligns with the heat of Philadelphia in mid-July. We spend nearly every waking moment together. Over eight days, everything melts together: classes, meals, readings, writings, collaborations, and testimonies. Conversations become personal and introspective. Stories are shared; tears are shed. At any hour, when not in class, we gather in the hotel. The 'club' atop the building offers sweeping views of Center City, South, and West Philadelphia. What forms within this in-between space—both marginal time and ancillary room—is an unconditional, non-transactional bond that exceeds the typical dimensions and constraints found in the construction of human relationships. Its dimensions are elastic, unmeasurable. The bonds are present, yet intangible. They are the sort which build and sustain enduring relationships, the sort needed to steel for the work ahead.

"Othering [is] a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities" (Powell & Menendian, 2016, p. x). Our leader cohort, by design, spans physical, psychological, demographic, geographic, and cultural dimensions. We are each and all a hybrid of unique sets of affinities and histories. We all lead education. Our diverse perspectives, in many senses of the term, enrich the learning experience—they become us.

We convene as a collection of "others." Though in positions of educational leadership, each brings a sense of displacement and isolation—an imposter syndrome—and with that: our reserves of doubt come to the surface (Clance & Imes, 1978). Belonging is an unspoken question. We are challenged to bring an authentic self to the circle. We develop a group identity that begins to defy

the dominant cultures that subject us to performative selves, to struggle at times (Appiah, 2006). By virtue of composition and the bonds forged, the cohort model disrupts colonialist paradigms of rugged individualism with collectivism, a shared sense of responsibility for—and to—one another (Chilisa, 2020).

Unlike many prior educational experiences, it is not about competition, it is about the collective. With diversity of thought and experience, yet like-minded in many ways, it is here in this third space where we can plot the dismantling of the status quo, the “othering” still entrenched in our respective professional and personal settings (Appiah, 2006). There is no place for individualism, ego, or competition in the third space (Bhabha, 2004).

### **Emergence(y): A Cohort**

An executive program, classes continue on-campus one weekend a month. To attend to the substantial work between weekends, we connect through a variety of media. Classes are not compartmentalized nor do they follow a conventional semester schedule. It is an ongoing and endless stream of work that is overlapping (scholarship and practice) and interweaving (individual and shared professional engagement). Over the following months, in the spaces around rather than within the curriculum, the cohort continues to establish its identity and bond. It cultivates a potent, collective power, infused with a deep belief in our ability to lead and traverse educational landscapes with the three intertwined goals: survive, proliferate, grow. Still young, it remains a fragile work in progress.

In March 2020, we prepare to launch the pilot studies, a precursor to dissertations. The coronavirus pandemic strikes and the waves of COVID-19 closures swamp all plans. In a surreal moment of extreme tumult, in the span of hours, we close our schools, shoo the children home, and arrive for class...online. It is a hazy space, full of fear, shock, and pain; a space suspended between past, present, and future. The crisis is still unfolding, we have yet to grasp its enormity as we worry for our students, families, and communities. In this unfamiliar and awkward virtual space, we gather on a frontline, together (Morris, 2020).

Schools are not hospitals. But schools have become a critical vehicle to coordinate and deliver social, emotional, intellectual, nutritional, academic, physical, and communicative support for children and families. We are leaders deep in the trenches without a playbook, precedent, historical accounts, or research. It is an in-between space like no other. Thoughtful agility is a critical survival skill as we grapple with creating a sense of order in virtual schools even as order is absent from the physical world (Imad, 2020; Morris, 2020).

With guidance, leadership, and unwavering support from a professor, the cohort collectively elects to turn away from individual research, and instead study educational leadership in this watershed moment, to consider the inevitable impacts upon the American educational landscape.

How do we, as cohort members who are in-service educational leaders come together as a flux inquiry group to identify and balance our positionalities in the fluidity of the crisis, define our shifting leadership roles in order to respond and console the litany of colleague and community needs, reconcile these needs with our personal self-care needs of mind, body, and spirit through a crisis, all while determining and setting a course of action for our institutions without the benefit of clear data, precedence, or policy? How does the emergent hybridity of our voices, cultures, and experiences come together as an agentic and creative third space of hybridity, emergence, and transformation?

### **Navigation: Leaders in Flux**

With barely a toehold in this new mode and space, the cohort begins to write this book. Practitioner doctoral students, cast into a radically changed landscape, the practice of authoring a book is uncharted territory too. We are documenting a tectonic shift as we live through its uncertain trajectory. The crisis leadership is compulsory: school must continue, but none know how. Then, ten weeks into the pandemic and shelter-in-place orders, George Floyd is murdered at the hands of a White Minneapolis police officer. Floyd's murder sparks global civil actions which erupt into multi-generational civic outrage. Social and educational terrains are profoundly ruptured. Everything is imperiled. A spotlight of truth is shed on the status quo. The cohort's sense of urgency deepens and intensifies. We are hurting.

We pivot from academic plans to scholastic unknowns. We examine unfolding educational crises and imagine anticipated yet unpredictable paradigms. We interview each cohort member. This is research and reflection. As we document personal and professional responsibilities, we seek to better understand the crisis' dimensions, even as we learn how to measure this new geography. Common threads emerge. We lean into our shared leader inquiry as both guide and ballast (Ravitch, 2020).

Instability has become the defining feature of our doctoral education career. We are weathering radical flux in education, both in our respective settings and as a cohort. Through this chapter, we offer the field our leader stories. It is a telling of our reality: how we managed as leaders in education during a time of radical flux. This is what we are thinking and feeling and doing during this pandemic: to keep our sanity, our schools functioning, and our families intact. We share how we--all 25 of us-- stay informed, intentional, and thoughtful in the now blurred third space of professional and personal lives (Bhabha, 2004).

We use this opportunity to meaningfully collect and share our experiences less to record history and more to project impact. It is a book written in a third space: between past and future. We attempt to frame the cohort's evolution, even as it bridges into radical unknowns, with hope to offer something forward. This sense of empowerment is uniquely emergent from the cohort itself. Our work - the work - is about self-care and caregiving, doubt and validation, rituals and boundaries, pleasure and guilt, blurred lines and identities, staying calm and charging forward with urgency, making hasty decisions while maintaining an inquiry stance, supporting strain and venting stress, dismantling the status quo, and honoring the need for familiarity, mourning loss, and celebrating growth. In this chapter we share the empirical research we did to explore all of this.

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