Metaphors of Diversity, Intergroup Relations, and Equity in the Discourse of Educational Leaders

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Building on the idea that “discourse does ideological work” (Wodak, 1996), this article examines how school leaders use metaphors that convey as well as construct concepts of diversity, intergroup relations, and equity. The author draws on data from interviews with school leaders in the United States who were focusing on improving race relations in their schools. An analysis of metaphors in these interviews reveals differing ideologies of equity and intergroup relations. Based on this analysis, the author suggests that professional development programs for school leaders ought to include a critical approach to language to enhance leaders’ awareness of the way discourse creates and reinforces ideologies, and to enable them to use language strategically to support equity-based reforms.

Key words: discourse, metaphor, education, leadership, equity, diversity

School leaders in the United States who are committed to social justice are struggling to end the predictability of which students are the “high achievers” and which students are academically “at the bottom.” They are also working diligently to create environments where students and staff of diverse backgrounds feel physically and emotionally safe, and where differences are respected. Many of these leaders are aware that social and economic inequality, segregation, racism, and other factors underlie many of the problems we see in schools today, including racial and ethnic conflict and the persistent achievement gap. The public discourse of education is replete with language that attempts to capture these goals. At the federal level, we have the “No Child Left Behind” legislation. Locally, many school district mission statements claim to “educate all children to be productive citizens in a democratic soci-

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ety.” One program that prepares educational leaders is designed “to prepare outstanding educational leaders who will create educational equity through transformational change and improvement” in the school districts in the Bay Area (Consortium on Leadership for Educational Equity, 2003, p. 2). Despite these compelling stated purposes, it is proving very difficult to practice equity, or to use a common metaphor, to “walk the talk.” This article shows how analysis of the discourse of educational leadership can help us understand ideologies in practice. In particular, it shows how metaphor, as one dimension of discourse, plays a central role in constructing understandings of diversity, intergroup relations, and equity.

For educational leaders, discourse is, in a very concrete sense, practice. School leaders accomplish much of their work through spoken and written discourse. They use discourse, among other functions, to negotiate change, to address conflicts, to promote a unified school vision, and to either transform or maintain the status quo. Given that educational leaders often talk about diversity, intergroup relations, and equity, it is important to examine how they understand these concepts. Yet the scholarly literature and professional development materials for school leaders reveal little attention to discourse as an important dimension of school leadership.

Some notable exceptions include Corson (1999), who advocated for critical language awareness among teachers, curriculum developers, students, and the wider school community, including its leaders. Miller and Fredericks (1990) use metaphor analysis to examine the educational policy document “A Nation at Risk.” Goatly (2002) examines the metaphors used in the reform proposals of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and finds that “consciously adopted reformist theories of education” were “consistently undermined by commonsense and conventionalized metaphors” (p. 266). A recent study by Briscoe (2003) examines the newsletters of the University Council on Educational Administration (UCEA) to understand how different identities such as students, teachers, board members, and parents are positioned. She concludes that “the discourse of UCEA reenacts many of the power relations found in the context of schooling and society” (p. 23). So far, most of these studies of educational leadership discourse have analyzed formal written documents and policies, rather than oral texts.

Studies like these are important because they connect microanalyses of educational discourse to their larger social context. Goatly (2002), for example, speaking of the constructivist educational reforms in Hong Kong, says, “The conclusion has to be that the progressive thrust of the reform is often compromised by the metaphors chosen or available” (p. 292). By focusing on educational discourse but also examining it in its larger context, we can better understand how educational discourse both constructs and is constructed by the social order. Such analyses also lend themselves to addressing some of the “big questions” in education. For example, why is it so difficult to sustain change in schools, and why do schools in the United States continue to reproduce the achievement gap between racialized groups and European Americans (Hamann, 2003)?
Fairclough (1995) asserts that “it is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values, and identities are taught and learned” (p. 219). If this is true, then an examination of the discourses of school leaders has the potential to reveal how leaders construct the notions of diversity, intergroup relations, and equity. These constructions can in turn help us understand how people in leadership positions might more consciously adopt discursive practices that promote equity. This position argues that discourse not only reveals or displays social relations, but that it also actively constructs those same relations (Luke, 1995).

DEFINITIONS: DIVERSITY, INTERGROUP RELATIONS, AND EQUITY

School leaders often use these three terms to talk about various aspects of their work. Although their meanings are not necessarily shared, I begin with a common base by explaining my own understanding of each term.

Diversity

The term *diversity* refers to the demographic variation in populations. Diversity can encompass a wide range of factors, including race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, physical abilities, sexual orientation, and so forth (Nieto, 2000). In this article, I use the term primarily to refer to differences among racial and ethnic groups. The term diversity is often used to talk about differences without making any value judgments about the groups involved.

Intergroup Relations

This term refers to the quality of relations between people of different social groups, including racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic class groups, gender and sexual orientation groups, and so on. Usually some kind of modifier is placed in front, such as “positive ethnic relations” or “worsening relations.” The more general term, *intergroup relations*, is often preferred when people do not want to be specific about the type of groups involved (Adams, 1997).

Equity

The concept of *equity* is slippery because people often have different understandings of this concept, but assume shared understanding. Many people confuse equity with the more familiar notion of equality. The concept of equality of opportunity assumes that there is a “level playing field” from which all students come, and that if one pro-
vides the same education to all, students will be able to achieve academic success regardless of race, class, gender, linguistic background, and so forth. The concept of equity, on the other hand, means treating students differently because they do not all come from the same backgrounds and enjoy the same privileges and advantages. In other words, equity-based reforms in schooling should prepare all students to achieve high standards and remove the predictability of educational outcomes on the basis of race, class, and so forth. Equity-based reforms should also help students and teachers critically examine whose standards they are meeting and the power relations that undergird these constructs (Corson, 2002). In an equity-based approach, the process of preparing all students to meet high standards and the resources directed toward different individuals and groups will differ depending on students’ background factors (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000).

**METAPHORS AS A FOCUS FOR ANALYSIS**

Why would a study of school leaders’ discourses focus on an analysis of metaphors? Lakoff and Johnson (1980) show that metaphor, far from being only figurative language, is used regularly in everyday discourse. More recently, in 1999, they proposed that metaphors are used to reason with, and that all conceptual metaphors are fundamentally “embodied”—that is, related to the human body and its movement in the world. Once we have accepted a particular metaphor into our discourse, it becomes difficult to think of the concept otherwise. In a very comprehensive analysis of metaphors for Latinos used in the *Los Angeles Times*, Santa Ana (2002) shows how in this public media, California’s demographic changes are repeatedly portrayed through metaphors such as “awash under a brown tide,” “the relentless flow of immigrants,” and “like waves on a beach, these immense human flows are remaking the face of America” (p. 7). The use of metaphors “implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally” (Morgan, 1986, p. 12). Not only does metaphor reveal how we understand our world, it reveals how we conceptualize social relations within that world. As Santa Ana argues, “Even though many scholars continue to assume that such metaphoric expressions are only rhetorical frills, cognitive theorists now argue vigorously for metaphor’s central role in the construction of the social order” (p. 21).

**METHODS**

Educational anthropology has a long tradition of studying the discourse of classrooms, focusing on how teacher talk shapes opportunities for student participation and how participation structures in the classroom are culturally constructed, privileging students who already come to school knowing the discourse of the dominant
culture (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982). This analytical method, however, has not been applied to the realm of school leadership, perhaps in part because of the methodological difficulties of studying the multiple contexts in which school leaders operate. It is not easy to “capture” the discourses of school leadership, which take place in settings as varied as faculty meetings, assemblies, disciplinary interventions, meetings with parents, and other venues. Another possible reason for the lack of attention to the discourses of educational leaders is that educational leadership as a scholarly focus has been influenced primarily by organizational theorists such as Fullan (1999), Barth (1990), Deal and Peterson (1999), and others. These scholars, although they have moved the field forward in many ways, have not shown any particular interest in a focus on language.

My interest in studying the discourses of school leaders came about while I was conducting a large national research project called Leading for Diversity, which documented how school leaders in 21 ethnically diverse schools promoted positive interethnic relations (Henze, Katz, Norte, Sather, & Walker, 2002). Using a case study approach, my colleagues and I conducted over a thousand interviews with school personnel and students, as well as doing observations and collecting records and documents. The initial project focused mainly on the content of what people said and did not take a discourse analytic view. However, I became curious as to whether a discourse analysis of these leaders’ speech would reveal any interesting patterns, and I resolved to return to the database and do secondary analyses when I had an opportunity.

Critical Discourse Analysis

I used Critical Discourse Analysis as the main methodological approach to understand not only what people say but also how they say it and how their discourse is nested in the larger sociopolitical context of school leadership. The definition of discourse I am following in this article is taken from Fairclough (1995), who sees discourse as a “complex of three elements: social practice, discoursal practice (text production, distribution, and consumption), and text” (p. 74). In the Critical Discourse Analysis model he developed, each of these elements need to be analyzed to understand the significant connections among “features of texts, ways in which texts are put together and interpreted, and the nature of the social practice” (p. 74) within which texts arise and make sense.

Sampling the Database

For this analysis, I selected a sample from the original database. My criteria for selection were as follows: (a) the sample should include leaders at all three levels of schooling (elementary, middle, and high school), and (b) the sample should include only principals and assistant principals, with a couple of exceptions to include teach-
ers who played extraordinary leadership roles. I explain the rationale for the second criterion momentarily. Of the 21 schools that were in the original study, 17 are represented in this analysis. The data that form the basis for this article include 46 interviews with 32 leaders representing 17 schools (see Table 1). Some people were interviewed more than once; thus there are more interviews than individuals.

I focused on people in school leadership positions, mainly principals and assistant principals, because they are expected to shape the school’s culture in positive ways (Deal & Peterson, 1999). They are positioned between teachers, parents, and students, on the one hand, and district administrators, board members, and country and state policymakers on the other. Their dominant role in relation to the first group gives them the possibility of using their power and authority in responsible ways to promote policies that foster equity and positive interethnic relations—or not. On the other hand, their subordinate role in relation to district administrators, board members, and county and state policymakers makes them interpreters of dicta coming from those with more institutional authority. They can very easily slip into roles as obedient servants of higher level administrators. Thus, school leaders potentially play dual roles as reproducers of social patterns and as transformers of those patterns.

The schools in the original Leading for Diversity study, however, were a special group, selected because there was evidence that their leaders were doing something positive to address racial or ethnic conflict and promote positive interethnic relations. Some were pursuing explicit equity agendas, whereas others were more focused on creating harmony but not necessarily challenging basic inequities in the system of schooling. In short, some took a more critical approach to diversity. But all were trying hard to make schools safe places where students and staff were respected for their diverse backgrounds, and they had achieved some measure of success at this.\(^1\)

### Interviews as Discoursal Practice

Interviews for a qualitative research study of this type are a particular kind of speech event or discoursal practice in which certain conventions and shared expectations operate (Kramsch, 1998). The interviewers are expected to, and do, ask questions, and the interviewees are expected to respond to the questions. These interviews were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Number of Individuals</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 elementary schools</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 middle schools</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 high schools</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 17</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
part of a larger study in which interviewees were asked to describe and explain positive approaches school leaders use to improve ethnic relations. Although many of the interview questions sought descriptive information about programs and approaches at the school, some questions also asked about administrators’ belief systems.

The content and quality of the interviews were also shaped by the fact that interviewees were explicitly told that the study would have an audience that could potentially be quite broad. They were told that by participating in the study, they would have an opportunity to have an impact beyond the school level. Their thoughts and words might be heard by school administrators across the United States, district leaders, policymakers, teacher leaders, and professors of educational leadership. As a result, the interviews took on an ideological bent to the extent that interviewees saw the interview as an opportunity to advocate for a particular reform, improvement, or belief system. Much like media interviews, these interviews became a public forum for leaders to try to influence the intended audience. As a result, the interviews serve as a rich source of evidence on whatever it was leaders wanted to “sell” to the audience.

Text Analysis

In the analysis of the text itself, I used the QSR Nud.ist program (a qualitative data analysis program). I first coded metaphoric usages in the interviews and labeled them with a word or phrase that was the same as or very similar to their actual expression in the text. For example, if someone used the metaphor “going to that place” to refer to discussions that deal directly with race, I created a code labeled “going to that place.” After reading through the data in this manner, I had hundreds of such labels, each with one or more chunks of text attached to it. I consider these the most grounded layer of analysis and the layer involving the least interpretation on my own part. In QSR Nud.ist, there are two kinds of coding one can do: One is called “free nodes;” these are codes that are not attached or linked in any way to other codes. They allow one to move freely between data records and analysis without subjecting the data to premature categorization and interpretation. Codes can remain unfixed and free as long as one likes. The other kind of coding is called “index tree.” These are codes which are hierarchically related to one another. One can move items quite easily from one system to the other, and back again if necessary.

Eventually, after spending more time with the data, it became evident that certain metaphors I had coded as free nodes were in fact related. When these relations began to emerge, I began to group free nodes into categories such as “vision,” and so forth, and eventually developed a hierarchical classification system for some of the most frequently occurring types.

Once I was fairly confident that I had a workable system, I taught one of my graduate students to work with the data and do some of the coding. She coded approximately half of the interviews, and I coded the other half. Then we switched and checked each others’ coding. We coded only those metaphors that appeared to
be related to the concepts of diversity, intergroup relations, or equity; there were many other metaphors that we did not code because the speakers were not using them to convey these particular concepts.

WHICH SOURCE DOMAINS WERE USED TO TALK ABOUT DIVERSITY, INTERGROUP RELATIONS, AND EQUITY?

Although literally hundreds of metaphors were identified in the database, certain clusters stand out because of their frequency and because they are used specifically to talk about diversity, intergroup relations, or equity. They might also be used more generally to talk about other topics. Table 2 displays these source domains, arranged from the most frequently occurring to the least.

The following sections focus on what can be learned about leaders’ notions of diversity, interethnic relations, and equity by examining the top three source domains—spatial relations, seeing, and communication. A spatial metaphor, also known as an orientational metaphor, is one in which basic physical orientations, such as up–down, on–off, deep–shallow, here–there, and so forth, are used to describe and define things we cannot see. A sight metaphor usually equates seeing with understanding or knowing, and a communication metaphor sets up a likeness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domains</th>
<th>Number of Coded Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spatial relations (includes vertical, horizontal, and contained space)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing (includes vision, lenses, filters, veils, and color-blind)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and communication (includes response, conversation, and voice)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessions (includes ownership of a process, violence free, and having slurs)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mind and body (includes talk versus walk; body parts)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motion&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relations</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixing things</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing cards (race card, etc.)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Motion metaphors, such as “pushing,” and so forth, may also be considered a subcategory of spatial metaphors. For the purposes of this analysis, however, they are considered separately and are not included in the frequency count of spatial metaphors.
between an aspect of human communication, such as conversation or voice, and an aspect of, in this case, intergroup relations or equity.

Spatial Relations

In equity work, down is sometimes good, and up may be bad. One type of spatial metaphor arranges different experiences (target domain) along a vertical axis or hierarchy (source domain), with some experiences and things represented as higher, others lower. Ordinarily, one might expect the upper level experiences to be better, more desirable (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, in the ideology of diversity and equity, the value attached to these locations may be reversed. One leader, in speaking about his school’s decision not to celebrate specific ethnic holidays, stated that “Lifting up any group is also separating.” The common metaphors “top-down” and “bottom-up” also contradict the tendency to assign positive value to things that are higher. Thus “top-down” decisions were generally seen as negative because they do not involve the people at the school level who have the least institutional power, for example, students, parents, and community members.

Equity is deep; other efforts to address diversity are “surfacy.” Along with the frequent reversal of the values attributed to up and down, many leaders used the metaphors of “surface” and “depth” to talk about the tendency of diversity efforts to remain trivial or touristy. Some leaders recognized that this whole area is very complex, and they knew that more needed to be done—not more of the trivial things like assemblies and food fairs, but more of the things that engage people at a deeper level with complex, difficult issues such as power relations, racism, and the continuing underachievement of African American and Latino students. However, many leaders found it difficult to explain exactly what is needed or wanted, referring vaguely to something sustained, or part of the system. In the excerpt that follows, James Keyes, who had recently changed roles from a teacher leader to an assistant principal, comments on the tendency to stay at the surface level:

That’s right, in general, at [our school] we tend to gloss over things and try to make it real pretty and nice package on the outside, but if we really want to improve on our relations with the faculty and the students, we need to get into uncomfortable situations. But [the school’s] not ready to move on and do that yet. We’re keeping it on the surface level, right now. There’s nothing sustained. There hasn’t been any sustained progress toward improving ethnic relations. There’s no system in place. It’s like, you take care of that isolated incident and this isolated incident. They keep calling them isolated incidents, never deal with the situation as a whole.

The metaphor of depth can be a useful cover term for all that is yet inexpressible. One leader said, “I think we need to get more in-depth, along the lines of that
Delpit article.” Apparently this person had read one of Lisa Delpit’s articles (e.g., 1993), and found it emblematic of the kind of emphasis she saw as “depth.” Some leaders may have had difficulty explaining what this depth consists of because they had not yet experienced what they imagined as “depth,” except in brief encounters such as a particularly provocative reading or in-service activity.

In contrast to the difficulty of explaining “depth,” leaders seemed to know very well what is superficial. These things were familiar and easy to name—special assemblies to celebrate diversity, one time retreats, any activity that is merely an add-on and not institutionalized, activities that treat cultures as bounded, traditional objects frozen in time. Principal Frank Hartwell uses the image of cake frosting to convey this superficiality:

We have formed a teacher study committee, … that will help advise us in how to bring that networking program into our normal school operations and not have it be frosting on the cake, which is the way it looks to most staff right now. So that’s something you’re going to want to explore and watch because it’s really institutional; it has the potential for being long term, but right now it looks to most teachers as kind of an add on, done by skilled, pushy white parents.

**Up is explicit; down is implicit.** Many of the vertical metaphors suggest that leaders were aware of an implicit culture–explicit culture distinction and used vertical metaphors to express this. Assistant principal Betsy Kubota, when asked to talk about problems between racial and ethnic groups, expressed this especially clearly:

It’s not like I come to work and think: What’s the racial issue of the day? It’s not that at all. It just doesn’t happen much. Now that doesn’t mean that it’s not happening out there and just not coming to our attention. Kids just walk away from it. But in terms of what comes to the office and what gets elevated, there’s not that much of it.

Kubota, who worked at a very large high school, used the metaphor “what gets elevated” to suggest two things: (a) that the hierarchy of school placed her office in a more authoritative and powerful role (therefore upper), and (b) that there was a social and cultural world that remained implicit from the perspective of school administrators. She was aware that there were probably many racial incidents “out there,” but only a few of those ever crossed her desk. It is on this basis that many school administrators claim that their schools have little racial tension. The vertical location in this case privileges things at the top (surface) with attention; implicit or less overt behavior can easily be ignored or at least overlooked by administrators.

**Different beliefs and experiences are different and distant places.** Horizontal spatial metaphors posit different areas or places on a plane, with different areas having different characteristics. Some of these metaphors are concerned
with concepts of alignment and nonalignment between different people’s ideas or experiences. They provide a way for people to talk about differences without making them hierarchical. For example, one leader explained that in working with a particular staff member, she needed to understand “where he was coming from. That if I didn’t watch how I talk to him, he’s going to be backed up in a corner, madder than …” Here, the person’s past location (source domain) maps onto his past experience (target domain), which is apparently different from that of the speaker. Similarly, people who are “not in the same place” have different beliefs.

Other horizontal metaphors, such as “out there in the community,” create distance between the speaker and the people in that community. If the speaker’s location is in the school, then it suggests that school and community are separate, rather than the school being part of the community.

A very illuminating metaphor is the use of “place” to map onto accusations of racism. In the following excerpt, Larry Mosely, a high school principal, explains how in the past, when the school experienced more racial tension among staff than it presently does, some of the staff members would quickly jump to the conclusion that a conflict among them was racial. Not only does the metaphor recur many times in this excerpt, but Mosely also uses the deictic term that, which creates distance between the speaker and the metaphorical place where people accuse one another of racism:

Because I think there were a couple of people who went to that place whenever the going got tough. When something came up that was hard going, and without taking 100% responsibility, went to a place that, uh, this is about race. And a couple of those people aren’t here. And it has lightened the feeling for other people. I just had this talk the other day with Bernadette. And she said, “you know, I just never knew where that stuff was coming from. I feel like, black woman I am not blind, I know all that stuff is going on but I never saw it here.” And I think that that is probably the prevailing sentiment. We are looking at each other as people working hard, committed, and we are above the fray. We are not going to that place. We might have to go to that place sometimes but I am going to explore every other opportunity first. I am going check on all of the [undecipherable word] we have built up with each other, all of the hard work that we have shared and I’m not going to that place. I am not going to be suspicious of that until the very last, if I have exhausted every other possibility. I am going to give you the benefit of the doubt. I think that’s the working norm here.

Controlling other people’s behavior is keeping a lid on or leaving it at the door. Another kind of spatial metaphor arranges experiences or people in relation to a circle or some kind of bounded area. People and experiences are either inside or outside. These metaphors, not surprisingly, all have to do with either keeping behaviors or people in a place (controlling them), or allowing things or people to enter a place that is seen as desirable. These metaphors suggest that one “place” is more desirable than another. Some student behavior is not desirable, and therefore leaders sometimes speak of containment: “Having a guy like Rich here helps
keep a lid on that and it also helps avoid stuff that might get kids in worse trouble if it doesn’t get nipped in the bud.” One leader used the same metaphor, but indicated some ambivalence, as if the lid stays on by itself and staff do not want to take an active role in keeping it on: “If you look at it, we’ve got a lot of different kinds of kids. And the lid stays on pretty well, yet we’re not aggressive about that.” In other cases, leaders speak not of containment but of excluding something (an undesirable behavior) from the school. Following, Mary Kyle, principal of an elementary school, talks about how she deals with children who use “cuss words” at school:

Same thing with the language, somebody else says something very inappropriate and you know you say you leave that at the door. Umm, You know cause I used to say in middle school and in junior high school, do you use that language at home? And the kids would say yeah. I mean not being fresh. Don’t say that anymore then, to me, I said that’s not what I should be saying to the kids. I say you come to the door, you leave it out there.

**Educational equity is open doors and gates.** Other metaphors in this group pose the school, a course, or the principal’s office, as a place people want to get into. Thus we see metaphors like “gatekeeper course,” “open door policy,” “access,” and “getting the doors open.” In these metaphors, the school or its services have positive value, and the places where people come from, by implication, have less value. Interestingly, only one leader pictured the community as a desirable place where a school leader would want to have doors open for her. Following, Ms. Kyle reminisces about her first days at the school and how important she felt it was for her to get to know the surrounding community and gain acceptance among its mostly poor, African American residents:

She said somebody made a comment out loud in her hearing distance, you know, like, “what’s she coming in the front door for?” It was in a restaurant. I felt so horrible for her, I mean, here’s an educated person that had done so much for me in my professional life, even getting the doors open in the community, my first or second day here, boxes galore, she popped in and said, “Want to see the neighborhood?” and I’m ready to say to her, “Does it look like I want to see the neighborhood?” (laughter) I want to unpack these boxes. I said, “Yeah, I would like to.” and I’m thinking, God, make it quick. Well it wasn’t going to be quick. That was the best move I ever made. Because by virtue of me being with her and being seen that first time, that’s why all the doors opened the second time when I’m going out. …

**Seeing**

**Educational improvement is a vision.** In educational discourse, conventional uses of sight metaphors abound as they do in discourse outside of schools. However, some uses of sight metaphors seem to be particular to the field of educa-
tion. The interviews bear out what most people familiar with U.S. educational discourse would suspect—that the term vision is used quite ubiquitously in educational discourse. In every instance, it is used to refer to a purpose, a goal, a positive sense of the future. It is always given positive attributions, and a lack of vision or a poor vision is always cast as undesirable.

Although the vision metaphor can be used to talk about any kind of goal, it can also be applied more specifically to a school’s ideology regarding diversity, equity, and intergroup relations. Many schools try to capture these goals in a pithy motto often known as a “mission statement” or “vision statement” such as “Diversity is our strength; unity is our goal.”

To be a person of color in a White-dominated society is to look through veils and filters. Racism is a veil or filter. Ideally, vision should be clear. If seeing is understanding, then seeing poorly is not understanding, or understanding poorly. The bodily concept of sight has many entailments, such as poor vision, impediments to vision, and aids to vision (such as glasses, contacts, and shades). In the following excerpt, Betty Medford, an assistant principal at a large high school, had recently read the article “White Privilege” (McIntosh, 1989) as part of a professional development activity at her school. The article is a short, pithy explanation of how the author, a European American woman, benefits from the “unearned privilege” of her Whiteness. At the end of the article, McIntosh lists examples of benefits, such as being able to walk into a department store and know that the security guards will not regard her as a potential shoplifter. Medford found the article compelling and commented on her reaction as follows:

My son-in-law is Tongan. So I then started looking at it through his eyes, because I know some of these experiences. And it’s like wow. It’s no wonder that there are the feelings about life and just daily existence that there are. That for me was where I really heightened my awareness as to why—why is it that it’s always so narrowed down to a bottom line that people of color look through that veil, that filter, and that’s because that’s always been in everything, everything. That list had about every kind of thing that you could think about doing—reading the paper, watching the TV, writing a check, going for a loan—all of that. So it becomes almost the first check that a person must go through, to go through all those filters. Is this happening to me—is it a color reflection? Whereas I don’t experience that and never have.

In the excerpt, Medford uses the metaphor of veils or filters over the eyes to explain her understanding of what it means to be a person of color in a White-dominated society. She suggests that, as a European American woman, it helps her to try to see through the experience (perspective) of a particular person of color—in this case, her Tongan son-in-law—to understand what it is like to be a person of color in this society. She also suggests that people of color have to look through a veil, a
filter of racism in everything they do. They always have to ask themselves whether what they are experiencing is because of their color. She herself has never had to do that. And yet, ironically, to understand her son-in-law’s experience, she realizes that she must try to imagine that same filtering process.

Checking for equity is using a lens to improve sight. Another leader, Janet Tse, uses a similar metaphor when she says that as a district administrator, she has to make sure that “All decisions have to be filtered through an equity lens.” She explains that the “equity lens” means that every decision has to be subjected to (at least) three criteria: “Does it help all students achieve? Does it help to close the achievement gap? Does it help to eliminate the predictability of who’s at the bottom and who’s at the top?”

Treating people equally is being color-blind. Another metaphor related to intergroup relations is the very pervasive one of color blindness. Terri Turner, a middle school principal who is European American, uses this metaphor as she describes how students react when they see photographs she has in her office of her son, whose father is African American:

One other thing, and this is weird, I mean, it’s not anything you can outline in this work, multicultural relationships. I think, with my husband being black, like I have pictures of my son, and kids come in and see Jay and ask, “Who’s that?” and I’ll say, “My son” and they’ll say “He looks black” and I’ll say, “He is” and they’ll look at me and I’ll say, “That’s his dad.” I mean, it’s amazing, I think that’s one of the things that they realize … when they see that, “Oh my, she has a black son” then it’s been easy for me to make the kids realize that Ms Turner doesn’t see color and she treats everybody the same. It’s been an advantage.

As the interviewer, I then asked the following: “Is that really true? I always wonder about that when people say, ‘Oh, I’m color-blind, I don’t see color.’ I’ve heard different opinions about that.” Ms. Turner replied as follows:

You’re right, it’s not that you don’t see color, it’s just that I treat everybody the same, so I can’t say that I don’t see it because of course you do, everybody sees things. One thing the kids have always known wherever I’ve been is they’re going to be treated the same, no matter what. But even though we’re really straight and narrow on this is the way it is and if you don’t follow the rules, you go away, the other little key piece of that is, you can do it very nicely and very humanely. … I can’t tolerate staff members yelling and screaming at the kids or doing something like that. Same thing with security.
Language and Communication

*Demographic changes are questions; children are needy people.* In regions where rapid demographic changes have taken place, educational leaders often preface their descriptions of their own leadership efforts by talking about the changes that occurred prior to their tenure or at the beginning of their tenure. These demographic changes are then invoked as if they were questions that demanded a response. In the following example, Faye Brunswick, an elementary school principal, is discussing the rapid increase in the number and proportion of Mexican immigrant children in her school:

In the earliest stage, I don’t think there was a lot of response until the numbers really started to grow, because basically when the children came into our level, which was the K–2, if they came in speaking little or no English, they picked it up quickly because there were not that many of them, so they were really forced to use the English classrooms. … And then I think we responded by using our extra support programs (at that time I was a title 1 teacher—we called it chapter 1 then). We responded by putting children into smaller groups … then we would pair them with buddies in the classrooms.…

Later in the same interview, Ms. Brunswick talks about the continuing growth of the Mexican immigrant population, and she extends the metaphor of demographic change as a question to one of children as needy people:

From the very beginning, we started visiting, we started reading, we started researching, and … from the second year I was here, there was a plan, however sketchy it was, to try and meet the needs of our children. We started with an ESOL program, staff development. … This staff was already individualized and that’s how we meet the needs of all the children. Whatever the child needs, we’re going to find a way to meet that need.

Several things are worth noting in these excerpts. First, both metaphors presuppose a corresponding action on the part of educators. In the first case, a demographic change is a question that requires a response, and in the second case, children are needy people who require a “response” or whose needs must somehow be “met.” “Meeting the needs” makes it appear that the children are deficient and the educators have to somehow fulfill their needs.

Second, both metaphors suggest a certain objectivity on the part of the speaker. This is due to the structural nature of these metaphors as adjacency pairs. One of the fundamental units in conversational analysis, adjacency pairs “always consist of a first part and a second part produced by different speakers” (Yule, 1996, p. 79). When a speaker utters the first part, he or she immediately creates an expectation that the other speaker will utter the second part of the same pair. “Failure to produce the second part in response will be treated as a significant absence, and hence
meaningful” (Yule, 1996, p. 79). By casting demographic changes as questions that require a response, and children as needy people whose needs must be “met,” the leaders in these interviews create a sense that their actions are natural and normal. The specific nature and significance of the demographic changes and the nature of the children’s presupposed needs are not questioned. Furthermore, the educators’ actions in response to those demographic changes or needs appear logical and natural because they are simply doing what is expected in a two-part sequence.

Although Ms. Brunswick refers to “our children” or “all the children” and does not specify “immigrant children,” it is clear from the foregoing discussion of demographic changes that she is referring to Mexican immigrant children. Neediness seems to be strongly associated with immigrant, non-English-speaking children in this interview. In other interviews in this database, the concept of needs is similarly associated with nonmainstream students.

Talking about racial and ethnic relations is a dangerous conversation.

Another group of metaphors calls attention to the dangers involved in taking a leadership role in areas such as diversity, intergroup relations, and equity. The terms conversation and dialogue play a multifaceted role in many leaders’ discourse about diversity, intergroup relations, and equity. In the first excerpt, Pauline Johnson, an assistant principal of a small urban high school, explains how, after 3 years of talking about diversity issues at the school but not really making any changes, the staff decided to have a consulting group come in to work with staff members: “They came in and did some training and introduced some tools; they gave us three tools that we could use to kind of structure safe conversations, safe dialogue, but get to the real issues.”

At a large urban middle school, principal Gail Evans also discusses the staff’s ability to communicate about racial issues:

It’s one of those unwritten things, after four years, we’ve worked together so long, that we don’t have to ask, “Is this conversation OK to have now?” We don’t have to ask that anymore. Because you [the research team] wouldn’t be here if this conversation wasn’t OK.

Conversation, in its everyday usage, is usually a nonthreatening kind of interaction. In the previous two excerpts, however, both speakers used the term conversation to refer to a specific kind of conversation—one that is about ethnic or racial diversity and its impact on education. The fact that they both added attributions—“safe” in one case, and “OK to have now,” suggests that ordinarily, such conversations are not safe.

A principal at a small urban high school, Larry Mosely, makes this point more directly without using “conversation” as a metaphor:
On the day of the decision about the Rodney King case, we had an email fan out [from the district office] that you cannot talk about Rodney King in school. It’s too dangerous. If students raise their hands and want to talk about it, you are to tell them no. If you can’t handle it in the classroom, you’re supposed to send those kids out, or call for an administrator. Basically, a news blackout.

Mr. Mosely goes on to explain that the school did not follow this order from the district. Instead, it shut down classes and had a facilitator come in and work with students

to make sure they could get their stuff out in a safe place. And for me, there’s the difference between a pent up, we don’t dare, it’s too dangerous to talk about this and they could get out of control—versus if you don’t talk about this, it’s dangerous and will be out of control.

The seemingly innocuous term conversation has been adopted to downplay the potential danger in talking about race and racial issues. Yet paradoxically, those who share common background assumptions know that such interactions can be conflictual, so it becomes necessary to add attributions like “safe” and “OK.”

Changes that promote equity can happen through the right kind of conversation. Conversation can also be cast as a stimulus for change. In the first excerpt, Rick Sebastian, principal of a large suburban high school, is telling the interviewer that he wants to begin sharing data on student outcomes with community members, staff, and students:

What I’d like to do is create a kind of very simple picture that makes sense to the community, which is … equally important to the students and staff. So, I think what it should do is trigger the right kinds of conversation … the kinds of conversation that will move the process.

Larry Mosely uses the same metaphor when he explains his efforts to support staff members to affirm an equity-based approach in math classes at a small urban high school:

They were holding on to a very high standard in math and they were under attack from a lot of different factions in the schools for having an unrealistically high standard, and they made a powerful argument. … They basically came down to the point that if these young people of color are going to have access, they have got to do the math at this level. And the community has rallied around it. So the conversation can be a different one—not “Is the standard too high?” but the conversation became “How do we support students to meet the standard?” And that might mean five years; that might mean three days a week after school; it might mean
summer math camp; it might mean bringing the parents in and saying what are you doing to help Johnny at home?… You have got to love that change, as a principal, as a parent, as a teacher. … So I take a small amount of credit for helping the math team and the student support team to have that conversation and change the nature of questioning.

If one is a leader who is trying to create equity, there appear to be right and wrong kinds of conversation. Some conversations do not “move the process” and some types of questions are more helpful than others. A leader’s role in promoting an equity approach is in part to facilitate and guide staff and others to have these kinds of “conversations.”

**Emotion and representation are voice.** The use of the term voice to mean either emotional expression or representation of certain underrepresented groups was also common in the interviews. In the first excerpt, David Murakawa, an elementary school principal, talks about how he brought in a number of new teachers who shared his vision of equity and diversity:

> It creates the groundwork for diversity, which gives a place for people to voice their—it’s a place where voice is encouraged to come up … what these kids are doing or what these parents are doing is trying to give voice to their feelings. And then teaching them how to give that voice in a way where people might be able to hear them, rather than just squish squashing their voice.

Part of his vision involved allowing people to express themselves emotionally because he felt that if that was not allowed, those individuals would feel disenfranchised from the school. A middle school leader, John Van Horne, expresses a similar idea, but focuses more on the idea of representation:

> I do not think we’ve done enough to connect with our parents. In previous years we’ve done better and for the last couple of years, we just have not reached our parents as strongly as we can. … I think maybe it’s because we haven’t, maybe the question is we have to find some way to give them a real voice in the place … in decisions we make on what kids to kick out, what kids to bring in, somebody always has some investment in some kid or another, or they feel that the process wasn’t appropriate. … that causes the person to feel that his voice may or may not have been heard.

In these instances and others throughout the data, the use of “voice” as a metaphor for emotion or representation is attributed to people in low status positions—for example, students, parents, and people of color.
In this section, I examine the metaphors from the previous section from the point of view of ideology and social practice: What can the metaphor analysis of oral interviews with progressive school leaders reveal about their concepts and ideologies of diversity, intergroup relations, and equity? How do these concepts and ideologies relate to the social practice of educational leadership?

Metaphors of Diversity

As noted earlier, the concept of diversity often has a nonjudgmental connotation. It is used to refer to broad demographic trends that affect schools and communities. The leaders in this study use two metaphors to talk about diversity. One of them involves the source domain of horizontal space. Different beliefs and experiences that are associated with an ethnically diverse population are metaphorically cast as different and distant places. These places are not higher or lower than one another, just “different.” There is no value assigned to the differences, but it is still easy for the speaker to distance himself by using deictic expressions such as “that place.”

It is possible that the use of horizontal space to express differences is a more “politically correct” and more recent phenomenon than the use of vertical space to express those same differences. In other words, traditional U.S. concepts of racial hierarchy always placed “White” as superior to, and therefore above, other racialized groups, whereas current progressive discourse norms make it unacceptable to explicitly categorize groups vertically. Instead, we use the horizontal plane, without necessarily implying a value of better or worse.

The second metaphor used to talk about diversity is the one in which speakers conceptualize demographic changes as questions that need responses, or immigrant children as needy people whose needs must be met. This two-part schema of question–response or need–response, as noted earlier, creates an illusion of objectivity because we normally think of questions and needs as requiring responses. Speakers who use this metaphor to talk about how they handled demographic changes in the school population place more emphasis on the second part, the response, than on the first part, the question or the need, which is already presupposed in the speakers’ mind. For example, when a school principal says, “We knew we had to respond to the needs of the children,” the article “the” tells us that the needs are already known information. They do not require clarification because the listener is already supposed to know what are those needs. A typical next part of the conversation or interview would be “So how did you respond?” not “What did you think the children needed?”

These two metaphors together suggest that diversity is something that is not really within the control of school leaders. It happens to them, and they are expected
to respond, but the nature of that diversity or the needs associated with the people who are part of that diversity are not questioned.

**Metaphors of Intergroup Relations**

The metaphors that leaders use to talk about intergroup relations show that this is a much more personal concept than diversity. Whereas diversity simply happens to schools and cannot really be controlled except by larger policy initiatives that revise the way school boundaries are drawn, intergroup relations are more amenable to site-based and personal intervention.

Two metaphors, both originating from the source metaphor of seeing as understanding or knowing, provide almost opposite ways of conceptualizing intergroup relations. One suggests that understanding other people’s experiences or perspectives (the veils or filters they see through) is essential to attain positive intergroup relations. In particular, it is important for European Americans to understand or know the filter or veil of racism and how it affects people of color in this society. The metaphor suggests that empathy is a key ingredient of positive intergroup relations, but it is a one-sided empathy. In other words, the veils and filters of racism belong to people of color, and it is important for White people to understand that. There is no evidence, at least in the metaphors in this database, that people of color are expected to understand the perspectives and experiences of European Americans.

The color-blind metaphor shares the same source domain of seeing, but is quite different in its application. The color-blind metaphor suggests that positive intergroup relations are attained by not seeing, which maps onto not understanding. We should, in other words, bracket our perception of a person’s racial identity, and by doing so, we will be able to treat everybody equally. Rather than seeking understanding and out of that understanding developing empathy, we should, in the color-blind ideology, refrain from recognizing a person’s racial identity as an important part of who that person is. Why? Apparently, such knowledge can be dangerous. The theme of danger is supported as well by other metaphors, as we shall see.

If one is not color-blind, in other words if one recognizes racial identities and makes them an explicit part of intergroup relations, then two things could happen, both of which are dangerous and therefore provide the rationale for color blindness. One possibility is that we would then exhibit racial preferences and treat people unequally on the basis of race. Another possibility is that we might have a “dangerous conversation.” A dangerous conversation is one in which race or ethnicity and presumably class is explicitly discussed. Such conversations are risky because, at the least, they can lead to people accusing one another of racism, or worse, erupt in violence. However, they can also open the door to understanding and empathy. In fact, it is hard to imagine how understanding and empathy can be achieved without such conversations. In the interviews in this study, many proactive leaders described how they had managed to transcend the fear of the dangerous conversation.
and through that process, their schools’ faculty and students had developed ways of relating to one another that included recognizing racial identities and racialized experiences explicitly.4

The last metaphor that is used to talk about intergroup relations is related again to the source domain of space, in this case bounded space or containers. Several leaders referred to “keeping the lid on it” or “leaving it at the door.” In these metaphors, intergroup relations are also seen as a matter of potential danger or threat. Diverse students, parents, or faculty can have conflicts that are racialized. Even when a conflict does not start out as a racially based conflict, it can easily take on a racialized character when other students get involved. One of a school leaders’ primary responsibilities is to make sure that the school he or she leads is safe both physically and emotionally for the students and staff. Therefore, along with positive interventions aimed at creating greater empathy and understanding among groups and individuals, leaders also have to find ways to control other people’s behavior if violence or racial hatred is likely to occur. Once again, these metaphors highlight the potential danger speakers see as an inherent part of intergroup relations.

Metaphors of Equity

To promote equity as an educational leader involves, most of all, recognizing, challenging, and changing traditional power relations. Many of the metaphors that arrange space vertically allude to this need to study power relations and to make them central in one’s efforts as a leader who seeks equity. Equity involves working closely with people who are in subordinated positions vis-à-vis the traditional power structures of education, and to work closely with them, leaders must create “spaces” and opportunities where their “voices” can be heard and not squelched. Along with an explicit recognition of power relations, then, equity is concerned with representation.

The metaphors that evoke surface and depth suggest that leaders who seek equity cannot be satisfied with “surfacy” efforts. Instead, they have to try to develop an approach that “goes deeper.” Going deeper means, among other things, recognizing the implicit, the heretofore unspoken or unacknowledged things that take place in schools. It also means that leaders have to be willing to have and facilitate “conversations” in which people talk explicitly about dangerous topics like racial, ethnic, and other tensions—conversations which could lead to overt conflicts and therefore require great understanding and skill to ensure that they are the “right conversations.”

Leaders who promote equity must also work hard to open “spaces” to subordinated groups, providing access where there was none before. This means, for example, maintaining a high standard for all students, and making sure that students from nonmainstream backgrounds and students who have had less preparation are provided with the support they need to achieve the standard. It is noteworthy that leaders used containment metaphors such as doors, gateways, and boundaries in
ways that show tension between controlling (keeping bad things out) and allowing (others to come in to a space that is framed as desirable). Usually, it is the school-related spaces that are framed as desirable. Only in one case was the power dynamic shifted such that a school leader wanted access to the community.

Finally, the “equity lens” is an important notion because it suggests that leaders have to improve their understanding and knowledge by wearing a corrective device (the lens) that allows them to include equity in everything they do. In other words, equity is not something that can be achieved by spending an hour a day, or a month each year, working on it. It must become part of the way we see and hence understand everything. Leaders who aspire to promote equity have to wear the lens all the time.

Although all of the leaders in the study were taking proactive steps to create inclusive environments for diverse students, they had different ideologies and approaches. These approaches resonate with broader ideologies that have been described as the human relations approach, the equality approach, and the equity approach (Banks, 1997; Grant & Sleeter, 1989). The analysis of metaphors shows how leaders construct and convey their approach and ideology in an interview situation, or how “discourse does ideological work” (Wodak, 1996, p. 17).

Santa Ana states that “Metaphor, as a cardinal means of human cognition, curbs people’s view of the world. But it may also be used to reconceptualize worldviews” (2002, p. 38). The analysis in this article suggests that proactive school leaders, because they are change agents, struggle to express concepts of diversity, interethnic relations, and equity in ways that resonate with the work they are trying to do. There is no single metaphor for any of the concepts discussed in this article. Rather, leaders use conventional metaphors drawing on source domains such as spatial relations, seeing, and communication to reflect their beliefs and ideologies, and in so doing, they also further construct those beliefs and ideologies. Because of their roles as leaders, particularly leaders who have been publicly recognized for their proactive stance on issues of diversity, their words and phrases become part of the larger, more public discourse of education. Their use of metaphors, overall, reveals profound struggle over issues of power that lie at the heart of creating a more socially just system of schooling. The more equity-oriented leaders especially are keenly aware of the dangers of openly engaging issues of race, class, and other social divisions in our schools.

If this analysis represents a beginning of what can emerge from studying the discourses of educational leaders, it seems auspicious. The discourse of educational leaders is a neglected topic both in scholarship on education and in the professional preparation of educational leaders. Yet, “a critical awareness of language and discursive practices is becoming a prerequisite for democratic citizenship” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 140). Even more to the point, bringing about social change “requires the creation of insubordinate metaphors to produce more inclusive American values, and more just practices for a new society” (Santa Ana, 2002, p. 319). This study provides a glimpse of what further research in the dis-
courses of educational leadership could reveal. Integrating the study of discourse practices in educational leadership programs could encourage new leaders to use language more consciously in support of the desired goals of equity and social justice in education. Critical language awareness for educational leaders could provoke a number of positive changes, including awareness of how language reflects ideologies, how bias is structured into our language, and how changes that eliminate bias can be consciously initiated by those in leadership roles. Critical language awareness could also help make presuppositions or assumptions visible so that they can then be openly engaged, contested, or accepted. Finally, critical language awareness could increase leaders’ awareness of the relation between espoused theories and theories-in-use (“the walk and the talk”). Leaders might be able to develop alternative language to better reflect their espoused theories and ideals. Given the key roles of educational leaders in shaping the culture of schools and the fact that discourse is as much a part of a school leader’s practice as his or her decision-making processes and actions, it seems foolish not to broaden the scope of leadership preparation to include this important dimension of leadership practice.

A possible next step would be to create a pilot curriculum that would introduce a critical approach to language in leadership preparation programs. Implementation of such a curriculum would, however, have to contend with two potential challenges: First, introducing a critical approach to language could easily take on the aura of a “language police.” Those involved would need to be careful to create an inclusive environment in which everyone can participate in examining the power of discourse to shape reality and in suggesting alternative discourses. Second, any attempt to integrate a new practice in educational leadership is bound to meet resistance, partly because educational leadership in general tends to attract and reward those who maintain the status quo, and partly because educators are simply tired of hearing about yet another innovation. Any effort to follow through on the suggestions outlined here will have to address these challenges in creative ways.

ENDNOTES

1See Henze, Katz, Norte, Sather, and Walker (2002) for an explanation of how we measured “success” in promoting positive interethnic relations.
2The sight metaphors discussed here were presented in a paper by the author (Henze, 2002).
3All names are pseudonyms, used to protect the confidentiality of information shared. In introducing leaders, I also introduce a racial or ethnic descriptor and their gender because I believe it is important to frame their comments with an understanding of how these individuals are perceived socially.
4See Henze, Katz, Norte, Sather, and Walker (2002) for more information on what leaders did to promote these “conversations.”
REFERENCES


