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Rosa L. Rivera-McCutchen

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Armed Love in School Leadership: Resisting Inequality and Injustice in Schooling

Rosa L. Rivera-McCutchen

Educational Leadership, Lehman College CUNY, Bronx, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

While the notion of “armed love” has been discussed in the context of pedagogy in a limited way, it stands to reason that teachers cannot do this work alone; school leaders must guide teachers by practicing and enacting armed love in their leadership. In this article, I borrow from prior conceptualizations of armed love and, applying it to the field of leadership and the activism of two school leaders, in particular, I argue that actively resisting forces that stand in the way of access to high-quality educational experiences and opportunities is a form of armed love and exactly the kind of leadership we need.

In *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, Freire (1985) calls for a pedagogy of love that is *armed*, arguing that it is “the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce and to announce” (p. 41). Here, of course, fighting is not to be taken literally; rather, it is a willingness to forcefully advocate for students, a fierce commitment to teaching and active engagement in the socio-political, and often oppressive, processes that shape educational policy. Freire argues that love is a quality that teachers must have, but he acknowledges that love alone is insufficient. By coupling it with the word “armed,” we are reminded that the love required in education for liberation and equality cannot be timid.

In her reflections on Freire’s work, Darder (2002) expanded this concept noting that armed love is not a “feel-good” notion of love. Rather, it is “lively, forceful, and inspiring, while at the same time critical, challenging, and insistent” (p. 34). In her study of exemplary urban school teachers, Daniels (2012) argued that armed love is an extension of caring; it is a fierce and unequivocal love for students and their communities, coupled with an unwavering belief in their potential to achieve the highest levels of success, despite structural and institutional impediments. The teachers she studied acted as “advocates and warriors” on behalf of their students and communities (Daniels, 2012, p. 45).

McLaren (1999), on reflecting on Freire’s life and the concept of armed love, argued that love is necessary for revolution and liberation to occur. He writes, “Love both embodies struggle and pushes it beyond its source. In Freirean terms, revolutionary love is always pointed in the direction of commitment and fidelity to a global project of emancipation” (McLaren, 1999, p. 54). Elsewhere, McLaren and colleagues further discuss the Freirean concept of armed love, noting that it acts as a counter to exploitation and despair; love is required to maintain hope in the face of despair (Freire, 1985; Ryoo, Crawford, Moreno, & McLaren, 2009). Here and in other places, scholars have integrated their discussion of armed love in the context of critical pedagogy and liberation theology, where love is seen as active and essential for political engagement and resistance (Kirylo, 2017; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015).

Armed love as a construct resembles other critical theories in education literature, including in Duncan-Andrade’s notion of critical hope (2009). He argues that critical hope is a rejection of “false hope,” which is devoid of critique and a refusal to confront the realities of racism and inequality.

CONTACT Rosa L. Rivera-McCutchen ✉ r.rivera@lehman.cuny.edu 📧 Educational Leadership, Lehman College CUNY, 250 Bedford Park Blvd W, Bronx, NY 10468

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Critical hope, per Duncan-Andrade, is the enemy of hopelessness, precisely because it is an unflinching willingness to engage with the pain, rage, and trauma experienced by marginalized communities of color experience, alongside the triumph and victories.

In the school leadership literature, armed love can be seen as related to notions of social justice leadership theories, particularly with respect to active engagement in the struggle for maintaining access and opportunities to high-quality public education for Black and Latinx¹ students. Though there are a multitude of definitions of social justice leadership, Dantley and Tillman (2009) have argued that moving from rhetoric to action is an essential and morally imperative component. This sentiment has been echoed in other research, where scholars have argued that social justice leadership is not a passive mindset; rather it is active, engaged and compelled to resist hegemonic forces in education (Bogotch, 2002; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014; Theoharis, 2009).

Unlike radical hope and social justice leadership theories, however, a Freirean notion of armed love is explicitly politicized and revolutionary. There is an urgency that is implied in the concept of an “armed love,” and is an appealing framework for considering the role of the school leader working with and for Black and Latinx communities that have historically been marginalized and underserved, especially considering the disturbing policy trends both in public education and in our country, writ large (Horsford, 2018). In this article, I borrow from prior conceptualizations of armed love and, applying it to the field of leadership and the activism of two school leaders, in particular, I argue that actively resisting forces that stand in the way of access to high-quality educational experiences and opportunities are a form of armed love and exactly the kind of leadership we need.

Persistent inequality: the case for armed love in leadership

A report released recently by the US Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) (2018) noted that despite several reauthorizations of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), school districts that serve the most disadvantaged student populations are generally lagging in terms of providing equal access to high-quality educational experiences when compared to their counterpart schools serving more affluent and white communities. In part, they highlighted the following:

- Low-income students and students of color are often relegated to low-quality school facilities that lack equitable access to teachers, instructional materials, technology and technology support, critical facilities, and physical maintenance. These absences can negatively impact a student’s health and ability to be attentive and can exacerbate existing inequities in student outcomes.
- Many students in the U.S. living in segregated neighborhoods and concentrations of poverty do not have access to high-quality schools simply because of where they live, and there is potential for housing policy to help provide better educational opportunities for these students.
- The reality of American schooling is fundamentally inconsistent with the American ideal of public education operating as a means to equalize life opportunity, regardless of zip code, race, economic status, or life circumstance (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2018, pp. 9–10)

Based on the overwhelming evidence that educational opportunities are persistently unequal and inequitable, the USCCR report urged Congress to act to define access to a high-quality public education as a federal right.

The findings from the report echo earlier studies that also pointed to the impact of opportunity gaps on Black (The Education Trust, 2014a) and Latinx students (The Education Trust, 2014b) on long-term academic outcomes when compared to their white counterparts. For example, Black and Latinx students have fewer opportunities to take advanced placement courses or be enrolled in courses required for college readiness. While the percentages of Black and Latinx students who are enrolling in college are on the rise, they are more likely than their white peers to enroll in for-profit colleges, rather than two- or four-year non-profit institutions of higher education. Furthermore,

although Black and Latinx students have demonstrated important gains in achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and math assessments, in many school districts they still lag behind their white peers on the same assessments.

There is likely no greater example of the disparities described by the USCCR than in New York, where school segregation is the worst in the country (Kuscera & Orfield, 2014), and in NYC, in particular, which is one of the drivers of the state's abysmal ranking. Years ago, Jonathan Kozol documented the "savage inequalities" in Bronx, NY schools and other low-income and racially segregated communities (1991, 2005); over time, these patterns have persisted in creating predictably unequal schools for marginalized Black and Latinx youth in NYC (Hannah-Jones, 2016) despite the engaged activism of grassroots community organizations like the Mothers on the Move (Mediratta & Karp, 2003), Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and others across the country (Warren & Mapp, 2011). These disparities are not merely the result of poorly executed policies; rather, they are the byproducts of the structural racism that has systematically denied Black and Latinx students access to opportunities in schools (Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

A related issue that has compounded unequal schooling outcomes is the high stakes accountability mandates ushered in by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA. Research has shown that while accountability policies may be intended to shrink achievement gaps, the results often yield the opposite outcomes (Au, 2011). Though NCLB compelled school districts to disaggregate assessment data thereby highlighting stark disparities in outcomes among the most marginalized student populations, the rigid and punitive accountability mandates generally exacerbated the gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2010; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008; Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). As testing mandates intensified, schools serving low-income Black and Latinx students responded by increasing their emphasis on teaching to the test and reducing curricular offerings on non-tested content areas (Graham et al., 2013; Smith, 2000). Already scarce resources for arts education and other content areas that were not tested were redirected to English language arts and math, where the majority of high-stakes tests was administered (Volger, 2003).

Given the structures that reproduce inequality in predictable patterns, the critical question at hand is what can school leaders do? I turn again to Freire (1985), Darder (2002), and Daniels (2012), and argue that passionate and public resistance in the spirit of "armed love" is what school leaders must do.

Methods

To explore the concept of armed love in this article, I drew on the examples of two NYC public school leaders whose visible activism in the interest of access to education as a public good was captured in various media outlets and who may serve as models for understanding how armed love might be enacted in leadership practices. The principals discussed in this article, Jamaal Bowman and Jill Bloomberg, were selected through purposive sampling for this analysis because of their high public profiles in local New York City media outlets that reported on their activism. While I have worked with and studied Mr. Bowman's leadership in the past, Ms. Bloomberg's name and activism came to my attention after she was accused of recruiting students in her school to join Communist party (this is discussed in greater detail below).

For the purposes of this study, I relied solely on openly available sources via internet search (e.g. newspaper reports, school websites, etc.) primarily because I was interested in the public expression of activism and resistance to unequal and inequitable educational structures and policies as a manifestation of armed love. These leaders' behaviors and activism serve as exemplars that others might emulate as they work to safeguard and preserve equal access and opportunity to education as a public good.

In the following sections, I construct a narrative description of each of the leaders' actions and public activism, drawn from the documents reviewed during my research. I then discuss the common threads and then conclude with a discussion of how a framework of armed love in leadership might inform the work of those of us who are preparing future leaders.

Principal Jamaal Bowman: resisting high stakes testing in new york state

Testing in the primary and middle school grades has been a mainstay of educational policy in New York State for quite some time. Beginning in 1999, NYS required that English language arts and math standardized exams be administered to all students in grades 4 and 8. In 2006, the policy expanded to include grades 3–8 as “testing” grades (New York State Education Department, *n.d.*). A substantial increase in testing began when, in June 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were implemented in NYS, and the state was awarded nearly \$700 million in Race to the Top (RTTT) federal funding (Medina, 2010). A condition of the RTTT funding was that the state had to link teacher (and school leader) evaluations to CCSS-aligned assessments. In addition to increasing the stakes, the updated testing policies included changes in the length of the test. Whereas the ELA and math assessments were only 75 and 85 min long in 2006, respectively, by 2013, the CCSS-aligned assessments had increased in length to 270 min and were administered over a period of three consecutive days.

Substantive critiques of the NYS 3–8 exam policy include that changes in the structure, format, and scoring of the test made year to year comparisons regarding growth impossible to measure (Strauss, 2017). This, critics argued, was proof that the use of the tests was not actually intended to support students' academic needs and close achievement gaps; rather, they were evidence of a larger neoliberal effort to measure teachers and schools (Au, 2016). Across the state, parents were noticing that their children were coming home with more test prep materials, and that the diversity of the curricula was being impacted by the increased emphasis on the teaching to the test. In the wake of these critiques, an “opt out” movement began to grow, both in NYS and across the country.

Accountability is not inherently problematic. In fact, many civil rights advocates have been supportive of the heightened accountability mandates ushered in by NCLB, precisely because it required that data be disaggregated, thereby illuminating stark disparities in the educational attainment and achievement among historically marginalized populations. Still, as noted earlier accountability mandates that are highly punitive, as with the New York State scheme, can have an uneven and negative impact on low-income Black and Latinx students, as well as English language learners and special education students, doing more to increase the gap than reduce it (Darling-Hammond, 2010; McNeil et al., 2008; Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

It was into this context that Jamaal Bowman, founder and principal of Cornerstone Academy for Social Action (CASA) Middle School stepped into the “opt out” fray. Founded in 2007, CASA is a small school serving roughly 400 Black and Latinx students in grades 6–8 and is located in Bronx, New York, one of the most underserved and under-resourced counties in the state on multiple measures. The borough includes one of the poorest congressional districts (Sisk, 2010), and a recent study showed that 52% of the neighborhoods in the Bronx were classified as either high or extreme poverty, the highest in New York City (Austensen, Been, O'Regan, Rosoff, & Yager, 2016). The Bronx also ranked the lowest of all 62 counties across New York in both health outcomes and in factors contributing to health, including access to healthcare, socioeconomics and physical environment (University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, 2017). Across the borough, students have historically performed poorly on academic metrics when compared with their peers in other parts of New York City (Kozol, 2005). These outcomes are not surprising when one considers that, in comparison to the rest of the city, the Bronx has the lowest rates on multiple metrics, including educational attainment and overall health (New York Academy of Medicine, 2014).

After experiencing a growing frustration with how the tests were shaping curriculum, Bowman became engaged in the opt out movement, and began a public campaign to inform parents of their

right to refuse the grades 3–7 NYS ELA and math exams. In August 2015, just before the school year began, Bowman authored a blog post about the “tyranny” of testing, and opened by stating: “Public school high stakes standardized testing is a form of modern day slavery, and is designed to continue the proliferation of inequality in our society” (Bowman, 2015). He crisscrossed NYS speaking to community members who were interested in learning more about opting their children of the tests. Moreover, in contributions to local and national media outlets, Bowman expanded his critique of the assessments, and connected the dots between the tests and the divestment in public education in the state, particularly for Black and Latinx communities (Bowman, 2015; Strauss, 2015). Specifically, Bowman directly challenged Success Academy Charter network and others that overemphasized testing at the expense of students’ opportunities to explore engaging curriculum. Instead, Bowman argued, children in schools should have the opportunity to be design-thinkers and innovators, a learning approach that can be discouraged by a high-stakes accountability environment.

As the opt out movement gained momentum, the NYC schools’ chancellor Carmen Fariña became more outspoken in her support of the tests. This message trickled down to schools as a clear message that discussing opting out was not condoned and should not be discussed with families (deMause, 2016; Pichardo & Zimmer, 2016; Taylor, 2016; Zimmer, 2015). Despite the clear warnings from the NYC Department of Education (DOE), Bowman persisted in his public activism, and worked alongside activists in the statewide grassroots opt-out organization, the NYS Alliance for Public Education, regularly lending his voice to press releases aimed at changing testing policies. While Bowman also made structural and curricular changes in his school to address some of his concerns, his public advocacy was on behalf of all Black and Latinx students negatively impacted by high-stakes accountability policies. Bowman’s activism at the city and state levels explicitly challenged structural racism, and contributed to increase numbers of Black and Latinx parents opting their children out of the New York State exams. It likely also contributed to the NYS Board of Regents’ softening of their approach to standardized testing in grades 3–8 by decreasing the length of the tests, and also placing a moratorium on the use of the scores to evaluating schools and educators.

Principal Jill Bloomberg: resisting separate and unequal resource allocation

The Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn of today barely resembles the 1980s version of the community. Racially and ethnically diverse at that time, Park Slope had been home to successive waves of immigrant communities, including the Irish and Italians, and Puerto Ricans moving to mainland US, as well as Blacks and whites (Yardley, 1998). However, as white residents of Manhattan began looking for larger homes at more reasonable prices, they turned to the Park Slope and by the 1980s, low-income and Black and Latinx community members were pushed out (Dowd, 1984).

While the gentrification of the neighborhood led to an increasingly middle-upper class white student population in community’s elementary and middle schools, the local high school, John Jay, which also served other Brooklyn neighborhoods, saw an opposite trend. As the Park Slope families opted to send their children to Manhattan public schools (Bahramour, 2000), John Jay became increasingly segregated with a large percentage of low-income, Black and Latinx students. After years of being under-resourced and struggling, as a result, John Jay was restructured in 2001, phasing out its upper grades, and introducing two new middle schools that would eventually expand to include high school grades. Still more restructuring followed, and by 2003, there were three secondary schools (middle through high) on the campus. One of the goals of the changes, apart from dismantling a school that was perceived as persistently failing, was to entice Park Slope parents to send their children to the new middle schools, and disrupt the persistent segregation in the neighborhood schools.

It was in this context that Jill Bloomberg, a newly certified principal, assumed the leadership role in Park Slope Collegiate middle and senior high school. Although the school was only one year-old, Bloomberg was its second principal and was shocked to find the facilities filthy and in disrepair

(Coplan, 2014). Moreover, she was disappointed to find that the campus had metal detectors that students had to pass through each day. Though she petitioned to have them removed, she did not get support from the other campus school leaders. Over the years, there was little change in the demographics of students enrolled in Park Slope Collegiate, and by all accounts, Bloomberg worked to advocate on behalf of students who did attend her school, petitioning the NYC DOE for scarce funding.

In 2010, Bloomberg was finally told that there would be capital funding available for the John Jay campus, but only if it added a fourth school: Millennium Brooklyn. The new selective admission high school would be led by the principal of one of the desirable Park Slope middle schools and was to be the sister school of a successful Manhattan high school where many Park Slope parents sent their children. Many perceived the proposal as confirmation that the schools' Black and Latinx students were not a priority for the DOE. As one teacher noted in a community news blog, "The building was good enough for black and brown students, but now that they're moving in what is likely to be white students, they're putting in improvements" (Coleman, 2010, para., p. 6).

Rallies staged in protest of the proposed new school highlighted the racial implications tied to including Millennium Brooklyn (O'Neill, 2001). Bloomberg, in particular, became an outspoken critic of the plan and presented a scathing testimony at the public hearing ("Secondary School for Research Responds," 2011). In her comments, Bloomberg outlined a list of grievances spanning her years at the school and highlighted how the persistent underfunding of each of the existing schools on the John Jay campus was a set-up for failure. She also noted that the presence of metal detectors and requiring students "assume the position" contributed to low enrollment, which further impacted funding and contributed to a vicious cycle. Bloomberg was explicit in calling out the racist DOE policies that had created the conditions in her school and on the campus. Further, Bloomberg noted that the addition of Millennium Brooklyn would create a tracking system that would almost certainly result in racial segregation within the building. In conclusion, she noted:

Every generation has an opportunity, and a choice: to shut our selves into the darkness of small-minded self-interest, or to stand proudly in the light of the age-old struggle against racism and inequality. We are choosing to take a stand. We are choosing to fight racism and inequality, and we need everyone with us. Separate can never be equal. We invite you to join us in building something new on the John Jay Campus together. Integration, yes! Segregation, no! ("Secondary School for Research Responds," 2011, para. 49)

Despite Bloomberg's public and forceful opposition, the DOE went ahead and opened Millennium Brooklyn, and campus inequality persisted.

In January 2017, Bloomberg took notice of the segregated sports teams in the building. Most campus schools combine sports teams to constitute a campus-wide team, while PSC and the other two older schools had done that, Millennium Brooklyn was partnered with their Manhattan sister school, Millennium. Not surprisingly, this produced two racially segregated school teams using the John Jay campus facilities. Further, Bloomberg alleged in formal complaints to the DOE that the Millennium team had more resources, leading to separate and unequal conditions (Taylor, 2017). Not long after, the DOE, acting on anonymous tips, initiated a formal investigation of Bloomberg, alleging that she had recruited students to join the Community Party. Bloomberg sued the DOE, charging that the investigation was in retaliation for her history public efforts to highlight racial inequality, but she was unsuccessful in her efforts to have the investigation halted. Though Bloomberg was found to have violated other minor and unrelated policy guidelines, she was cleared of the initial charges. Throughout the investigation, Bloomberg continued to publicly advocate for the rights of her students (Edelman, 2017).

Discussion

The two leadership narratives described in this article illustrate the possibilities of considering leadership through a Freirean conceptualization of armed love, and provide us with a useful

framework for engaging in liberatory leadership practices. Specifically, their examples highlight core takeaways for how we might imagine approaching leadership with an ethic of armed love. First, armed love is a political act (Kirylo, 2017; Lanas & Zembylas, 2015) and demands that leaders understand and are able to critically analyze the socio-political dynamics that shape how their schools function within a larger system of schooling and power.

Both Bloomberg and Bowman's activism demonstrated that they were clear that the lack of resources, both materially and intellectually, stemmed from structural racism that worked to preserve inequitable conditions for Black and Latinx communities. Their activism was grounded in an anti-racist stance that critiqued institutional racism while simultaneously demanding remedies.

Another element of armed love in leadership exemplified by Bowman and Bloomberg's leadership practices were the public nature of their advocacy. Both leaders explicitly called out the institutional racism in ways that were highly politicized by virtue of their public nature. They used their positional authority to elevate their advocacy against oppression using platforms (i.e. blogs, public statements posted online, letters to the editor, comments to the press, etc.) that amplified their message in ways that connected with broader audiences. Rather than concentrating their efforts solely on their individual school communities, raising their activism to a more public level had the potential to increase their impact on other communities. Doing so raised their profile, however, and put them at real risk of retaliation and hyper-scrutiny by the very power structures they were critiquing. In Bloomberg's case, the threat was real and resulted in a serious attack on her career. Bowman and Bloomberg's activism was an expression of armed love, or "the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce and to announce" (Freire, 1985, p. 41), and was spurred on by a moral imperative to engage vigorously in the struggle for equality despite the perils of so doing.

While Bloomberg and Bowman engaged in activism on different fronts, at the core of their efforts was a quest for racial equality and for equitable access to resources. Bowman condemned an accountability system that was constricting the curriculum of the Black and Latinx students his school was serving, and students across the state. His position was that the tests were limiting students' opportunities to engage in meaningful educational experiences. Bowman sought intellectual rigor and freedom that schools in more affluent and white communities are automatically granted by virtue of their race and class privilege.

Relatedly, Bloomberg stood in opposition to inequitable access to the material resources for her school community. Her advocacy around desegregation was part of an anti-oppressive approach to schooling practices, including resource allocation. Her specific grievance about school sports team funding for PSC and two other campus schools was a broader indictment of structural forces that falsely claimed resources were scarce until a predominantly white school needed funding.

In both cases, Bowman and Bloomberg engaged in public activism, giving interviews and presenting statements that spoke explicitly about the racial inequalities that were being reproduced by educational policy structures. In keeping with an ethic of armed love as described by Darder (2002), Bowman and Bloomberg's actions were challenging and forceful. Both of these school leaders were resolute in their efforts to both navigate around and counter the structural racism that resulted in unequal and unjust conditions of schooling for the Black and Latinx communities they served.

Conclusion

As I reflect on the concept of armed love and leadership, I am reminded of Howard Zinn's (2002) book, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*. In it he writes:

I didn't pretend to an objectivity that was neither possible nor desirable. 'You can't be neutral on a moving train' I would tell them. Some were baffled by the metaphor, especially if they took it literally and tried to dissect its meaning. Others immediately saw what I meant: that events are already moving in certain, deadly directions, and to be neutral means to accept that (p. 8).

Zinn argues, and I would agree, that neutrality in the face of injustice, and particularly racial injustice, is unethical. Armed love in school leadership requires clarity on issues of racial equality particularly as it relates reclaiming education as a public good. Leaders must be prepared to forcefully and publicly advance an agenda that is concerned with the equal access to rigorous, high-quality educational opportunities that their peers residing in other zip codes and living in different skin have without fail.

Armed love, as a construct, captures the increasing urgency with which school leaders must act. School leaders must see themselves as duty-bound to fight for educational equality and justice. They must be vigilant in examining seemingly race-neutral policies (López, 2003) that are in fact, deliberate efforts to disenfranchise communities of color. They must be forceful in their efforts, recognizing the risks involved in their revolutionary actions. Leadership preparation programs must also emphasize the role of the leader as an activist in the service of social justice and equity.

Those of us working to prepare future school leaders must also practice armed love. First, we must do so by explicitly adopting anti-racist frameworks in our own curriculum and instruction. In order to train future leaders to practice armed love in leadership, they must be equipped with the tools to examine school policies using critical lenses that illuminate structural racism. Moreover, we must teach our students about the role they must play in dismantling those policies. Through examples like Bowman and Bloomberg's public activism and leadership, educational leadership faculty must support our aspiring leaders in building the capacity to practice armed love.

Equally important, educational leadership faculty must use our power and privilege within the academy to stand alongside leaders like Bowman and Bloomberg in resisting policies that reproduce inequality. This might take shape in different ways. For example, faculty practicing armed love might participate in protests and rallies alongside school leaders to demonstrate our solidarity. Our institutional affiliations can provide them with much-needed protection as they work to resist policies that are harmful to the communities they serve. We must also be intentionally and explicitly in conversation with those in the field who are leading with an ethos of armed love so that we might learn from them about what they need from us.

As faculty members, we have powerful leverage: we can shape leaders into activists who are working in the service of addressing inequality. And if we use our privilege for good, graduates from our programs will know that when they practice armed love, they will find staunch supporters among the ranks of their faculty.

Note

1. I use the term "Latinx" to refer to individuals who have historically been labeled as Latina/o. Salinas and Lozano (2017) note that the term is used to promote inclusivity with respect to the concept of gender.

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