

University of Vermont

UVM ScholarWorks

Rubenstein School Leadership for Sustainability Project Publications Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources

2021

MASTER'S PROJECT: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CHILDISHNESS IN THE HANDS OF LEADERSHIP?

Anthony J. Arias Sorto

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/rslspp>

Recommended Citation

Arias Sorto, Anthony J., "MASTER'S PROJECT: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CHILDISHNESS IN THE HANDS OF LEADERSHIP?" (2021). *Rubenstein School Leadership for Sustainability Project Publications*. 33. <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/rslspp/33>

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources at UVM ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rubenstein School Leadership for Sustainability Project Publications by an authorized administrator of UVM ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact donna.omalley@uvm.edu.

MASTER'S PROJECT: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CHILDISHNESS IN THE HANDS OF
LEADERSHIP?

A Capstone Project Presented

by

Anthony Jose Arias Sorto

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Professional Studies
Specializing in Leadership for Sustainability

October, 2021

Defense Date: August, 2021

Committee:

Britt Yamamoto Ph.D., Coach
Matt Kolan, Ph.D., Capstone Leadership Team

ABSTRACT

I began this project as an inquiry about the wisdom of children. I began by centering their experience because I've always been inspired and shaped by it. Understanding how we show up to their experience, reveals a body of knowledge that represents who we are and where we are in our development as leaders, mentors, and role models.

I observed my teaching practices closely and found new ways of listening to my internal practices. I found that being in relationship with the natural world, being in relationship with my body and my creativity, were essential in strengthening my teaching practices. Most importantly, developing these relationships allowed me to name *love* as a fundamental part of my work and practice. Being able to name this, has allowed me to confront my own habits rooted in patriarchy, specialness, and systems of domination.

Love is the way inward and forward, at the sight of oppression or as a witness of inspiration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: METHODS	1
2.1 Writing as a Reflective Practice	1
2.2 Running as a Reflective Practice	2
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS	3
CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION/ASSESSMENT	6
CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS/NEXT STEPS/KEY LEARNINGS	7
REFERENCES	9
APPENDIX A	10
APPENDIX B	12

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

What is the role of childishness in the hands of leadership? I think about this question literally. I picture a leader, an educator, a mentor, or anyone working with children, students, and youth, as the *hands* in this question. I think of childishness as everything that children do, and adults may be less inclined to do, such as playing, being vulnerable and silly. My work with children has shown me that strength and leadership is possible through love and vulnerability. I'm inspired by the children I've worked with and feel as if they've trained me to become a better educator. As a male educator, centering love involves internal and reflective practices. But what do those practices look like and how can I embody a pedagogy of love?

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

2.1 Writing as a Reflective Practice

When I first moved to Boston, Massachusetts from Honduras, I began writing to reflect on my journey and remember my family and land. Through writing, I discovered a way to reflect on my experiences and I felt a deeper connection with who I was and who I was becoming. Writing allowed me to be vulnerable and acknowledge my feelings in a new way. It gifted me a space to have questions and doubts. Sometimes those questions were answered. Sometimes it led to more questions. Writing was a way to capture my feelings and validate them as a way of knowing.

Through writing, I've been able to record key moments and lessons from my experience working with children, as well as the lessons that emerge from the ways I connect and become present to their wisdom. As I wrote these experiences down, in the way of poems and essays, I began finding new inspiration and emerging questions. I continued my journey of reimagining the idea of *childishness* by finding insights from my personal experience as a man, partner, educator,

and son. I also began to question the way other forms of life inspire and strengthen my ability to be in connection with self, which can strengthen my ability to meet the wisdom of children.

I began creating a website where I could keep track of my poems, essays, and reflections. Over time, creating the website felt less valuable than the act of writing itself. I turned my attention to my writing habits and routines. When did I feel called to write? How often did I write? How much writing was enough? During my time as a Before and After Care Coordinator at an elementary school, creating the space and time to write became challenging. Mainly, the challenge came from being emotionally unavailable to write. I persisted and practiced writing more freely. I began thinking of *creativity* in a new way. Sometimes I would begin writing a poem and would stop after two or three sentences. The next day I would come back to the same poem or move on to a different poem or essay. I focused on creating beauty, flawed poetry, and messy writing. By getting rid of the expectation for perfection, I engaged with creativity as an act of being present; creating a tactile feeling of what is otherwise unseen, fleeting, ignored and unimportant.

Please see Appendix A for a sample essay and Appendix B for a sample poem; both written during my time working as a Before and After School Coordinator at Leesville Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina.

2.2 Running as a Reflective Practice

The following excerpt is from a journal entry I wrote on January 20, 2021, titled *On Running*,

“I run because I have insecurities. I grew up being insecure about my body. *My legs are too skinny, my torso is too short, my head is too big.* You get the point. So, I started running as a way to gain muscles in my legs and slim down my torso. Nothing I can do about my head really.

And after running for over 5 years, I can happily report that my body remains the same as the first day I started running. My weight is the same. Head is just as big. If anything, my hair started thinning and I've gone from oily curls to a bald head."

Running is my sanctuary. It began as a reflective practice and has become a way of being, of showing up to the natural world and being in deeper connection with myself. When I run, I exist and when I exist, I love myself fully. To love myself is to unlearn conditioned ways of understanding power and masculinity. It shatters the notion of domination as a way of being and invites me to think of vulnerability and courage as essential tools for showing up with love. As writer and runner Haruki Murakami (2008) states, "First there came the action of running, and accompanying it there was this entity known as me. I run; therefore I am".

Running, as a reflective practice, reminds me to remain accountable to the values I'm in deep connection with. But it's a practice that involves consistency and practice. By remaining accountable to my running practices, I can bring the same rigor to non-running practices. I can center the love, empowerment, and sense of vulnerability I feel through running, in the ways I show up with others and through my work.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

I wasn't expecting to name the heart and soul of my project at the very end. As a runner, I normally have an idea of how many miles or minutes I set out to do before the run. Setting this goal allows me to set the pace and to a certain extent, it gives me an idea of the effort involved. I tried setting the number of miles and minutes for this project. I wanted to have a clear idea of what I was up against and how I could face it. Throughout this project, I've questioned issues around masculinity, power, privilege, identity, culture, vulnerability, leadership, education, and many

other ideas. These ideas are important in my journey as an educator, and as I tried to center each of these ideas in my project, my leading question kept changing and evolving. I've tried to set the miles, minutes, effort, and purpose of this run from the very beginning. But sometimes, all that is required to run is a willingness to do so. I've learned this firsthand from the children that inspire me.

My willingness to set out on this run and be part of the MLS program was only made possible by the love I've received from the students I've served. I've been inspired by them and challenged to remove expectations and rules within my practice as an educator. I'm grounded on values and ideas which can't be measured. To complete this project, I feel invited to continue growing as an educator by centering one specific value. Naming this value feels like presenting to a large crowd or learning how to do a cartwheel in front of elementary school students. It feels somewhere between embarrassing and awkward. The value is love. I believe that as an educator, I'm responsible for understanding the way love presents itself in my reflective practices and through my skills inside the classroom. I find this process especially important as a man in education, because it allows me to redefine the relationship between my strength and my sense of masculinity. Defining love's potential, application and place in my practices is very challenging. Yet, I believe this is where my project ends, and the next project begins.

Truthfully, there has always been a part of me that wanted to name *love* as the center of my inquiry, but I didn't have the courage to do so. In *All About Love: New Visions*, Bell Hooks (2000) speaks to the many factors that stand in our way of approaching love fully. "Taught to believe that the mind, not the heart, is the seat of learning, many of us believe that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means we will be perceived as weak and irrational" (Hooks, 2000). I believe that learning exists beyond our mind's extent, because I've witnessed it happen with my students.

I've seen feelings being transformed into new ideas, and those ideas into lessons. Listening to those moments and meeting them with respect and love, is a sign of strength in any educator. I'm inspired to speak of love without the fear of feeling weak and irrational; to move beyond specialness and into courageousness.

As a man, being in close relationship with ideas of love, pushes me to a place of discomfort. As Hooks states, "AWAKENING TO LOVE can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination" (Hooks, 2000). Most of my experiences that shape my understanding of masculinity, were driven by this same obsession. The MLS program has given me a space to reconnect with these experiences, reflect, learn and integrate new understandings into my work and practices.

Through my reflective practices, I've found that my certainty as a man is dependent on my ability to welcome everything that is feminine, masculine and unmasculine about me. Locating where my masculinity lives, certain and uncertain, is essential in naming my power and shaping its use around others. As an educator, my ability to center love as a leadership practice is only possible as I continue to define my relationship with power.

In *Daring Greatly, How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, Brené Brown (2012) captures many of the questions and ideas I've explored in this project. Brown's exploration of vulnerability and its impact in our lives, is a body of work I'll continue to reflect upon for inspiration and courage. "Experiencing vulnerability isn't a choice—the only choice we have is how we're going to respond when we are confronted with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (Brown, 2012). As educators, experiencing vulnerability is inevitable, and our response to vulnerability is what defines our sense of leadership.

I think of this project as one stage in my journey as an educator. I'm left with many unanswered questions and the work of Bell Hooks and Brené Brown are essential tools and sources of inspiration in my work moving forward.

CHAPTER 4: EVALUATION/ASSESSMENT

To create a framework of ideas and values centered around love and care as a fundamental part of being an educator, I must first locate what inspires this work and who it could affect. My involvement in the MLS program has always been with my students' needs in mind. Their needs are at the center of my research process. To honor their needs and shape my research and learning, I must engage in practices where I'm a student of my students.

I've been privileged to witness the magic and wisdom that only exists when children play. At one stage of this project, my leading question was the following: **How does the wisdom of children inform the world around us?** I became dedicated to defining and naming the things I witnessed when children play. However, the focus of my question relied on a process of defining children's wisdom. I soon realized that defining the wisdom of children was not a journey I was willing to take.

With the guidance of MLS affiliates and my capstone coach, Britt Yamamoto, I began changing my question and methods. During one of our Capstone Slam Stands, I spoke about the importance of being informed and inspired by the wisdom and knowledge of children. Jennifer Lentfer (2020) invited me to "Think about consent - if/when/how there needs to be any (if any) more explicit checks on the exchange of knowledge."

Jennifer's feedback inspired me to find methods that honored and respected the knowledge and wisdom of children, without trying to define it. Britt helped me define my role through this

process. During one of our check-ins, Britt and I spoke about the mindfulness required to enter a space where children create, play, and learn. Britt suggested focusing on my process as someone who meets their wisdom, rather than someone who defines it. Jennifer's and Britt's feedback helped me find a focus that would serve my research process in a way that honored my questions and the children around me.

CHAPTER: 5 RECOMMENDATIONS/NEXT STEPS/KEY LEARNINGS

I'm now beginning a new chapter in my journey as an educator. I've always dreamt of becoming a teacher but have never formally been one. As I wrap up this capstone project, I'm preparing to join Carolina Friends School in the Fall of 2021 as an Assistant Teacher for Kindergarten - 5th Grade. CFS is a private K-12 school located in Durham, NC, inspired by Quaker values. Joining the school provides a unique opportunity to bring the framework of ideas I've created through the MLS process and continue shaping it through my work with future students and peers.

This project has allowed me to name new and important questions relating to my work with children and my leadership practices. To continue this work, I must learn and be informed by other collective practices that support the creation of a pedagogy of love. I aim to continue this work as a student of the Ph.D. program in Transdisciplinary Leadership, Creativity and Sustainability at the University of Vermont. I'll begin this program in the Fall of 2021 and along with my teaching role at CFS, I aspire to bring rigor, curiosity, and love in my work and future research. I'm inspired to learn of the ways the wisdom of nature informs the ways we show up to love and vulnerability.

But what else is possible when we work through a pedagogy of love? What collective practices are possible, regenerative, and sustainable, for male educators willing to embrace a

pedagogy of love? What does this mean for students? How can we shape education and learning practices to reflect our most childish selves?

REFERENCES

Brown, B. (2012). *Daring Greatly How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* [Kindle Paperwhite Version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

hooks , bell. (2000). *All About Love: New Visions* [Kindle Paperwhite Version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

J. Lentfer, personal communication, March 24, 2021

Murakami, Haruki. (2008) *What We Talk About When We Talk About Running*. [Kindle Paperwhite Version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Appendix A

Written during the month of December of 2020, the following essay is titled *big brother* and it was written as part of my reflective practice during my time as a before and after school coordinator at Leesville Elementary School.

big brother

Anthony Arias Sorto

I find myself, perhaps like many others, stuck inside a culture, a country and a time defined by people, laws, views and opinions that perpetuate harm. In times and places like these, I can't help but reflect on where I stand, in all of this. I possess, as a man, a great degree of privilege and power. I'm unaffected by countless things and as an immigrant, whose latter part of the journey has proven that good fate does exist, I'm in a better place than I'd thought I'd ever be.

I owe much of my good fortune to the work I get to do every day. I work at an elementary school and I facilitate spaces for children to have fun, express themselves and learn how to share spaces. I coordinate a before and after school program, but my job is best defined by that of a big brother. Children come up to me because someone took their ball or they felt bullied by another child. They express their anger, stress, insecurities and strengths.

Being there, in the middle of it, is often a complicated and exhausting process. It's like being a walking sponge, soaking up all the tears and laughter shared by the little ones. As an educator or big brother, my role is layered by the responsibility of keeping children safe and by acknowledging that as much as I want to guide them, they're equally responsible for guiding me.

Children are truth tellers, but they also lie. They know what they want and if they don't, they show you what it's like, to figure it out. Being in the middle of all of this like being trapped in a timeless warp of constant and relentless discovery. It's like being trapped and being freed every time a little one calls my name in need of something.

The enactment and public display of feelings is the most valuable currency gifted to us by children. The holding, sharing and exchanging of feelings between children and other children, and between children and adults is a system. Within this system lies a framework for becoming more like children, for learning to live closely with our vulnerable and emotional selves, for becoming more empathetic and loving people. The wisdom of children is able to inform our leadership practices, to be built on fundamentals of love and a willingness for discovery.

Appendix B

Listening

Anthony Arias

OH it hurts so bad to be this tired
I can still hear the children's voices
Like a tiny but mighty strong being living inside my head
BANGING a rubber mallet to my right temple.
From the inside out.
OH the headache of a long day of listening.
Of a day of running around yelling
STOP
AND
PUT THAT
DOWN.
Should I drink a glass of [fill in the blank] to ease me into a night's sleep?
Or should I keep remembering the feelings
And thoughts
And fears
And laughs
And fights
And the time I yelled at that child and I immediately regretted it. Then I walked up to them and
apologized. They said it was okay. But it wasn't okay, or was it?
What about the time I heard that child cry because they felt pain?
The amount of times I heard my name being called
And the equal amount of times I looked down and said
What
Or whats up
Or whats wrong?