

## **Leadership in At-Risk Communities: The case of Myles Horton**

This research focuses on a context of leadership which has received little attention in the extant literature. Rarely have the poor, impoverished, marginalized and disadvantaged been a focus of leadership study.

In looking at the future of leadership, Warren Bennis draws attention to the greater chasm growing between the “haves” and “have-nots”, globally. He alerts leaders to the growing “Brazilification” of the world economy and its threat to business (Bennis, 2001).

James MacGregor Burns revisits his transforming leadership theory and focuses on how leaders facilitate life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He states that, “Nothing offers so clear and urgent a challenge to leadership, nothing tests it so decisively, as human wants and needs” (2003, p 146). He asserts that leaders must learn to capitalize on those needs and wants in order to promote liberty and happiness among followers. In latter sections, he identifies how leadership has failed in this regard when human need is addressed in non-organizational terms. He states that,

“... the tests of applicability are even harder for transforming leadership, particularly when the biggest, boldest kind of leadership confronts the largest, most intractable problem facing humanity in the twenty-first century: the basic wants of the world’s poor. (2003, p. 231)”

Burns argues that alleviating poverty and empowering the poor is the greatest challenge to leadership and should be our greatest concern. Throughout his book, he weaves an undercurrent of examples that reveal the need to harness the power of people, recognize the value of people, and respond to the needs that people identify. He states that past failures to successfully address poverty were the result of placing too much confidence in the application of technology or large investments of cash as being the key in overcoming poverty. He identifies the central problem as a lack of leadership that would take a hard view of the misconceptions of those “helpers” of the poor and learn to draw close to the poor, to see their problems as they see them. He finishes by stating that strategic leadership is the vital link in empowering the dispossessed and poses the question, can leadership develop from the bottom up (Burns, 2003, p. 236)?

This research focuses on a leader who has a proven track record as one who can empower the poor to develop their own models and practices of strategic leadership and address their own problems. This inquiry relies on an in-depth analysis of the interviews and writings of Myles Horton. By studying a leader who successfully labored in at-risk communities for over 40 years, it is anticipated that principles, traits and approaches to leadership will be identified that relate specifically to at-risk settings which may differ greatly from those found in mainstream leadership literature. Because of the richness of the data derived from a qualitative approach, valuable insight related to the inner struggles of leaders who seek to work in at-risk settings is expected as well.

This research utilizes a mixed qualitative method approach involving case study nested within content analysis. It also provides multiple levels of analysis that include individual leader traits, contextual analysis, and analysis of how leadership shapes members of at-risk communities.