A Praxis-Oriented Framework for Educational Leadership

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Leadership and leadership theory are, in some ways, as old as society itself. From early days of social organization, and especially with the emergence of political or military institutions, one can find discussion of what makes for good leadership. Sun Tsu, writing in 6th Century China, for example, provides aphorisms of advice about leadership in times of war that still inform theories and business practices today. Other well-known writers, such as Plato or Machiavelli, are still commonly referenced in discussions of leadership. From Samuel Smiles in the Victorian era to Steven Covey's modern catalog of a leader's prerequisite "Seven Habits," everyone seems to have a working hypothesis about the how, why, who, and when of leadership. However, despite the myriad of pages written and seemingly endless number of volumes published on the subject, there is an ongoing interest in almost every field— with new theories, models, or approaches to the topic appear annually.

In education, the field of leadership studies, first known as administrative science, is relatively new, having its origins in a group known as the Vienna Circle in the early 1920s. In North America, it developed most fully in the 1950s, with the discussions of the Chicago Cooperative Program in Educational Administration (CPEA). Culbertson (1988) writes that "CPEA leaders agreed they should make greater use of the social sciences in training and inquiry" (p. 15a). One of the early seminal works in the field was Simon's (1945) *Administrative Behavior* in which he focused on decision-making, a task he considered to be central to administrative work.

Since those early days, when educational leadership was developing into both a science and a discipline, educators have been bombarded by theories related to decision-making, planning organizational change, personnel administration, teacher supervision and other tasks of leadership. There have been studies of leadership traits and behaviors (Caldwell & Wellman, 1926; Stogdill, 1974), leadership styles and approaches (Fiedler, 1967; McGregor, 1960) that extend from scientific to organic and from transactional to transformational. In recent years, the barrage continues unabated with work on feminist leadership, critical race theories and leadership, distributed or distributive leadership, servant leadership, spiritual leadership, emotional leadership and so on. It seems there would remain little to be said about the topic.

At the same time, of course, researchers in many countries have begun to demonstrate that leadership is important, that it does make a difference to such things as the quality of the workplace, the organizational culture, or its goal attainment (Morgan, 1997). Some (Hill, 1998; Silins & Mulford, 2002) have found that leadership also has a direct impact on student learning.

With the common press for accountability found in the United States, Britain, and other developed countries, the question as to leader efficacy has taken on new importance. As legislators, politicians, and the general public demand to know whether or not educational leaders and the schools which they

lead are actually making a difference to student learning, the subject has become crucial. With the increasing diversity in many schools, there is also indication of increasing disparities in student learning between groups of children who have traditionally comprised the dominant group and those who are in some ways minoritized or marginalized due to factors such as race, ethnicity, family socio-economic background, or home language—factors that are largely beyond their control. Accomplishing what is often referred to as "gap reduction"—enhancing the academic performance of traditionally lower performing sub-groups—has become the gold standard for success.

To address these latter demands for equity in terms of demonstrable improvement, studies of educational reforms and restructuring have also proliferated. Yet, some children still fail in today's schools. Poor children and children of color are less likely to succeed in North America than white middle class children. Educational leaders are expected to cope with inadequate buildings, uncertified teachers, insufficient resources, and an uncertain and shifting political climate. They are expected to address and overcome many wider societal issues such as lack of early childhood education, poverty, lack of medical care, or substandard housing—all of which impinge on children's ability to learn.

Purpose

This paper is based on insights acquired by the authors over years of engaging in educational leadership and of conducting educational leadership research. Here we present a framework for educational leadership that we posit has the ability to move us beyond models and prescriptions to focus on the (many and still contested) purposes and goals of the endeavor. We agree with many others who have found a lack of clear cut differentiation related to various leadership traits, styles, or approaches. We are convinced that there are highly successful hierarchical leaders as well as equally successful collaborative leaders; we have found as many highly regarded extroverted leaders as highly respected introverts. Some educational leaders seem to lead from the heart and shoot from the hip, while others appear to plan every move as if it were an elaborate military campaign.

In spite of this, we have found some common threads or themes, often in ways and places that were totally unexpected. We have found there to be a significant difference in the ability of educators to exercise leadership based on the clarity of their moral purpose, their willingness and ability to exercise agency, and the presence or lack thereof of something we are calling savvy. The purpose of this paper is to explore and develop this framework, drawing on examples from research sites we have studied over the past 15 years. This is, therefore, not an empirical piece per se, but draws from both theory and practice to develop a praxis-oriented framework for educational leadership.

Theories and Definitions: Some Clarification

We have used several terms in the previous section that warrant clarification (at least in how we are using them) before we proceed; they are *leadership*, *moral purpose*, *agency*, and *savvy*. In this section, we do not provide

short, dictionary-type definitions, but instead, describe some of the current theories that embody these terms and explain the ways in which we are thinking about them.

At the outset we also want to be clear that we are not creating yet another list of leadership traits, nor are we thinking of these as topics to be taught during a preparation program. We are also not very comfortable with words like attributes, components, or facets as they all seem to imply something relatively fixed that can be clearly defined and bounded. We do not suggest that the elements of our framework are innate—you either have them or you don't, nor that they are immutable—once you have acquired, learned, or demonstrated certain characteristics, you cannot change. These are essentializing ways of thinking about something we see as dynamic and interactive, aspects of leadership for which we seek an appropriate term.

Instead, we will be talking about *moral purpose*, *agency*, and *savvy* as aspects or elements of a praxis-oriented leadership framework in order to acknowledge their fluidity and imprecision. At most, we consider them to be dispositions, not in a fixed sense of one's usual mood or temperament, but more as a combination of qualities, inclinations, or tendencies that help to shape and define an approach to leadership. Taken together they represent manifestations of beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices learned over time through interaction with our social groups and the "discursive culture that these people inhabit" (Burr, 1995, p. 50). Tendencies toward one or another of these dispositions may even be inborn—a little like the tendency for extroversion or introversion. They are ways of thinking and acting that may be both inherited and learned, but are undoubtedly shaped by the dominant discourses (words and practices) of the societies in which we have lived (Foucault, 1980).

Leadership

We do not attempt to define leadership, but take as a starting point, Bogotch's (2000) suggestion that it is "deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power." Implicit in this statement are a number of ideas we tease out as we talk about a framework that includes moral purpose, agency, and savvy. For example, the notion of deliberate intervention implies action. Here the statement does not suggest the kind of intervention: it might be top down and mandated; it might come from the grassroots; it might be instigated by a large pressure group or by a single individual. We are making explicit the notion that there are many ways to exercise leadership. Bogotch suggests that a leader (or leaders) need to deliberately intervene—in other words, they need to act in order to exercise leadership. Action, too, is fundamental to our concept of agency. Bogotch then introduces the concept of morality related to a leader's use of power. As we will elaborate later, moral purpose is an intrinsic component of the framework we develop in this paper and power is inherent in one's ability to act, either for good or ill. As we will demonstrate later, our findings clearly demonstrate that a component missing in much of the literature is that of savvy; yet, we posit that without what we are calling savvy, moral purpose and willingness to intervene are less likely to succeed.

However defined, there is considerable evidence emerging about the importance of educational leaders. Silins and Mulford (2002) state that "the contributions of school leadership to past and current … school reform efforts have been found to be undeniably significant, even if these contributions are indirect" (p. 564). Some have suggested that one of the most promising approaches to leadership that makes a difference to student outcomes is transformational leadership. Sleegers, Geijsel, and van den Berg (2002) indicate that "transformational leadership has emerged as one alternative model with potential for enriching our understanding of innovation in schooling" (p. 84). Drawing on the work of Leithwood and colleagues, they identify six dimensions of transformational leadership (vision building, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high performance expectations, and modeling important values and practices) (p. 86). In addition to these organizational dimensions to which leaders attend, some approaches to leadership are more broadly focused. Astin and Astin (2000) describe transformative leadership in the following terms:

> We believe that the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life; to expand access and opportunity; to encourage respect for difference and diversity; to strengthen democracy, civic life, and civic responsibility; and to promote cultural enrichment, creative expression, intellectual honesty, the advancement of knowledge, and personal freedom coupled with responsibility. (p. 6)

This emphasis on leadership that enhances equity and social justice, that is interested in enhancing the quality of life for students and their families and in increasing access and opportunity, is closely related to our understanding of moral purpose.

Moral Purpose

While the ways in which moral purpose is exhibited may vary according to context, here we adopt Fullan's (2003) framework. Fullan identifies four levels of what he calls the moral imperative—the individual, school, regional, and societal (p. 30). In talking about what connotes a moral purpose for schools, he states:

> The criteria of moral purpose are the following: that all students and teachers benefit in term of identified desirable goals, that the gap between high and low performers becomes less as the bar for all is raised, that ever-deeper educational goals are pursued, and that the culture of the school becomes so transformed that continuous improvement relative to the previous three components becomes built in (p.31).

Fullan sums up what this means by saying, "Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society" (p. 29).

Purpose itself suggests a clear relationship between the goals of educational leadership and the ways in which it is practiced. In our conception of moral purpose related to *educational* leadership, the goal is closely tied to what some would describe as social justice: instituting equitable and inclusive learning environments in which all children reach their highest potential.

Brown (2005) declares that "at times there has been little relationship between the expressed goals of education and actual educational practices" (p. 110). Leading with moral purpose would require a groundedness in which there is congruence between expressed purpose and practice. Some (for example Evans, 1996; Terry, 1993) call this authentic leadership. Terry says that authentic leadership is not just action but ethical action—being "true to ourselves and true to the world, real in ourselves and real in the world" (p. 139). Dantley (2005) summarizes many of these themes when he says that

> Moral leadership, therefore, is broader than traditional school management. It demands a deep investment of the genuine or authentic self of the educational leader. Moral leaders have the courage to locate their work in a broader as well as deeper space as they work to bring about societal transformation. Moral leadership is problematic because it interrogates what school systems and communities have essentialized. It is problematic because it dares to demystify those structures and rituals that have become almost reified after so many years of acceptance. (p. 45).

It is important to recognize, however, as Fairholm (2000) does, that moral leadership is not new. He explains: "the problem is we have not *thought* of our leadership in values terms. So the *idea* of values leadership is "new," while the *practice* is much more common" (p. xxi).

We note here that when we suggest a leader is lacking moral purpose, we are not implying that that leader is immoral or amoral. For the purposes of this paper, we are saying that educational moral purpose necessarily focuses on providing the optimal environment to enhance student learning. Naturally, there are other moral purposes. We recognize that all too frequently disparate moral purposes compete with each other for an educational leader's attention. Our argument for moral purpose sides with that of enhanced student learning, whether it be intellectual, emotional, social, or spiritual.

Agency

Agency, as we are using it, implies both the willingness and the ability to act in order to achieve one's mission, goals, and objectives in a proactive way. Ogawa (2005) suggests that agency is held in balance by forces outside of individual control but also acknowledges the individual responsibility to exercise agency. He adopts the concept of human agency

> as a heuristic for examining theory and research on educational leadership. Agency involves the control that people exert over their

> destiny, which is matched against deterministic forces assumed to lie largely beyond their control. (p. 90)

Ogawa further states that much current theory treats organizations as a constraint on leadership, but argues for the alternative approach of Katz and Kahn (1966) who think of leadership as "outside the bounds of organization's routine directives, or structures" (2005, p. 93). He goes on to quote Schein (1992) who defines leadership as "the ability to step outside the [organization's] culture" (p. 93). Rather than think about leadership as constrained by the norms of the institution in some way, an agentic perspective on leadership takes the leader outside the bounds of the organization's culture in such a way as to take deliberate action that may make a difference.

We have not chosen to add power as a separate component in our framework, because it permeates both moral purpose and agency. For the most part, power has become perceived as a negative element of human interaction. Senge and colleagues (2000) believe that today too much of the

> discussion around school reform takes place in a power-coercive framework. State legislatures announce that, in effect, "These children *will* achieve." Regardless of whether they have been fed well, live in safe neighborhoods, have parents at home, have good medical care, or live in a peaceful and tranquil environment, they will be judged against children who have those things. Teachers, similarly, are told, "You *will* have high test scores or we will close you down." … The results they want are laudable but they show no awareness of the process that must occur naturally to produce those results. (p. 393-394).

Obviously, this is not the use of power that generates successful educational reform. But it is the type of power, too often seen in educational reform processes, and the one that gives the term power itself negative connotations and implications.

One of Foucault's contributions to our understanding of power was the notion that "the effective exercise of power [may] be disguised" (in Seidman & Alexander, 2001, p. 72). He asserts that power is exercised, not just through sovereignty, but also through techniques and discourses. Power, as Foucault conceptualized it, is neither inherently negative nor positive. His argument is that its discourses must be interrogated to determine who is served and who is oppressed. To understand power, one must examine its social and historical contexts, the regimes of "truth" of any given society (Rainbow, 1984, p. 73).

There is little doubt that power, whether personal, positional, or discursive may perpetuate inequities or may be used to overcome them. Hence it is closely tied to our concepts of moral purpose and agency.

Savvy

Savvy is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as "practical understanding or shrewdness." It is widely used to describe knowledge about such mundane things as shoes, sunscreen, or technology. Terry (2006), with no definition or explanation, uses the term *administrative savvy*. Barton (2005) says that nurses "must become savvy in the use of informatics" and students must become savvy in evidence-based practice" –again without any further comment or explanation of the term. Rivero (2005) talks about "web savvy K-12 students" and the need to "develop a new generation of tech-savvy leaders" (p. 33). Johnson (2005) asks, "What does a tech-savvy administrator look like" and concludes he is one who incorporates the six Technology Standards for School Administrators (TSSA) adopted in 2002 by the International Society for Technology in Education (¶, 2). This person therefore understands leadership and vision, learning and teaching, productivity and professional practice, support, management and operations; assessment and evaluation; and social, legal and ethical issues—a vague list of terms, with no direction about how to get there. In these and most other references one can find to savvy, the authors simply assume that people know what it is—some sort of practical knowledge related to a topic.

There are a few references to savvy in which there are implicit if not explicit explanations. Gregory (2005) argues that because liberal education is in a battle for survival, it "needs fewer friends who are merely well meaning and more friends who train themselves to flight for liberal education's distinctive goals—not to mention its very survival—the way they train themselves to be smart, savvy, and successful in their disciplines" (p. 56). He further says that because "no one within universities receives any particular training in how to think critically, comprehensively, or philosophically about it," They do not know how to talk about liberal education. Moreover, few would know "where to *begin* to bring themselves up to speed" To adequately and intelligently discuss the topic. The implication is that to be savvy, one needs to be more than well intentioned. One needs to know how to think critically, comprehensively, and philosophically about a given topic. One needs to be "up to speed" so to speak.

In *The Survival of the Savvy* (Seldman & Thomas-Williams, 2004), an "organizational savvy model" is introduced in which a savvy leader is described as one who is receptive to feedback and challenge, admits mistakes, changes the risks and rewards equation for candor, detects deception, and exposes and eliminates closed shops—those situations in which "an overly political leader gets into power or a pocket of power in an organization and established control over information" (Seldman & Thomas-Williams, 2005, p. 61). We could find no comparable discussions in educational leadership literature, although we find mention of "professional savvy" regarding the processes and politics of change (see Fullan, 2003; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). For our purposes, the ideas outlined by Selman and Thomas-Williams are constructive in helping us to begin to clarify our use of the term. We combine these ideas with the notion of being

shrewd and having practical insight as a starting point for what we mean by savvy.

The Framework

In the next section, we want to illustrate the tendencies, dispositions, and inclinations that together seem to provide a sound framework for effective educational leadership. Based on our observations of leaders over time, and the date from the sample for this paper (see Table 1), we have found that despite other differences, where leaders consistently demonstrate all three inclinations, they are prone to success; whereas if any one of the three is missing, success is elusive. We reiterate that among the principals with whom we have worked and whom we have studied, some were introverts, some extroverts; some were male, some female; some white, some black; some straight, some gay. Some were implementing reforms that they had conceived or developed; others were implementing reforms mandated from an outside jurisdiction. None of these differences could consistently be associated with success or failure. In this section, we will illustrate, the importance of our framework for a praxis-oriented approach to educational leadership using data from only five respondents.

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Learning from Practice

As one examines Table 1, it is readily apparent that each principal was able to make some changes in his or her school, most exercised considerable agency related to the changes they wanted, but that only two demonstrated clear and consistent connections among the goal of adequate student achievement, the action they took, and their ability to achieve success. In this section, using pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality, we will give a flavor of the leadership of each in turn, before turning, in the last section, to a discussion of some of the implications for leadership praxis.

Alisha: A Voracious Innovator

Alisha has been a dedicated educator: classroom teacher, guidance counselor, and principal, for over 25 years. As principal of a small (200 students in grades 7-12) Navajo school in the United States, she has instituted numerous positive changes. Among other things, she has overseen multiple facility renovations to provide a bigger library, excellent computer and technology labs, and a well-equipped art room. She has been instrumental in changing the look of her school from a “school just like any other,” to one that reflects the dominant Navajo culture at every turn. Pillars and walls display Navajo art and images, posters in the building display pictures of successful Navajo people and their guiding Beauty Way; and outside, there is a traditional Hogan, a shade house, a Churro sheep project, and an ethno-botany garden.

Indicative of Alisha’s agency is the story of how she worked to install lights in her football stadium. As one can imagine with such a small school, the football team is generally small (sometimes only 8-10 students) and rarely very successful—in one recent season it lost every game.

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Person	Demographics & Context	Reform Particulars	Moral Purpose	Agency	Savvy
Alisha female, white principal	small Navajo HS, low performing	multiple annual reforms, many physical changes, cultural programs, football lights, unrealistic low expectations Both top down & bottom-up reforms, NCLB	Mixed All students do not learn – disconnect between explicit goal & activities	Active interaction with community, fund raising, failure to address poor teaching, football lights	Mixed Knows how to get things done, understands culture, No risks, ignores feedback, does not explicitly admit mistakes
Luke male, white principal	inner city urban school, diverse, low income, failing	Extra personnel, parents, culture change, low adult-student ratio. Bottom-up	XX Did not focus on student achievement but a culture of safety & security	Mixed Worked within BCTF structure, surface changes	XX Desire to be liked, safe, burnt-out, did not challenge BCTF, personal interest in students & families
Naomi female, white principal	large JHS, diverse, low income	MY-YRS, flexible groups, learning leaders, multiple reforms	Instituted to make a difference for students	Able to get resources, permission to innovate, overcame structures, new policies	XX Too much going on, too much flexibility, freedom, risks, lack of attention to feedback
Sandy female, white, principal	40%poverty, diverse, award for achievement	Rejection of deficit thinking, fun, collaboration, staff study , use of data Bottom-up, but NCLB,	Clear focus on achievement, inclusion, empowerment	Active leadership, parent & community involvement, advocacy with board	Risks, feedback, pro-active, rewards candor, effort, no closed shop
Esther female, black, principal	large school, high minority , low income	MT-YRS, parent programs, intersession, class size, teacher training, focus on learning, high expectations, Both top down & bottom-up, NCLB	Dramatic improvement, disbelief in state capital	Active interaction with community, Willing to take a stand, move teachers on	Risks, feedback, admits mistakes,

Yet, Alisha was convinced that, like other schools, hers should be able to host evening games and thus needed stadium lights. In part, she believed this could send a positive message of valuing the community. For over five years, she worked to raise enough money and finally the lights had arrived. When she contacted the district to arrange installation, she was told there would be an additional charge of several thousand dollars. After bargaining with the district and arranging some cost sharing, she was still short. Undaunted, she wrote a letter to Tony Hillerman, the famous Southwestern fiction writer, who had often set his novels in her area, asking if he might be interested in donating enough money to install the lights. To her surprise, Hillerman soon contacted her and arranged for the donation. The lights were installed and inaugurated in a celebratory evening that concluded with many students and community members dancing and singing spontaneously on the field.

Alisha is extensively involved in her community in many ways. Parents and students knock on her door at all hours seeking assistance and her home is a designated emergency care home. She cares deeply about her community and exhibits strong and positive relationships with them. She can muster the resources to make significant physical changes in her building. However, despite multiple changes in the organization of classes and the grouping of students over 13 years of her principalship academic achievement has barely changed. Less than 50% of students still meet or exceed statewide expectations in language arts, less than 40% in math, and less than 33% in science. One of Alisha's difficulties is that although she talks about wanting all students to achieve, she expends considerable energy on making changes in areas in which she feels competent and in which change is more visible and concrete.

When asked about what she wanted to accomplish before she retired, for example, she stated that she wanted to enlarge the parking lot and fix the tennis courts. There was no sense that she wanted to improve overall student achievement. Herein lies Alisha's difficulty. She has, over the years, hired several teachers with inadequate skills or experience to promote academic success among students. After an intensive year-long staff development program in which an outside consultative team provided intensive training, classroom support and mentoring, and regular feedback to teachers and to Alisha, both she and the team sat down to discuss the next steps to be taken. Despite every indication that one probationary teacher was incompetent, had not responded to feedback, and had been unsuccessful in helping students to achieve academically, Alisha renewed the teacher's contract. She needed a teacher to oversee the yearbook; the teacher had voluntarily taken on some staff responsibilities; and the teacher's mother sat in the state legislature.

The foregoing is one illustration of many of Alisha's lack of savvy. She seems unaware of the disconnect between her advocacy and support of the community in tangible ways and her lack of ability to focus on what is best to promote student learning in her school. She tends to discount external feedback if it requires risk-taking on her part or if it demands that she institute deep and difficult changes in teacher position, pedagogy, and practice. On the other hand, Alisha demonstrated a remarkable degree of savvy regarding the installation on lights on the school football field. She negotiated with the district to get the extra prohibitive costs down, and then turned to an outside source to get financial assistance on the balance.

In this instance, Alisha does not demonstrate a clear focus on what we have identified (with Fullan, 2003) as the central moral purposes of schooling. Where she has a clear and definable goal, she is purposeful and successful in achieving it. Where there is less clarity and where the goal seems more remote, she does not seem to have the ability—the savvy—to take the risks.

Luke: A Well-Intentioned Care-Giver

We first met Luke when his school was selected to participate in a longitudinal study about student engagement in learning and school life. He was a friendly, dedicated educator, who, like Alisha, had developed positive relationships with his students and who cared deeply about their welfare. According to census data, the students (67% of whom speak English as a second language), live in one of the poorest areas of British Columbia. Like Alisha, Luke had worked hard to change the appearance and culture of the school from "one of violence to one of community." He created an inviting space with a carpet, couches, and toys in which elders (40% of the students are indigenous) and parents could come and sit and talk to one another. He developed a strong volunteer program in which adults came and read to students and in which community members volunteered to teach crafts or tell stories in classrooms. The school had a food bank, a clothing depot, and a community and family worker to assist parents with shopping, nutrition, and other needs. A local artist involved parents and students in the creation and painting of a large multicultural mural for the foyer. Another group instituted Native Indian drumming in the foyer each morning intended to "drum the children to school" in a culturally appropriate manner.

Luke was so successful in creating an inviting climate that during the first year of our study, the school had an adult-student ratio of one to four (50 staff members + some volunteers for a student population of under 250). But, students still failed to achieve academically. Students were pulled out of so many classes that teachers sought to institute a mentor program in which each child might have a positive interaction with the same caring adult on a daily basis. Luke responded to each teacher request sympathetically, but failed to exercise the leadership required to stabilize instruction and to institute high expectations and standards. On one occasion, when a particularly ineffective and somewhat obstreperous teacher whose position was funded from a special district fund targeted for inner city schools, Luke indicated that as much as he might want to reassign other classroom teachers in the light of the availability of a new staff member, his hands were tied by the Teachers' Union and the contract. He was unwilling and apparently unable to seek permission to try something different to promote success among his students.

At the time of Luke's leadership, a commonly heard phrase in the school was, These students have so many problems." In fact, most teachers expressed a deficit perspective (see Valencia, 1997; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005) in which they stated that with the poverty and crime in the area all they could do was provide a safe place for students; academic goals were unrealistic. On one occasion, during a professional development workshop held for teachers in April, one teacher stated, "I finally began teaching the 5th grade curriculum this week." When asked what she had been doing until then, she replied that she had "been helping the students to feel safe."

Several other comments provide a sense of the deficit thinking and lack of expectations at the school. On one occasion, when a child refused a teacher's request that she "get a book," the teacher backed down saying "It's okay then, if you want to lie down, lie down. I'm glad you came." The teacher explained to the researcher that she chose to give the girl the power rather than engage in an inappropriate power struggle. On another occasion, a teacher commented:

> There's nothing to do about those kids; there's no back-up for you anymore; the Youth Worker can't manage them, Social Services can't manage them, they can't be in the classroom, they can't be in the hallway, and the administrators are not managing them so you're basically having kids that are just running around and you can't really make that progress any more; and that happens a lot in this kind of school....Their homes are always in a disaster, ... they won't work, they won't work for anybody; you can't send them home because there's nobody at home; and if you send them home, they come back.

There is clear indication here of a general lack of moral purpose. Nowhere did we find a sense that these students could achieve academic success if teachers actually taught them and expected them to do well. There was no attempt on the part of the administrator to make changes that might have turned the school around, except to make it a safe and welcoming place. Perhaps most importantly, Luke seemed to be unaware that this could or should occur.

It is worthy of note that several administrators later, and with a similar student demographic, the students are achieving above provincial levels in every subject area tested. For example, at the 7th grade level, 85% meet or exceed expectations in reading, 100% in writing, and 100% in math, compared to previous provincial achievement levels of 77%, 90%, and 83% respectively (under Luke's administration).

This narrative demonstrates clearly that Luke's focus on safety, although a necessary precondition for learning, is insufficient in and of itself and is not consistent with the way we are defining moral purpose. He demonstrated agency in terms of developer closer relations with the community and in bringing parents into the school. Where it was a question of acting with respect to school organization, class assignments, and ensuring appropriate instruction and pedagogy, he failed to act. Moreover, he seemed to believe that he had little agency apart from fulfilling the regulations of his district or of the teacher's federation. Moreover, he did not believe in the capacity of his students to succeed. His inability to make the requisite changes, when seen in the light of the subsequent success of similar populations of students in the school, is strong indication of lack of savvy.

Naomi St. John: A Go-Getter

When we first met Naomi, she had just opened a new school in a rapidly growing area of a mid-size western city. Having been appointed a year prior to the opening, she had worked with both builders and board members to achieve the kind of school she wanted: one that operated on a rotating, year-round schedule; specially constructed with pods or learning communities; and flexible spaces for various kinds of pedagogical interactions and student learning. She had convinced the district to permit her not to hire

the traditional vice-principal, but to identify a learning leader for each of the five “tracks” she would be operating in this multi-track year-round junior high school. Everyone was excited. The school had opened with no rules, no processes, and the opportunity for extensive participation on the part of all students, teachers, and parents. For example, at first washrooms were not designated male or female; there were no processes for reporting student achievement; and there were no rules—could the children wear hats? There were no elected members of the student council—it was open to all students (with the result that few attended meetings).

The school had been built to fill a perceived need in this rapidly growing, diverse, working class community and Naomi was convinced that giving everyone a voice and instituting a cutting edge middle school approach to teaching and learning would result in high levels of student achievement. She recognized that not all children learn in the same way and that not all activities needed the same 30 to 1 student teacher ratio with which most schools and classes in the district operated. So she introduced a system in which each learning team developed its curriculum, its schedule, and grouped and regrouped its students and teachers according to their perceived needs. In theory, the cutting edge approach was strong. Naomi had already proven she had a clear sense of moral purpose and singular focus on students by her inclusive and responsive approach. She had demonstrated clearly agentic behavior in her persuasive interactions with the builders and school board members. But somehow, things went wrong.

The collaborative approach began to polarize the community—staff, students, and parents. One original learning leader stated that

> it was exciting. The teams were working together. The administration was working together. There were all the things that when you open a brand new school. There were no traditions. So expectations had to be set. Our principal was a strong advocate of stewardship and collaborative decision making. Then that process tends to take a little bit of time. … We didn’t have any infighting on the admin team. We’re still close friends…. I still believe in it. I believe in the learning community approach. I believe in year-round schooling.

Many found it overwhelming, however, and expressed less positive impressions. recalled that

> “The philosophy of the school looks so good on paper, total integration, total inclusion, total integration of subjects. We tried to do everything all at once ... one of the philosophies of the school was ‘student voice, student choice’... There was such destruction the first year. The walls, everything. Six months and the school looked like it had been lived in for thirty years.

In fact, at the end of the second year, we found that only 13 of the original 40+ teachers would return for the third year; one learning community had lost all of its teachers. At the same time, Naomi announced she would leave the school to take a position as CEO of a non-profit organization. There is no way to know if the original plan would have succeeded had she stayed, but many indications that the writing was already on the wall. By year five, when the school opened with its third principal, little

was left of the original plan: walls had been erected, the multi-age, multi-grade flexible learning communities had returned to fixed classes; a vice-principal had replaced the learning leaders; and the school calendar had moved from multi-track year-round to a single-track schedule.

It is our perception that Naomi's lack of success may be explained, at least in part, by a lack of savvy. There were signs of difficulty early in the first year, with many teachers expressing a high degree of stress and a sense of constantly being overwhelmed. Student involvement had not translated into students' taking responsibility for the school building; students and parents had expressed concern that the multi-age approach would not prepare them for High School. But Naomi persisted, claiming everything was going well, citing some positive feed back she had received but neglecting the negative. She was willing to take risks in terms of implementing an innovative program, but failed to attend to the details necessary to make it work. Further evidence of her lack of savvy is contained in this summation by a former teacher in the school: "The administration can really set the tone of the school. Not to say that Naomi didn't have the best interest of the students in mind, but I think she was too idealistic."

Sandy: A Community Success Story

Sandy's story has a happier ending. In contrast to Naomi, she did not come into a new school with exciting programs and permit them to slip away. She was appointed to a newly merged school in an older building, one in which the wealthier children were now forced to attend school with "white trash," African-Americans, and a rapidly growing Hispanic population. She set about to help teachers identify what kind of school they wanted to work in, constantly asking questions, and setting a tone of inquiry (Palmer, 1998). In fact, she was so successful that between her first and second years, student achievement as reported by the state under the NCLB mandate changed from 59% of students meeting or exceeding expectations to 76% at those levels.

Teachers report that she turned previously boring staff meetings into times of discussion, data-examination, and fun. Sandy kept her staff off-guard by introducing activities that she said were reminiscent of outdoor experiential education, as well as cartoons and unanticipated competitions with silly prizes. She engaged her teachers in processes of reflection, taught them the importance of using data to make decisions about children, and empowered them to make appropriate changes.

After carefully examining student achievement data, teachers noted that the children who were not achieving well in math at the end of the year were the same children who had begun the year with deficiencies in math. To overcome this, teachers decided to group and regroup children, testing them every eight weeks, and assigning them to flexible groups based on their prior knowledge and achievement level of the specific task at hand. For example, a child might have some advanced understanding of graphs but struggle with long division. It made no sense to them to place that child either in an advanced or a remedial class for the whole year, when the tasks and students' prior knowledge changed frequently. As part of this empowering, inquiry approach to change, she gave teachers a choice of group depending on what they felt most comfortable teaching, but expected that the levels they taught would also change frequently. Through additional probing, they came to the place where they all agreed

that the teacher with the lowest performing group at a given time would have the smallest number of students and first call on volunteers and school resources. When they instituted similar groups in reading, everyone participated enthusiastically—Sandy, the district personnel manager, and the district curriculum specialist all taught a group.

When we visited the school, we had occasion to participate in one of the now weekly assemblies. It was a vibrant celebration of school life in which everyone sang the school song (a rap written by a teacher), the teachers taught the children a dance, first grade students performed a readers' theater, and awards of every description were distributed. Pride in the school was evident both in the enthusiastic response of teachers and students and, when appropriate, in their quiet and respectful behavior. What was interesting was that both principal and teachers told us that when the assemblies were first instituted, teachers had complained, worrying that the time away from instruction would negatively affect test scores. They had found however, that when the school came together as a community, the sense of belonging and pride in achievement was so enhanced that it become simply another vehicle for student learning.

Sandy is not a typical principal. She is outgoing, creative, and willing to take immense risks to achieve her goal of creating a warm and caring school community in which every child successfully acquires a deep understanding and mastery of the academic material. She knows when to push her teachers and when to back off. In her first year, although some sympathetic board members warned her she risked being fired; she challenged the closed shop of the principal meetings and superintendent's decisions. She received the lowest salary increases in the district but persisted because she constantly asked herself, "What am I really here for" and then "just did it." Here is a principal who showed evidence of all three interactive dispositions of our framework: a clear sense of moral purpose, agency, and savvy to accomplish what needed to be done.

Esther: A Principal with a Mission

Newly-appointed principal Esther Harwood found a sprawling, overcrowded school with two new wings and 28 portable classrooms. In response to a district mandate that if a school exceeded its designated capacity by at least 20%, the principal was to introduce multi-track year-round schooling. Although the mandate had not been enforced in more affluent areas, it was enforced for Jericho Elementary School, a low performing school in a low SES area. The school's population included 50% Hispanic students and a large group (33%) of children whose parents who were migrant workers. Jericho Elementary School was included on Florida's list of "critically low performing schools."

Esther threw herself into the change, believing it might be a way of shaking up the staff and helping the teachers think about new approaches to instruction and to involving the community in the programs of the school. She asked her teachers "Do you think kids can learn? Do you believe we can teach?" Upon receiving affirmative responses, she replied, "Well then let's do it." Despite the fact that the school had what she described as "real challenges, with some of the migrant kids coming in and out five

times a year as they follow the apples and the tomatoes," her bottom line was that she "would accept no excuses."

Esther made numerous changes such as GED tutoring Parents, Drive-Through Fridays when parents could drop off their children and pick up a cold breakfast with an accompanying sheet of parenting tips, Wonderful Wednesdays when breakfast was served to both parents and children, Make-and-Take for Parents--a room in which parents could make educational materials to use with their children. Esther and her staff worked to make the school the center of the community, but her focus was always primarily targeted on improving student academic achievement.

Recognizing the need for a great deal of support to meet her goal of success for all students, Esther made numerous changes. Among others, she used part of her school's Title 1 money to reduce class size, particularly in the problem area of math. Teachers decided to introduce extra tutoring programs to meet individual needs even when it meant finding a room in an adjacent apartment complex or church basement because there were no spare facilities on the school premises. Esther then assigned some special education teachers to a four day week, and then asked them to teach classes to small groups of students who needed remediation. This instruction was supplemented by a three hour Saturday school held on Saturday mornings and staffed by teachers she hired from around the district (Esther's husband, a teacher in another district school, taught for free).

After one year, Esther submitted her school's test results as required to the State Office of Education. Although not every principal whose scores increased considerably was asked to do so, she was "called to Tallahassee" to defend her school's results. She explained that she thought part of the reason was that the others were white and there is still a lot of racism in the state and district. She recounted the dramatic tale:

> I took a van to Tallahassee with some teachers, our test scores, enrollment lists, and videos of the school, and I responded to their concerns by saying, 'You told us *to* do it, you told us we *could* do it, and we *did* it and now you don't *believe* us!' I told them to come to see for themselves and not waste my time driving all that way. Only two of them ever came.

The state did, however, send a team to her school because her math scores had gone "over the top," even higher than most of the other schools' math scores and they wouldn't accept them. She continued,

> They came in one day and told me to take a day off and go to Orlando and shop. While I was in Orlando, unsuspecting, they took 12 of my fourth graders and re-tested them. They thought I had cheated but they tested just as well as they had before!

Esther's story is dramatic in that not only did she achieve success; she had to prove several times over that she had done so ethically and honestly. She turned around a school in which deficit thinking and failure had been the norm. Her clear sense of moral purpose, her ability to act proactively, and having enough savvy to withstand the skepticism of the state legislators and implicit personal attacks, won the day.

Implications and Discussion

We began this paper conscious that many people talk about a divide between theory and practice or between scholars and practitioners in ways that are unproductive and that unnecessarily polarize the discourse about education. In most developed countries, public education is being played out in a political climate of high stakes testing, intense demands for accountability, and increased concern over sub-groups of children who continuously seem to be underachieving. We acknowledge that much prior research has resulted in useful models, strategies, and approaches to educational leadership. At the same time, we are concerned about the ongoing proliferation of studies and the concomitant inability of educational reform efforts and educational leaders to achieve sustained and positive change. For that reason, we revisited all of our data, gathered over 15 years of research in educational leadership, coded interviews and observations of dozens of school-based and district leaders, and identified what we believe to be three underlying essential and inseparable dispositions: agency, savvy, and moral purpose.

We have selected five exemplars from our data to emphasize that our discussion is both generalizable and context dependent. Although it is possible to state that educational moral purpose must focus on student achievement, it is not possible to provide a prescription for what the focus must look like in a specific setting. Alisha, in her Navajo setting, will have to find a different approach than Luke, in an urban inner city elementary school, or than Naomi, in a newly constructed middle school, for example. Although we can posit, with considerable assurance, the need for agency, the specific actions related to goal attainment will vary considerably, as Esther and Sandy clearly illustrate. Thus, it is savvy—the ability to identify, understand, and work with both the constraining and the supporting factors of one's specific context that enables one to be successful in a given situation.

We defined moral purpose *in education* relatively narrowly, taking seriously Fullan's (2003) assertion that "Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn" one in which the "gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced" and which prepares students for full participation and citizenship in a "morally based knowledge society" (p. 29). Once again, we acknowledge that there are other purposes one might describe as moral. Moreover, saying that someone lacks this particular moral purpose does not imply a general lack of morality. We do, however, believe that in today's explosive political climate, educators must take seriously the requirement that schools help all children—no matter what their class, economic circumstances, ethnicity, or home language—to learn. Note here that learning is not narrowly defined only in terms of scores on standardized tests, but also in terms of citizenship and participation in a morally-based knowledge society. Esther demonstrated that this is possible despite the disbelief of legislators and policy makers. Sandy showed that when the community engages in dialogue about what is right, about what kind of learning students require, they achieve to high levels. Moreover, we have seen in the exemplars of Alisha, Luke, and Naomi that unless a leader focuses explicitly on developing high standards and rejecting deficit thinking (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1995), it does not happen.

At the same time, explicit goals are not enough, no matter how often they are said. Having a stated desire to improve student learning but demonstrating implicitly that other goals take priority is a misuse and misunderstanding of agency. We have chosen five educators who demonstrated different kinds of agency. In some instances they were highly successful in some activities (as in Alisha and Naomi) but less successful in bringing about the conditions that promote student learning. Expending the majority of one's time and energy as a leader on tasks that are unrelated to student learning may change the physical plant, or even the culture of the school, but it does not enhance learning. A safe school, as Luke showed us, does not necessarily produce good students. Agency must, as Bogotch (2000) stated, and as Sandy and Esther demonstrated, must be "deliberate" if it is to work towards the fulfillment of moral purpose.

Finally, we discuss the notion of savvy. Although the term is widely used in both technical and colloquial settings, it is rarely defined. We believe savvy to be so important that it needs more investigation and clarification. At the very least, it underlies the notion of praxis—moral action that is theoretically grounded. Savvy requires, as we have seen, a combination of practical insight and shrewdness, a willingness to take risks, to step outside the bounds of tradition, to attend carefully to feedback that points to needed change, to discriminate what is important, or truthful, or desirable from what is not. It is the ability to think critically, comprehensively, and philosophically about what one is doing, to navigate the social, cultural, and political minefields that surround public education.

The savvy we have identified here is savvy that permits one to negotiate the social, cultural, and political environment in ways that permit consistent progress towards the goal of inclusive and equitable student achievement. As we saw with Sandy and Esther, savvy involves being willing to take flak, to stand firm even in the face of threats to one's job security. It is unfortunate that sometimes, as in the case of Naomi (and perhaps to a lesser extent both Alisha and Luke), idealism, charisma, and even achievement can masquerade as savvy.

Heilbrun (1996) traced the quest for a "scientific formula of leadership" (p. 3). It is our contention that there is no such thing. He concluded that to grow as a discipline, leadership studies needed to "cast a wider net" (p. 11), and that in doing so, one might "discover that the most important qualities about leadership lie far beyond the capabilities of science to analyze" (p. 11). Here, we posit what we have called a praxis-oriented framework for leadership. It is not "scientific" although its success may be empirically demonstrated. Moreover, we argue that unless these tendencies, qualities, dispositions are probed, explored, studied, and practiced in formal programs of leadership preparation, educational leaders will be ill-equipped to implement them in practice.

We recognize the obvious. There is a considerable overlap among the concepts of moral purpose, agency, and savvy—especially as we are using them. None of them really fully exists without the other two. Moral purpose cannot be said to be authentic if one is not willing to be agentic (to actually do something about one's beliefs), and must be informed by savvy to keep from lapsing into a kind of ineffectual idealism. Agency needs to be undergirded by both moral purpose and savvy about both the content and

context of a proposed change. Otherwise it can become—what we sometimes sadly see in education—change for the sake of change. And, of course, savvy itself, is nothing without both the will and ability to act and a good moral compass to point the way. Bottled wisdom lacking in moral foundation is no good to anyone. We, therefore, argue that whether one takes a hierarchical or distributed approach, whether one leads authoritatively or collaboratively, whether one is charismatic and outgoing or quiet and unassuming, to be successful, it is critically important to ensure the presence of moral purpose, agency, and savvy in educational leadership.

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Thinking about Social Justice: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Educators Conceptions

There is not only a disconnect between theory and practice related to issues of social justice, but a backlash. No sooner have educators begun to incorporate thinking about social justice into discussions of the training and tasks of educational leaders than critics have begun the outcry against what they see as language and ideas that are ideologically dangerous and potentially thought controlling.

On June 6, 2006, the Chronicle of Higher Education, a major source of news, information, and jobs for America's college and university faculty and administrators, announced in a banner headline, "Accreditor of Education Schools Drops Controversial 'Social Justice' Standard for Teacher Candidates." The article informed its readers that The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) had won a key endorsement in its quest for continued federal approval of its accrediting power after announcing that it would drop language relating to "social justice" from its accrediting standards for teacher-preparation programs.

The response was immediate. Stephen H. Balch, president of the National Association of Scholars, said he was "delighted" by NCATE's decision to strike the concept of "social justice" from its standards, calling the phrase "ideologically freighted" and "necessarily ambiguous." Similarly, Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, applauded the change as a "step in the right direction." At the same time, educators in groups such as the University Council for Educational Administration or special interest groups of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) related to social justice expressed distress and concern.

In the Summer 2006 edition of City Journal, in an article published on the internet entitled, *The Ed Schools' Latest—and Worst—Humbug*, Sol Stern argued that teaching for "social justice" is a cruel hoax on disadvantaged kids. In the article, Stern not only condemns several academics by name because of their advocacy of social justice, he also critiques schools in New York City in which he maintains that attempts to address systemic inequalities and issues of equity are "a frivolous waste of precious school hours, especially for poor children, who start out with a disadvantage." He continues, "School is the only place where they are likely to obtain the academic knowledge that could make up for the educational deprivation they suffer in their homes" (¶ 55). It is obvious Stern believes that social justice work is opposed to academic excellence.

Practitioners engaged in social justice work, however, would refute this claim, arguing vehemently that there is no dichotomy. The principal of one school critiqued by Stern for her use of Freirian pedagogy during their deliberations on the school's mission responded that her school

> focuses on providing academically challenging work to students who previously did not have access to rigorous education. They read Antigone, study nuclear fission and fusion, and learn about

> landmark Supreme Court cases. They focus on activities in addition to, not to the exclusion, of traditional academics (¶ 2).

She concluded by saying that although she and the author disagree on many things, they "agree that access to rigorous academic opportunity is necessary—especially for poor children."

Although the details and vocabulary differ, it is obvious that both the principal and Stern want the best possible education for children, perhaps especially for children from impoverished homes. In general, I believe this to be true. Policy makers, scholars, and practitioners all want the best for children. There are certainly differences interpretations about what constitutes "the best." Sometimes there are sharp differences about how this might be accomplished. But in general, whether one uses the language of social justice or not, there are underlying concerns about equity and opportunities for success. Moreover, even though some may trace some theoretical influences to socialists, there are few social justice educators who advocate the institution of Marxist political systems. Perhaps for this reason, the intensity of the debates is surprising. They do little to unite researchers and practitioners who are sometimes pitted against each other, but they do influence perceptions of both the general public and of legislators. Kennedy (1997) explains:

> The connection between research and practice is not one in which research influences practice, as many researchers might hope, nor one in which practice influences research as many hope, but rather one in which both research and practice are influenced by and are perhaps even victims of the same shifting social and political context (pp. 9-10),

In the United States, this shifting context is largely framed by the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary legislation, commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). As described by the U.S. Department of Education,

> Under the act's accountability provisions, states must describe how they will close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. They must produce annual state and school district report cards that inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools that do not make progress must provide supplemental services, such as free tutoring or after-school assistance; take corrective actions; and, if still not making adequate yearly progress after five years, make dramatic changes to the way the school is run. (No child.., ¶ 2).

It is not the need to close the achievement gap that causes difficulties for educators, but the fact that the lofty goals expressed above are too frequently interpreted only in terms of students' mean scores and improvement points as measured by authorized standardized tests at every grade level.

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the challenges experienced both by practitioners and by researchers attempting to work within changing political frameworks in which educational discourse is dominated by discourses of accountability, high stakes testing, and a new gold standard of scientific research. First, I briefly describe the respondents and methods of the study, then present some of the theoretical underpinnings of social justice work in education. I provide some illustrations of the difficulty of instituting reform that ignores a justice perspective and in contrast, examples of ways in which successful schools have bridged the divide, united the two concepts, and created the conditions under which students have succeeded. In the concluding discussion, I explore some of the costs and benefits to educators trying to work ethically in this conflictual environment.

Participants

Data for this study come from preliminary interviews conducted by the researchers with 12 practicing educators (1 superintendent, 3 principals, and 8 teacher-leaders). Educators came from large and small schools in Illinois. All were white, experienced educators working in schools with socially and ethnically diverse populations. The five males and seven females did not show ethnic diversity, but represented backgrounds of both privilege and poverty and diversity of both sex and sexual orientation. Each was interviewed, using a semi-structured interview protocol and all appropriate ethical provisions, to explore how they thought about social justice work, what they actually did on the ground, and some of the costs and benefits they experienced. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded for themes and patterns related to understandings of social justice and democratic schooling.

These participants constitute the first half of a sample that will ultimately comprise 25 educators who will be involved in ongoing focus group discussions about the role and relevance of social justice training for school-based educators. Hence, the data and analysis are preliminary. At the same time, the striking differences provide evidence of at least three very different ways of thinking about equity and social justice within the wider social and political context of American education.

In order to protect the anonymity of participants but to provide some sense of the contexts in which their comments were expressed, I have created three fictional schools in which to situate the respondents. Further all names of individuals and schools used here are pseudonyms. In reality, there is no such clear-cut uniformity of response, but in each case, I present the dominant responses from the school in order to demonstrate clearly some of the differences in underlying theoretical grounding and ideologies that inform and guide practice.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Dominant approaches to education in North America and elsewhere still operate under the assumption that systems of education can (and should) be

ideologically neutral, rational, and objective. Moreover, there is a pervasive sense that if this is the case, the playing field is democratic, that all students have equal access to educational resources, and hence that everyone has an equal opportunity for similar successful achievement and outcomes. This dominant approach requires that educators ignore, or at least do not explicitly address, the differences inherent in educational institutions today (whether differences of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, dis/ability, language, and so forth), perpetuating not only color-blind, but difference-blind organizations. Yet, silence about difference neither resolves conflict nor changes underlying inequities; indeed, silence can be as pathologizing as many overtly prejudicial statements (Shields, 2003). As Shields and Bishop (2006) have argued and as the opening statements suggest, it is not diversity, but rather the disparity that comes from the power imbalances so often present in the ways in which society understands, conceptualizes, and addresses difference that may well be the most pressing problems facing educators in this century.

The prevailing discourse of democracy in North America is one in which people think about discharging one's responsibility as a democratic citizen simply through voting and becoming a contributing citizen (Bush, 2004). Social justice generally means rejecting overtly prejudicial statements and behaviors. And equity is generally assumed to mean equal treatment, equal access, and equal opportunity. Moreover, the general assumption is that the playing field is level, that citizens in the United States do have equal opportunities, and that somehow, if people are not successful, it is because they or their families have not tried hard enough.

Nevertheless, the data speak for themselves. In America, both in education and in the wider pluralistic (and so-called) democratic society, disparities between the dominant white middle-class and others have widened. In the last three decades, the gap between rich and poor has grown (Rothstein, 2004). Despite the promises of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the educational achievement of Blacks, Latinos, and American Indians still lags far behind that of white middle-class children. Data show, for example, that math and reading skills of African-American 12th graders are about the same as those of white eighth graders and that the white-black gaps are approximately 10 points wider, about a year's worth of learning, than they were a decade ago (The Education Trust, 2003). Further, 57% of 4th grade Hispanic students did not attain "basic" reading level on the NAEP test (ECS). These disparities can no longer be ignored.

Recognition of the disparities and of the inadequacies and failures of dominant discourses to shape reforms that have been successful in addressing these challenges have increased the need for theories that explicitly address inequities and the need for social justice and inform practice. Theoretical conceptions of social justice often grow out of critical theory and/ or liberationist approaches to educational leadership. Such well-known writers as Apple (1986), Giroux (2005), McLaren (2005), and Torres (1998) draw frequently on the praxis of Freire, Gramsci, or Marx to advocate approaches that take account of the classed, gendered, and raced nature of society and the inequities related to

social position. They focus on the need to reduce deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) and pathologizing discourses (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005) and to adopt constructivist and empowering approaches (Cummins, 1989) and high standards and expectations for all children.

Educators' Responses

At the outset, when educators encounter some of the language of critical theories that calls for activism (Lummis, 2001) or liberation from the oppression that may come from inequitable power distribution (Foucault, 1980), they may respond with resistance. The words "social justice" seem to evoke images of demonstrators marching with placards, memories of the violence associated with some civil rights' demonstrations, or calls for courage associated with the radical political action or heroism represented by Nelson Mandela. Nevertheless, as educators reflect on some of the inequities and injustices they have encountered in their schools, the theory sometimes comes alive and they adopt more explicit "subversive" or "disobedient" stances.

In this section, I provide, using three different story lines, some ways in which educators describe some of the challenges presented to them in their roles as educational leaders and how they have addressed them in their practice. I call these story-lines a) deficit thinking masquerading as social justice, b) islands of resistance and success, and c) school wide transformation and success. As I conclude each section, I make some comments and draw some inferences about the relationship of the story to the extant theoretical work on social justice and deep democracy.

Deficits Masquerading as Social Justice

In some instances, educators appear to have been so co-opted by the dominant discourse described above that their comments reflect the belief that the onus is on individual students to succeed. They express the belief that when schools institute practices that treat all students in the same ways, they are providing equitable conditions for learning. Such was the case in Randolph High School. The school has a relatively small (785) student population of which 70% is white and the rest are self described as African-American, Hispanic, Asian, or multi-ethnic. According to statistics provided by the state, the school has a low income population of 45%. According to the School Report Card published by the state, 40% of the students are meeting or exceeding grade level expectations in math and reading (compared to 65% statewide.)

Teachers interviewed at this school talk about the changes in the town and school demographics since the closure of a military base a few years ago. One teacher explained, "Now we have a whole different sector of people ... like a little Chicago or something, a ghetto with a lower income." He elaborated:

> You've got to understand we're seeing a different type of kid. The value of the student or IQ of the students in this school is depleting, there's no doubt in my mind. I say that because I see it; we're teaching differently ... We do the best with what we can. We have review sessions you would not believe, teachers ... bust their butts

> trying to get these kids to learn. You can tell kids what you want, but they still have to take it in and understand it for 16 weeks.

He went on to describe how he thinks about social justice:

> I think kids are heading to a not-less-educated future, but more of a craft, factory worker trade so they don't see the need. I can lead a horse to water, but I can't make him drink. There is your social justice. Do I tell these kids "You are going to go to U of I?" No, I'm not going to lie to them. I'm going to say that maybe [a community college] may be your best bet or a trade. I think the kids are changing and it's more difficult for us to achieve the scores we had before when we had the base here.

Unfortunately, this type of thinking was not isolated to a single teacher but was prevalent among those we interviewed at this school. Others talked extensively about "these kids"—kids who came from homes where education was not valued and for whom the most one could expect was a trade.[1] The school social worker defined social justice as "everybody having the same opportunities in an everyday life social setting ... in a classroom, every student is given the same opportunities." When asked to give examples of things she had done that might be considered social justice, she spoke about conducting "a lot of peer mediations and student-staff mediations." The principal informed us that when he had been asked to nominate some teachers actively engaged in social justice, he had identified "teachers who have a good rapport with students and deal well with them. They like getting to know about the students instead of just coming in and teaching the subject."

When both the principal and social described a recent incident that illustrated the application of principles of social justice in the school, they told the same story of a girl who had had some difficulties at home and then apparently over-reacted to an educator's comment at school. They both proudly explained that instead of simply applying the rules, they had taken the home situation into consideration. Social justice was "taking the home situation into consideration when dealing with her."

When asked to describe his goals for the coming year, the principal identified as his first priority a need to raise the test scores of sub-groups of students in order for the school to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). They had learned that their "African American students are not performing as well on average as our white students." Thus, his goal was to get the whole staff to look at "what to do with subgroups that don't meet AYP."

Some Reflections. In Randolph High School, it is obvious that the teachers care about and like the students. Many of them express a strong belief in the importance of positive inter-personal relationship, knowing individual students,

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[1] This attitude is not only illustrative of deficit thinking with respect to the students but belies an unfortunate deficit perception that devalues the role of trades in our culture.

taking their home lives into consideration when they apply the discipline policies, and providing equal opportunities for all students.

At the same time, it is important to notice the extent to which the general climate of accountability drives the practices of this school. The pressing need to achieve AYP cannot be discounted in today's climate of rewards and punishments. At the same time, raising test scores and getting students to remember information for the test are the focus of the educators interviewed in this school. The student "IQ is declining" because of the kind of children and families that have moved into the neighborhood and so teachers should not have to teach as though students will be going to university. This, of course, is a blatant example of deficit thinking that not only locates the deficit or problem in children and their families, but narrows their life chances as a result (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 1997).

In the definitions and explanations of social justice work in this school, there was no expressed awareness of systemic issues that might constitute barriers to the academic success of their changing student body. Educators acknowledged that changes might be in order in the curriculum, but these were changes that reflected a lowering of expectations, not those that might provide a more culturally and socially inclusive learning environment. There was no recognition that if students do not see themselves or their realities reflected in the curriculum, they may tend to feel marginalized, even to give up trying, believing that education is really not for them (Giroux, 1997; Shields, 2003). As Bishop et al. (2003) and many other researchers have found, educators need to reject such deficit thinking and move to more empowering, more agentic, and more constructivist forms of pedagogy. Wagstaff and Fusarelli (1995) found that the single most important factor in the academic achievement of minority students is the leader's explicit rejection of deficit thinking.

In this school, the dominant discourse was around the need to improve test scores. This was supplemented by a discourse of caring—paying attention to the circumstances of children outside of school. Yet, if educators at Randolph High School are to either enhance equity or improve academic achievement in their school, they will need to move beyond simply having positive relationships with students (although that is a necessary first step), examine their beliefs about the students, and identify ways in which they can overcome the pervasive discourses of deficit thinking that dominated much of the interviews.

Islands of Resistance and Success

A second group of educators described themselves as working in isolation, almost in secret, struggling with little institutional support, to achieve what they thought of as equitable outcomes for children. These are the educators whom I have called islands—islands of resistance working for student success. There is no doubt that such educators are struggling to find ways to operate ethnically within frameworks that are not necessarily receptive to alternative ways of thinking about fairness or of prompting student success. These teachers come from Rambling High School, a large brick building that houses over 2300

students, a school which is failing to meet AYP. In fact, only 42% of the student body, almost half of whom are Hispanic and 42% who are low income, are meeting or exceeding statewide expectations in math and reading.

During their interviews, educators from this school gave examples of the kinds of situations in which they found themselves and of some ways in which they addressed them. Here, I must note that although I have not cited them, each educator gave examples of times when he or she believed that the responsibility for inappropriate action and for the attendant consequences was that of an individual student. What follows are examples of times when these educators recognized the presence of deeper systemic responsibility as well.

One dean in charge of students gave several examples of students who had been referred by teachers demanding that he take disciplinary action against the student. A large number of these "infractions," however, he did not believe to be legitimate. For example, he picked a referral off his daily pile, and said,

> This is for an EMH (educable mentally handicapped) child who was not wearing his ID tag. The teacher asked about it, and he found it, but got it twisted and put it on backwards. The teacher wrote him up for "mocking him," and sent him down for me to deal with.

He picked up another form and continued.

> Here is another form for two African-American kids who were sent down by their substitute teacher from math class. The sub raised the issue of the Minute Men and when one child responded in a way the substitute did not like, he was written up.

My respondent, David, asked, "What on earth is he doing raising issues like that and what does he expect?" He explained that in such instances, he tries to talk to the teachers, to help the teacher take responsibility or put the incident in perspective. If unsuccessful, he sometimes takes the top referral sheet off the multi-copy stack, writes on the rest, and sends them on their way. In other words, he does not maintain a permanent record, but responds in a way that the referring teachers are satisfied. At the same time, David recognizes this is an ethically difficult choice and a position he should not have to take. He does, he concluded, a "lot of things I am not supposed to do." When asked to explain what he meant by to social justice, he responded, "When all teachers value all students and give all students consideration one would give a favorite student" and emphasized that teachers do have favorite students who are given all kinds of special and second chances.

Pat, another teacher-leader, told me of a situation in which a substitute teacher asked a child who received special education services to read a passage out loud. When the child stumbled, the substitute asked other special ed children to identify themselves by raising their hands and then proceeded to ask each of them to read. He then returned to the first one and said, "They can do it. Why can't you?" The teacher claimed it was to make a point. At the same time, my respondent indicated that it is inappropriate to attempt this by "singling kids out and calling them names." She tried to frame it as an example, and asked the

teacher how he wanted the incident explained to parents. In other words, this respondent tried to help colleagues to take a broader picture rather than to simply react.

A third story was told about an African-American kid who was found holding a knife. Matt, my respondent, emphasized that there had not been a fight but that he was simply holding the knife. He explained that the student was low functioning and did not really understand the implications of having the knife. He then told an elaborate story about the child who, in first grade had had seizures. Despite a medical referral, nothing had happened. When, by 4th grade, he was still having seizures, his condition was finally diagnosed but too late to prevent the severe brain damage that had occurred. Matt commented that it never would have taken four years for parents to get a diagnosis for a "middle-class, white kid." Moreover, he stated, "This child's situation came from apathy, ignorance, and lack of resources." In other words, Matt recognized that there could be systemic issues related to ethnicity or poverty underlying the situation of the individual child and tried to respond accordingly.

A final example came from Muriel, an administrator who had grown up in an extremely poor home with an alcoholic father. She talked about finding ways to ensure that "every child who walks through the door gets an equal chance for the best education we can give them." She explained that although her teachers understood on one level what that means, they do not understand why she seems "so driven," why she offers so many "scholarships" to students who cannot afford to participate in school events, or why she works so hard with the district and local business to find ways, for example, to ensure that even poor children can have their own band instruments. When she instituted a program of home visits prior to the beginning of a new school year, they asked why she wanted to go into those neighborhoods, and wondered why she was not afraid. Her response was that even though she had shared some of her childhood experiences with her teachers, they did not and could not understand. They "could empathize, but could never have the feelings," she stated.

Further Reflections. In these instances, these educators had a very different conception of social justice. In the foregoing illustrations, there was a strong sense that it is not always appropriate to jump to conclusions and blame the student. These incidents from their interviews provide a clear sense of educators working against the grain because they believe the explanation for student behavior or academic success often goes beyond simple teacher-student interactions and beyond the single family situation. Teaching substitute teachers about the consequence of their actions, working with local business to subsidize rentals or provide free instruments for children, helping teachers to better understand the neighborhoods in which students live—all are examples of what some of these respondents described as "subversive activism" or "creative disobedience."

Moreover, they recognized the costs. Muriel talked about how the other teachers seemed to respect her, but indicated that socially she felt very isolated in her school. Pat was willing to risk uncomfortable personal confrontations by

raising issues directly with another teacher. David acknowledged that if his superiors found he was not actually providing punishments to students referred to him, it could cost him in terms of salary increases, advancement, or ultimately even his job, But he explained, “I used to be an accountant and I could not sleep at night because I hated it; now, even with the risks, I sleep at night.”

In each case, these educators doing social justice work were doing so in isolated and sometimes clandestine ways. The larger frameworks within which they work are so steeped in the wider discourse of blame and accountability that they do not believe their beliefs or actions can be seen as acceptable or normal. These stories raise significant questions about the risks and the costs of working towards social justice. And yet, contrary to the implicit beliefs of people like Sol Stern (2006), their actions are taken in order to provide a safe and accepting environment in which the students can learn to their potentials.

Social Justice and Student Achievement: A Community Perspective

A third type of response came from the principal and teachers I interviewed in Northwest Elementary School, a small elementary school of 358 students, in which the staff, led, encouraged, and prompted by the principal had engaged in ongoing discussion about the rejection of deficit thinking and about ensuring an inclusive but demanding educational environment for all students. Here, despite the district framework in which the principal was often seen as oppositional, and in spite of the legislative mandates of the state and the federal NCLB programs, the mean student achievement on statewide math and reading tests has gone, in two years, from 59% of students meeting or exceeding expectations to having 76% at those levels. Further, this has been accomplished in a time of rapid change: school amalgamation, staff mobility, and community demographic changes. The school population now includes 50% of non-white students (25% of whom are Hispanic) and 37% of students living in poverty.

During my visit to the school to interview the principal and some teachers, I had the opportunity to observe a range of academic classes and to participate in a weekly school-wide assembly. The assembly was a vibrant celebration of school life in which everyone sang the school song (a rap written by a teacher), the teachers taught the children a dance, first grade students performed a readers’ theater, and awards of every description were distributed. Here the pride in the school was evident both in the enthusiastic response of teachers and students and, when appropriate, in their quiet and respectful behavior.

When I dropped in on the art class, I saw, on display, a small art print. Each student had been given a one inch square representing part of the image. The task was to enlarge it and mix colors to reproduce the image so they could combine their new larger squares into a very large version of the print. What struck me later, as I conversed with this teacher and the principal, Sandy Short, was the explicit and intentional nature of the work. Here the art teacher was not simply having the children draw, but was teaching proportion, graphing, as well as color mixing—to 7 year old children. Later, in a music class, a different group of 2nd graders were working with their teacher to compose music on a staff (with clef and time signature). Although they had not yet tried to play their composition

using tuned plastic boomwhackers, they volunteered to demonstrate. The teacher first handed out the tubes, reviewed the time signature, and began the performance. Again I was struck by the level and intensity of the lesson. The children were learning to reads musical notation, understand keys and time signatures, and play their own compositions.

Students in this school had not only improved in terms of test scores, but had benefited from high quality fine arts activities and from weekly assemblies in which they took responsibility for leadership as well. Here, there was no narrowing of the curriculum, no "drill and kill" or repetitious practicing of test items. When I probed for explanations, the teachers were unanimous. The principal had pushed them, collaborated with them, and made teaching fun. She had transformed the previously boring staff meetings by interjecting surprise and carnival; among other things, at a signal that occurred at unanticipated times during the meetings, she drew a name from a hat and presented a silly prize. She instituted free writing at staff meetings, requiring all teachers to reflect on issues confronting the school and subsequently met with grade level or role (e.g., special education) teams to probe the responses. She totally and explicitly rejected deficit thinking, asking instead for teachers to consider what they would do "if there were no limits." All talked consistently about "non-negotiables"—the fact that all children should be expected to succeed and that as educators it was their role to ensure success, for example.

During her first year as principal, Sandy says they "talked a lot." She taught them about data and with volunteer groups of teachers made a commitment to collect some data about every child in the school. Once they had some data, she constantly asked, "Now that we have the data, what are we going to do differently?" And she constantly taught them about topics she wanted them to understand, for example that it is important to differentiate in terms of what children know between what they have actually been taught and what they can do. A student who has never been taught something may not necessarily be incapable of learning it. She raised issues with the district superintendent telling him she was uncomfortable about the cavalier conversation at meetings about gays, fagots, white trash, and other abnormal people. In other words, Sandy did what she thought was right without ever backing down.

When asked about the extent to which she found elements of No Child Left Behind constrained her ability to succeed, she replied that if you were doing what you need to do to ensure all children learn, it is simply a reporting tool, one that really does not get in the way. It was, therefore, interesting that both principal and teachers told me that when the assemblies were first instituted, teachers had complained, worrying that the time away from instruction would negatively affect test scores. Nevertheless, it became clear to everyone that doing what they had to do—building a strong and inclusive school community, focusing on student learning and figuring out what to do to help all children succeed—was not dependent on simply teaching to the test or teaching test taking strategies.

Still Reflecting. Several things struck me as I listened to this bright, energetic educator and talked further with her teachers. First, she had no idea how unusual

her approach was. When asked how she convinced teachers to do something, how she got consensus, how she made change, she would say, "I have no idea, the teachers just did it." But then of course during the elaboration, the details of her questioning, and her strategies emerged. She talked about her background in alternative and wilderness education, always seeking ways to overcome difficulties to attain success.

The second revelation was her total commitment. On numerous occasions she mentioned how members of the board or district office had been unhappy; several times she indicated she had thought she might be fired, or told how someone had warned her to be careful. There was no thought for personal glory or even for personal job security—simply a clear conviction that she had to do what was right for the kids.

Here we find additional evidence of the research findings about the importance of the principal (Silins & Mulford, 2002). Moreover, we see clear evidence that when a principal is deeply grounded in issues related to social justice and deeply grounded in a personal ethic of right and wrong, she can exercise leadership in such as way as to overcome some of the contravening social & political pressures. The public press for accountability and the district and state concern with NCLB were not ignored, but, unlike in many other schools, neither was central to the daily life and work of Northwest Elementary School.

Implications and Discussion

The three different story lines used by the participants in this study demonstrate clearly differences in ways in which educators both incorporate theoretical perspectives and navigate dominant discourses of high stakes accountability and scientific research. In the first, no-one really used an empowerment discourse or expected high levels of achievement on the part of all students; instead, deficit thinking dominated. In the second, although individual teachers understood that equity requires an examination of underlying systemic barriers to student success, and worked to overcome them whenever possible, they were isolated islands of hope for these students. There is little doubt that their efforts made a difference for specific students in specific instances, but that they ultimately left the structures and systems of their organization intact. In the third narrative, we found that a single determined, knowledgeable principal was able to work collaboratively but authoritatively to move her whole staff to a position where they clearly understood the relationship between social justice and academic achievement. Here change was systemic and permeated the organization as a whole.

The third narrative demonstrated that there is no necessary dichotomy between discourses of social justice and high academic achievement on the part of students–whether measured by performance on standardized tests or defined by enjoyment of school, a sense of pride and belonging, the acquisition of democratic leadership skills. In fact, the first story line, in which the discourses of social justice were almost non-existent, emerged from the least successful

school, one in which educators were so negatively focused on the students themselves and their perceived inability to improve their performance on test scores they did not take time to examine possible impediments within their own control.

In the second story, educators were steeped in convictions about social justice. They believed that blaming students was counter-productive and tried, as best they could, to make a difference for students. Here, test scores and lack of general willingness to address systemic issues combine to create an environment in which student success has not been attained. The lonely, subversive approach to social justice undoubtedly makes a difference for the individual students involved in the kinds of incidents reported, but without systematic awareness of the roe of deficit thinking and how to create a more level playing field, these teachers remain isolated and at-risk themselves of punitive action and retribution.

The third story, however, is more optimistic. It identifies the need for a strong principal who is firmly grounded in her principles and has a clear sense of purpose related to how to create a learning environment in which all children may not only feel they belong, but in which they may be successful. Because she was willing to take personal responsibility and risk, to engage her staff in extensive dialogue about how to make meaningful change, to ensure that the decisions made by the staff were not only data-driven but grounded in theories of social justice, she was able to create a more successful school. I use the term successful here, conscious that its meanings are frequently contested, to emphasize the fact that not only was the school successful in Stern's (2006) terms, in achieving the conditions under which children from ethnic minority and high poverty families could succeed, but also in terms of achieving social justice. The conversations in her school focused on equity, inclusion, "on leveling the playing field rather than on treating everyone the same," she explained.

The initial analyses of interviews from this study demonstrate the importance of a strong leader, deeply imbued with moral purpose, who is able to withstand outside pressures and create a collaborative community focused on both social justice and academic achievement. This is not an isolated story. It is repeated in schools throughout this nation where educators understand that if we are to change the outcomes, we must change the system itself. Social justice is not, as Sol Stern would have us believe, a cruel hoax or a waste of time and money for poor children. The story of Northwest Elementary School suggests that the divide between theories of social justice and the practices of educators are less significant than often thought. In fact, the data presented here call for a different kind of action—one that unites educational researchers and practitioners to stand firmly against the kind of dichotomous thinking that runs rampant among those whose perspectives are mirror those of Sol Stern (2006). He, and others who take a similar ideological stance, argue that a social justice discourse is a political one—one that has no place in public education. But this type of argument belies the inherently political nature of public schools.

Whether we like it or not, public education is a political enterprise and is washed in and blown by the waves and winds of political opinion. Critiques of social justice are, therefore, more ideological than political. They serve to remind us of the importance of dialogue, not about whether schools should be political, but about what kind of political stance should be taken by public education. The data from this study suggest clearly that to take a position for social justice is, in no way, to take a position against academic achievement. Instead, they are and must continue to be inextricably linked if we are to create the conditions under which all children may attain high academic standards. We must resist appeals to reject social justice in favor of rigorous academic standards, for they can and must go hand in hand.

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