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Distributed Leadership for Social Justice: Exploring How Influence and Equity Are Stretched Over an Urban High School

Over the past 2 decades, educational leadership scholars have made significant contributions to our understanding of the ways educators can and do lead for social justice in schools (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Conceptual research suggests that a social justice orientation toward educational leadership practice and research promises to lead to an understanding of "how institutionalized theories, norms, and practices in schools and society lead to social, economic, and educational inequities" (Dantley & Tillman, 2006, p. 17). Social justice scholars argue

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that leadership practice informed by such understanding will empower and enable leaders to serve traditionally marginalized students and dismantle long-standing norms that privilege certain students at the expense of others. Empirical studies in this line of inquiry support the contention that school leadership can positively influence these dynamics but that such work is fraught with organizational barriers that perpetuate inequity within schools (e.g., Gooden, 2005) and deeply rooted sociopsychological dynamics that permeate all levels of society (Scheurich & Young, 1997).

Although many educators throughout school systems can find inspiration in the call to ameliorate hegemony and work toward ethical and equitable educational practice, school leaders are uniquely positioned to facilitate meaningful and substantive change at the building level. It is therefore incumbent on educational leadership researchers to explore social justice in situ and to develop, test, and refine theories that might provide a foundation for subsequent social justice research and, ultimately, equitable practices in schools (Beachum, Blount, Bogotch, Brooks, & English, in press). In response to this imperative, this research explored key social justice concepts at the building level by using a conceptual framework grounded in two heretofore discrete lines of theory: social justice and distributed leadership.

Viewing leadership practice from a distributed perspective suggests that contextual factors, situational dynamics, individuals, and artifacts influence one another to create a protean phenomenon termed *leadership practice* (Spillane, 2006). Importantly, when conceived in this manner, leadership practice is conceptually stretched over an organization rather than manifest as a set of roles and behaviors enacted by a formal administrator in a rational decision-making process. Instead, leadership practice is a fluid phenomenon that changes from situation to situation, from context to context, and that evolves over time. Although distributed leadership has been fairly criticized for failing to take into account the sociopolitical dynamics of organizations (Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006) and can be criticized as a difference-blind theory (Larson & Murtadha, 2002), we argue that the ambiguity of the distributed leadership theory is a strength in that it allows researchers a useful framework for identifying patterns of leadership practice. We also explain that the theory must be supplemented by complementary constructs to enrich our understanding of focused forms of leadership practice. Although not explicitly stated as such, some studies have adopted this approach (e.g., Goldstein, 2004; Spillane, 2005). In this study, we couple the distributed leadership theory to social justice concepts in an effort to make a conceptual and empirical contribution to these important areas of inquiry and to explore the ways that they might intertwine and be mutually exclusive. Accordingly, the

twofold purpose of this article is to explore the manner in which social justice leadership practice is distributed throughout a school setting and to investigate the efficacy of an exploratory conceptual framework: distributed leadership for social justice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: FROM ABSTRACT IDEALS TO EVERYDAY PRACTICE

Social justice leadership seeks whole-school reform that bases teaching and learning on students' creation of knowledge that will liberate and free them from the ways in which they

> have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses. This means discovering new ways of understanding [themselves] and one another, refusing to accept the dominant culture's characterizations of [their] practices and desires, and re-defining them from within resistant cultures. (Sawicki, 1991, p. 44)

Through problem posing and solving, students learn to question which knowledge is valued and why; they examine their access to opportunities for intellectual, economic, and social advancement, and they learn to reach an understanding of knowing that they know (Freire, 1989; Sernak, 2006). Other options that are available to leaders who are seeking to enact social justice include implementing incentive and sanction policies; introducing and supporting democratic and ethical organizational processes; reforming, aligning, and expanding curricula to meet the needs of particular populations (King, 2006; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003); promoting understanding of muticultualistic pluralism (Capper, 1993); practicing difference-sensitive instructional leadership; and providing professional development opportunities that focus on how educators can serve traditionally underrepresented and poorly served peoples.

Leaders who develop this perspective and adopt a social justice stance have been characterized in three ways: *transformational public intellectuals*, who "believe that the pedagogy in schools must be focused on morally impacting ends" (Dantley & Tillman, 2006, p. 20); *bridge people*, who are "committed to creating a bridge between themselves and others, for the purposes of improving the lives of all those with whom they work" (Merchant & Shoho, 2006, p. 86) while cultivating a form of leadership that connects people, purpose, and practice (Donaldson, 2006; Fullan, 2003; Furman, 2004); and *critical activists*, who deconstruct political, social,

and economic inequity and organize school and community resources toward the central aim of providing opportunity for traditionally underrepresented and oppressed peoples (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Larson & Ovando, 2001).

TRANSFORMATIONAL PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

Regardless of social and economic function, Freire (1989) contends that all human beings perform as intellectuals by constantly interpreting and giving meaning to the world and by participating in a conception of the world. Moreover, those who are oppressed need to develop their own organic and transformative intellectuals who can learn with such groups while helping to foster modes of self-education and struggle against various forms of oppression (Giroux, 1988). Social transformation must include theory that is seen as "the production of forms of discourse that may arise from universities, from peasant communities, from workers councils, or from within various social movements" (p. 119). Each of these sites provides diverse and critical insights into the nature of domination and the possibilities for social and self-emancipation, and they do so from the historical and social particularities that give them meaning.

Schools are places that represent forms of knowledge, language practices, social relations, and values that are selections and exclusions from the wider culture. For instance, many recommendations ignore the role that school leaders and teachers play in preparing learners to be active and critical citizens, and they suggest reforms that ignore the intelligence, judgment, and experience that these educators might offer in such a debate (i.e., opportunities to engage in self-critique regarding the nature and purpose of leadership preparation, in-service programs, and the dominant forms of classroom teaching). This debate also gives opportunities for aspiring and practicing school leaders to collectively engage in dialogue and collectively organize to improve the conditions under which they work and to demonstrate to the public the central role that leaders must play in any viable attempt to reform public schools. Consequently, school leaders and teachers must be touted as transformative intellectuals who combine scholarly reflection and practice in the service of educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens (Larson & Murtadha, 2002).

Transformative intellectuals take seriously the need to give students an active voice in their learning experiences; furthermore, they must connect pedagogical experiences to the classroom practice (i.e., incorporating individuals and groups in their various cultural, class, racial, historical and gender settings and their diverse problems, hopes, and dreams). To do otherwise is

to deny social educators the opportunity to assume a role of transformative intellectuals. Educating for social justice is not about showing students what social justice looks like but awakening and developing in students, teachers, and administrators a critical consciousness that will facilitate the recognition of institutionalized injustice, an understanding of the moral and practical implications of injustice, and a compulsion to move beyond rhetorical action into acts of social liberation (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Wren, 1977).

LEADERS AS BRIDGE PEOPLE: CONNECTING STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS TO EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

In the 21st century, school leaders are faced with many challenges of closing the achievement gap, ensuring student safety, hiring and developing quality teachers, and stretching allocated funds to operate their schools. Although these are important issues that can support the development of social justice in schools (see Marshall & Young, 2006), a social justice agenda in schools is about achieving equity and excellence in education for all children (Ball, 2006; Furman & Shields, 2005; Jean-Marie & Normore, 2006; Normore & Blanco, 2006) from diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Leaders who talk and walk social justice (Marshall & Young, 2006) are bridge people (Donaldson, 2006; Merchant & Shoho, 2006) who wrestle with, what C. D. Lee (2006) identifies as, attaining the balance of social justice.

For bridge people (Merchant & Shoho, 2006), decreasing the achievement gap, increasing the quality of schools for all students, and providing necessary resources are part of the agenda for social justice. Many school leaders espouse a belief in and articulate a commitment to social justice, but they demonstrate a tendency to separate social justice from daily practices that have a direct impact on the haves and have-nots. Bridge people as social justice school leaders embody characteristics that enable them to view social justice as being integral to practices (Marshall & Young, 2006) that affect educational objectives (i.e., increased student achievement). In a study of eight educators who were recognized as leaders for social justice and equity, Merchant and Shoho (2006) found that the leaders shared a number of characteristics—to a name a few, a strong orientation toward social justice and equity issues, instilled in their early years; a strong sense of purpose and belief to overcome obstacles; powerful experiences of marginalization, which shaped their determination to fight against injustices for all; and an awareness of the influence of the sociopolitical movements of the 1950s and 1960s.

Mobilizing and generating resources to strengthen initiatives that contribute to achieving social justice is an essential part of effective leadership. Furman and Shields (2005) advocate the use of a second leadership lens (i.e., constructivist leadership theory), which purports that leadership aims at the construction of meaning and purpose by members of a community through their communicative relationships. The authors further argue the "need for social justice to encompass education that is not only just, democratic, emphatic, and optimistic, but also academically excellent" (as cited in Firestone & Riehl, 2005, p. 123). Starratt (2004) proposes a multidimensional ethical approach for leaders with a social justice agenda. He bases his approach on the combination of ethics of care, justice, and critique and posits that school leaders give serious consideration to the ways in which students—particularly, those from marginalized groups (i.e., racial and ethnic minorities, poor student, gay and lesbian students, female students)—are socialized in the school setting. Individuals for social justice challenge unequal power relationships based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, and other systems of oppression (Jean-Marie & Normore, 2006; S. S. Lee & McKerrow, 2005).

According to Evans, Axelrod, and Langberg (2004) and Jazzar and Algozzine (2007), issues of oppression and inequities ought to be discussed in just about every sector in a community as a way of thinking and acting that recognizes the central role of schools in communities and the power of working together for a common good. It is appropriate that partnerships throughout learning communities (i.e., schools, colleges, universities, social services, businesses, school districts, parks and recreation departments, child and family agencies, museums and zoos) engage moral action and social justice advocacy in diminishing the dividing line between the haves and have-nots (Normore & Blanco, 2006). Nabors, Leff, and Power (2004) assert that community partnerships and educational leadership are the foundational forces upon which education is perceived as the foundation of democracy. As leaders act, so leaders instruct, guide, lead, and commit to democratic schooling where equity and excellence function as the social covenant.

CRITICAL ACTIVISTS: GET UP AND STAND UP FOR STUDENTS' RIGHTS

To understand, promote, and enact social justice, school leaders must first develop a heightened and critical awareness of oppression, exclusion,

and marginalization. To return to Freire (1989), critical consciousness, or *conscientizacão*, "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 58). Freire's *conscientization* is "the possession of critical consciousness, that is, understanding and addressing the reality one lives and, simultaneously, one's consciousness of that reality" (Lankshear, 1993, as cited in Sernak, 2006, "Conscientization," para. 2). Fundamental to attaining critical consciousness is dialogue, for it opens the spaces for free, creative exploration of complex and subtle issues (Senge, 1990), thus requiring critical thinking. It is this dialogue that is necessary to address the exteriorities of schooling. It is not telling the community what is needed in schools; rather, it is the deliberative dialogue (Gutman, 1999) that is essential to dealing with the various beliefs and assumptions that people have about one another and that affect the ways in which educators school children.

A social justice orientation is overtly taught in some preservice educational leadership programs, learned on the job or in professional development from other leaders, and likely never learned by others (Brooks & Miles, 2006). Children who live in poverty or who compose racial and ethnic minorities need more than a banking education (Freire, 1989). They need to learn for liberation and freedom; that is, they need to question the answers, not answer the questions, to take control of their own lives (Sernak, 2006). Without a leader's willingness to deal with dialogue, assumptions, and biases, differences will continue to be ignored. The power structure, hegemonic and hierarchical, continues as is; despite the rhetoric of vision, the researched pedagogy, and the community-shared and community-supported educational goals, schools remain the same. Freire (1989) advocated that education for poor children should be about human and community development, about understanding who the children are, personally, culturally, and socially. It is about becoming visible to self and others. David Whyte (2001), poet, eloquently illustrates this sentiment: "To be human is to become visible while carrying what is hidden as a gift to others" (p. 190).

However, as Brooks and Miles (2006) note, "awareness of social injustices is not sufficient, school leaders must act when they identify inequity. School leaders are not only uniquely positioned to influence equitable educational practice, their proactive involvement is imperative." Leaders who are critical activists take this call to heart; they are educational leaders who move from awareness to intent and then to action.

However, it is important to note that the work of critical activists can be difficult and dangerous. Speaking and acting against entrenched formal

and informal social structures, norms, and processes can lead to interpersonal and institutional reprisals. Furthermore, critical activists face potential threats from inside their organizations and from external stakeholders if they challenge long-standing traditions, regardless of whether it is from a moral high ground (Larson & Murtadha, 2002).

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: A DISTRIBUTED PERSPECTIVE

For the purpose of this study, *distributed leadership* denotes a theoretical perspective on leadership practice (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The term is not intended to be confused or conflated with other seemingly similar strains of educational research, such as *shared governance*, *democratic leadership*, *teacher leadership*, *team leadership*, *delegation*, *collective decision making*, and so on. Grounded in sociological and psychological inquiry, distributed leadership has evolved into a perspective for analyzing leadership practice that deviates from many traditions of educational leadership inquiry in that it does not prescribe any specific traits, characteristics, dispositions, attitudes, organizational positions, roles, or behaviors as leadership. According to researchers (e.g., Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995; Spillane, 2005), leadership practice, when viewed from a distributed perspective, occurs as three discrete organizational components that interact over time: situation, leaders, and followers (see Figure 1).
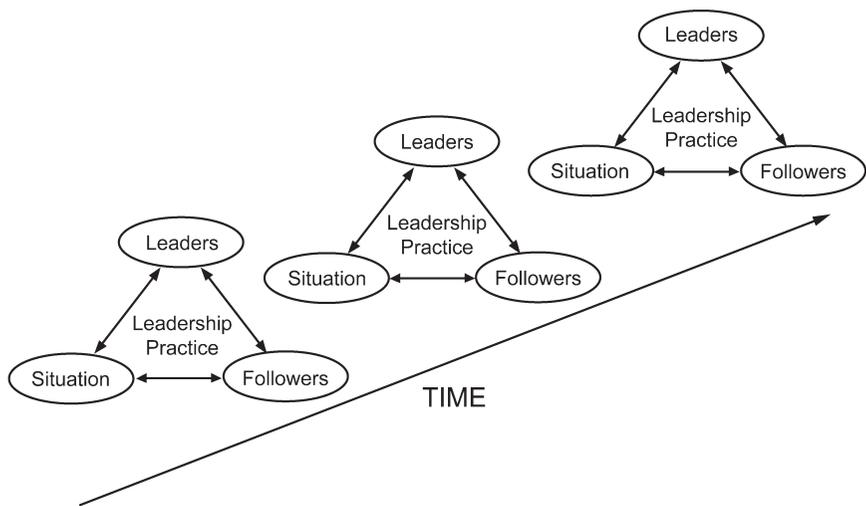

Figure 1. A conceptual model of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, *situation* refers to the routines and tools that constrain and enable leadership practice (Spillane, 2006). Routines of various types are common in schools and include everything from seemingly mundane tasks, such as walking through a section of the school on the way to one's classroom or office, to the regular schedule of multiyear strategic plans. Routines, then, are patterns of leadership that may include dynamics such as social norms, incentives, sanctions, interpersonal dynamics, and internal and external communications (Spillane, 2006).

When we discuss leaders in this study, we are speaking of formal and informal leaders who may occupy positions in the organization. We acknowledge that leadership can be enacted collaboratively, when two or more leaders practice in a context and situation (Spillane, 2006). We also recognize that leaders engage in multiple styles of practice and differ from situation to situation, from context to context, and over time. People in formal positions of authority, such as principal, dean, and department chair, may be followers in situations or may assume roles in situations. School leadership practice, then, occurs as these contextual factors interact in an organizational context and influence the articulation and attainment of goals and tasks. Research has addressed the way that leadership is distributed among teachers during comprehensive school reform implementation in elementary schools (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003), the enactment of accountability policy (Spillane et al., 2002), how teachers reconstruct their practice based on external reform demands (Spillane, 2004), and how leadership is enacted at the departmental and classroom levels differentially, depending on the subject of instruction.

The distributed leadership theory has been used to explore and explain various aspects of school leadership, and it has earned both admirers and detractors. Distributed leadership has been alternately lauded as a significant theoretical advance that improves our conceptual understanding of leadership practice and derided as yet another difference-blind model that fails to account for the political and power dimensions of equity issues such race, sexism, and class bias (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006). Although we acknowledge these limitations, we argue that the absence of these components in the model creates a useful ambiguity that allows researchers to explore the distribution of many forms of leadership practice. Whereas Spillane's model may not purposively and explicitly include such dynamics in the model described earlier, we can ameliorate this shortcoming by using the distributed leadership theory as a conceptual foundation and by supplementing it with additional theoretical constructs.

CONCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS: DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

In this study, we draw from research on leadership for social justice and connect it with the distributed leadership theory by examining the way that leaders act as transformational public intellectuals, bridge people, and critical activists. In doing so, we explore the ways that these forms of leadership operate in a fluid manner as activities enacted among leaders, followers, and artifacts that evolve over time and vary from situation to situation. As a result, the convergence of these concepts suggests a frame for investigating how leadership for social justice is stretched over formal and informal leaders and followers throughout an organization.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Given that this research is an investigation of social justice leadership practice, a phenomenological research design was employed (Creswell, 1998). The study took place in an urban public high school in the southeastern United States, hereafter referred to as the pseudonymous McLuhan High School. The student demographic distribution at the school is 85% African American and 12% White (with 3% listed as *other*). This case study, which took place over the course of two academic years, explores how leadership for social justice is distributed, or stretched, across the school. The following research questions guided our inquiry: How do school leaders and followers identify, perceive, and define social justice issues in a public high school? How do school leaders and followers act as transformational public intellectuals, bridge people, and critical activists in a public high school? How does leadership for social justice evolve over time and vary from situation to situation in a public high school?

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected via interviews, observations, and technical and nontechnical documents (Silverman, 2001). The lead researcher gained initial access to the school through an assistant principal, who introduced him to teachers, administrators, and other educators throughout the duration of the study. Although this gatekeeper was helpful at the onset, the lead researcher used snowball sampling to recruit other participants into the study, to gain multiple perspectives from educators who might be outside

the immediate social network of this administrator. Teachers and administrators largely accommodated requests for interviews and were amenable to the lead researcher's presence as he observed meetings and intimate informal work with students and colleagues. During the academic year, he conducted a total of 55 formal interviews with 42 teachers and administrators, each of which lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. During many of the 252 observation hours that the lead researcher logged during the year, he also engaged in numerous informal interviews. Technical documents such as the school improvement plan and an accreditation report were freely accessible public access documents. The lead researcher collected other technical documents as well, such as discipline plans, meeting agendas, and memos, whenever available. Primary nontechnical documents, such as posters in classrooms, notes, and e-mail messages, were also collected or reproduced with participants' consent.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using an inductive and iterative coding process (Patton, 2002). This process began with open coding, which was used as a preliminary technique to break open the data and suggest preliminary themes. The resultant open codes were then combined with other conceptually similar open codes to form axial codes, which were then collected into categories and developed into the themes presented in this article.

As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), speculative or tentative analysis during data collection serves to sharpen foci, reveal insights, and stimulate further pursuit of the literature. As additional data were analyzed, categories were refined and developed into the resultant themes. Recognizing the human element in qualitative data analysis (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and how focus groups have their own intersocial dynamics that affect what participants share, the methods used to collect the data support Lincoln and Guba's (1985) view of internal validity. This was achieved by methodologically triangulating interview data with field notes, observations, and document analysis.

FINDINGS

MCLUHAN HIGH SCHOOL: A COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL

Educators at McLuhan High School readily offered basic demographic and historical information about its town, located in the southeastern

United States, with a population of approximately 200,000. The city saw tremendous growth over the past 30 years, and indeed, archival data show that the population nearly doubled during that time. Not coincidentally, this growth accompanied the swelling enrollment of the town's two large state universities, one of which had transformed itself from a women's-only teaching college into a Carnegie-classified research-intensive institution, and the other of which was a historically Black university that developed and maintained an excellent academic reputation for nearly a century. Most educators at McLuhan had been trained at one of these two schools. Many proudly proclaimed their allegiance whenever the opportunity allowed, and they displayed banners in their classrooms and offices that announced their affiliation. However, educators explained that although scholastic membership was one of the most overt dynamics that affected the town's social and cultural norms, it was only one manifestation of a more pervasive culture of division; but as one teacher intimated, "we hang the banners and joke about it, but when you get right down to it, the cultural differences are much greater."

According to educators at McLuhan High School, the town is a city sharply segregated along racial lines, with a distinction drawn between the so-called Black and White cultures of the town. Educators explained that social interaction in the community is almost exclusively race specific. As one assistant principal suggested, "it's really two completely different town-within-towns—very little interaction." Black and White educators alike could easily list Black and White neighborhoods, schools, restaurants, cultural events, holidays, prominent community members, and institutions. One White administrator noted,

> That's the way it's always been in [this town]. The Black folks do their thing, and the White folks do something else. We go to different football games on Saturdays, and we eat at different restaurants. Of course, we mix to some degree, but I think that the sense of racial separation is much stronger than the sense of solidarity. It's a divided community, and it has been for a long time.

Regardless of which group they claimed to be members of, educators were conscious of the way that race, more than any other characteristic, defined the social and cultural norms of the town's people.

Educators described McLuhan High School as one of the "Black schools" in town. At the time of the study, the district employed 80 teachers at the school, a principal, three assistant principals, an academic dean, and a dozen educational specialists, to serve approximately 1,300 children, Grades 9–12. The educational staff is split almost into halves, phenotypically speaking: 37 White, 39 Black. One teacher identified herself as Hispanic, and another teacher self-identified as Arab.

According to educators, McLuhan is a school with significant challenges exacerbated by racial dynamics. They serve a poverty-stricken area of the city, and their students have fared poorly on standardized examinations for several years. Many of McLuhan's students read at an elementary school level and drop out of school before they finish. However, many others stay in despite low achievement. It is common among the school's general education population that a student might be 18 years old and in ninth grade or as old as 22 if diagnosed with a learning disability. As educators explained, "a significant number of students have a bleak academic future," and as another long-serving teacher lamented, "many students end up in low-wage service jobs, into lives of crime, or in the welfare system." That being said, students and neighborhood families have a sense of pride, and they value the school's academic and athletic traditions, both of which are significant. Over the course of its history, the school has won state championships in nearly every sport, although the banners that hang from the rafters of the gymnasium are now quite faded; the glory years seem long ago.

Academically, McLuhan High School was a paradox. Whereas the general education population was low performing, the school housed an international baccalaureate (IB) program that sent students to elite universities on full academic scholarships every year. At McLuhan, the IB program is essentially a school within a school. The program had its own operating budget, and teachers in the program answered directly to the IB program coordinator rather than the school's administrators. Additionally, IB teachers have their own lounge, which is the only operational lounge in the school. Furthermore, IB teachers receive a stipend every time that their students pass an IB examination, which can amount to several thousand dollars of extra money for teachers in the program. As a social phenomenon, the IB program is both a uniting and a dividing force. On one hand, the school would have certainly scored an F on the state's standardized testing system; however, administrators and non-IB teachers feel uncomfortable with the elitist dynamics that the program presents.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PUBLIC INTELLECTUALISM, STRETCHED ACROSS A SCHOOL

At McLuhan High School, teachers, administrators, and school staff practiced transformational public intellectualism in various ways during the course of the study. Although this took many forms, broadly speaking, these activities were practiced by a few committed leaders in multiple situations and with multiple followers, or they were practiced by somewhat fluid subcommunities of educators who would unite and act around a certain issue or problem. These subcommunities were at times formal units

within the organizational structure of the school, such as departments or grade-level instructional task forces designed to address areas of student need. For example, upon reviewing their attrition rates, the school formed an active Sophomore Retention Academy, which developed a series of instructional activities and presentations designed to show students the relevance and usefulness of school to their lives. One teacher explained:

> It's too soon to know the extent of the academy's influence on the dropout rate, because we've only now started collecting data. Still I know it is making a difference in many kids' lives, and to be honest, I think some of the teachers are excited about what's happening. It's engaging them intellectually and in terms of feeling like they are really making a difference. We're asking them to think outside the box with their lessons and develop experiences that really connect with the kids. Not everyone is really into it—to most teachers, it's just a bunch of talk—but those that are taking it to heart, I feel they might make a real positive change.

At other times, this kind of leadership was informally enacted by clusters of educators who practiced a kind of spontaneous transformational public intellectualism. That is, teachers and administrators initiated and engaged in countless impromptu exchanges about how to reach students with innovative teaching strategies and creative intellectual appeals. As one African American teacher explained, this was especially important for African American students:

> These kids need to know their intellectual ancestry . . . and the traditions of genius and guts that runs through their people. Most of them seem to think that having guts means acting tough in "da club," demanding respect they haven't earned or defending a neighborhood even if it's a hellhole. They want to be the next great gangsta rapper or NBA star. . . . I want them to see that they can and should want to be the next Dr. King or the next Malcolm X. These were brilliant men who changed entire countries for generations. That is their heritage!

Although varying from situation to situation and over time, teacher leaders who were practicing transformational public intellectualism generally interacted with teacher followers and student followers to promote such ideas. Administrators rarely exhibited transformational public intellectual leadership practice but commonly agreed that it was important in principle.

DISTRIBUTED ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM VERSUS LIBERATION LEADERSHIP: MICROPOLITICS UNDOING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Analyzing leadership through the distributed perspective revealed a tension in the school that took many forms but remained constant throughout

the duration of the study, a tension between anti-intellectual leadership and leadership for liberation. By *anti-intellectual*, we mean that on many occasions, decisions with broad-ranging implications were made with little or no debate, input, or espoused rationale. For example, during the 2nd year of data collection, the school learned that it would be housing a health education magnet program to attract students. In the early days at the school level, this meant that the administration needed to appoint a director for the academy and see to it that funds allocated to the purchase of health academy instructional resources were used to purchase specialized medical instruments and apparatuses, in addition to appropriate textbooks. The decision about whom to appoint as director became fraught with organizational politics rather than what was best for the students. Initially, the principal announced to his administrative team that the assistant principal for curriculum would assume the director's role of the prestigious program. This decision was not popular at the district office, and a central-office personnel director demanded that another assistant principal, one with much less experience, be made director. The principal was unhappy with this suggestion and with his authority being overridden. He suggested the possibility of making an administrative assistant who had worked as a nurse in her previous career the director. This, too, fell through, because the district ruled that the director must be a licensed teacher. In the end, a director was never named, and an assistant principal with no experience in health purchased all program materials, many of which proved to be inappropriate. The following year, the principal hired a director after conducting an external search. This director, who had experience as a health teacher and seemed like an inspired hiring, ultimately resigned 3 months into the school year, in part because of her perception that she did not have the proper resources to instruct students and in part because she believed that she was being made a scapegoat for the program's shortcomings, most of which were due to

> all the games and petty nonsense that goes on in this district. These people don't care about creating a good program and they don't care about the kids. They care about their careers and about telling people what to do. I guess it's about ego, and it's sad—this program could help a lot of kids who wouldn't otherwise have them have excellent careers.

After the director resigned, she was never replaced, not even as an instructor. Astonishingly, for about a month and a half of the school year, her students roamed the halls unsupervised during her formerly assigned instructional hours. Although this may seem a dramatic example, it was unfortunately not. These sorts of anti-intellectual leadership practices and their attendant con-

sequences occurred over and over throughout the study. It was sadly common in the school for micropolitics to take precedence over students' needs in many situations.

In contrast, educators in the school comported themselves with great leadership acumen in other situations, interacting with and acting as followers to practice liberation leadership. These included instances when transformational public intellectualism was practiced in a manner that facilitated critical dialogue around issues and articulated courses of action that were then pursued. For example, on many occasions, teachers, administrators, and students would act as leaders who critically analyzed instructional and curricular issues, noted oppressive practice, and rectified the situation by initiating a formal change. In particular, several teachers, administrators, and students questioned, from time to time, the nature of the hidden curriculum at the school. Examples of these leadership practices included the following.

A student-led inquiry about whether resources that were used to teach an upper-level philosophy course were Anglocentric and possibly racist. One student assumed leadership that engaged many others, by articulating an informed and reasoned intellectual critique of the works in question. Other students leapt to this student's side and joined in a campaign to reconsider materials. They offered possible alternatives, some of which were adopted.

A librarian-initiated effort to weed the media center's books of inappropriate materials. Many works in the collection contained racial slurs and eugenics-based materials that suggested that some peoples were inherently inferior to others. Although this so-called weeding of the collection threatened to put the school out of compliance with accreditation standards for the total number of books on hand, the librarian explained that she would rather jeopardize accreditation because

> books based on the idea that the "negro" has inherent moral, physical, and intellectual deficiencies are not acceptable, both because [such ideas] are offensive and grossly inaccurate. I refuse to be a part of the perpetuation of such horrible ideas.

Although observations suggested many instances of liberation leadership, there was little evidence that these practices evolved over time or that they were coordinated in any way. Educators in the school seemed largely content to practice this form of leadership on a situation-to-situation basis—these were random acts of social justice. Leaders—teachers as well as administrators—would use a perceived injustice as a rallying cry, articulate a tangible goal, and, upon believing that it was accomplished, discontinue their interaction.

IB PROGRAM: ONE SUBCOMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS FOR
SOCIAL JUSTICE

One subcommunity of scholars practiced transformational public intellectualism as a sustained operational norm. The school's IB program was a hotbed of debate, critical inquiry, and instructional and curriculum innovation, much of it focused on equity issues. There was an obvious esprit de corps among the teachers affiliated with the IB program, and perhaps more important, these teachers consistently included students in intellectual discourse. One teacher explained: "These kids are smart. I respect them as intellectual equals, and in many cases they know more about some things than I do. There is a lot of mutual respect, and I understand that these are tomorrow's leaders." IB classes were the only ones in the school where students and teachers engaged issues of race, class, poverty, sexual orientation, oppression, and privilege on a regular basis. Teachers in the IB program endeavored to create a safe place for this discourse in their classrooms and within their teacher subcommunity. Teachers did so formally and informally by establishing classwide discourse-facilitating rules and by sharing these rules (and the lessons based on them) with their peers.

IB teacher dialogues about social justice issues evolved over time, ostensibly for a few reasons. First, the attrition rate among IB teachers was lower than that among the school's non-IB teaching population. This allowed teachers to sustain dialogues with one another and with students who were matriculating through the entire course of the program. Second, IB teachers worked hard to create spaces where intellectual dialogue could occur. For example, the IB teachers maintained and used the only operational teacher's lounge in the school. Observations of this space indicated that it was a safe space for intellectual debate and idea sharing and for raising doubts and insecurities. One teacher, speaking for many, explained:

> I live for those lunches. They are an amazing source of ideas and inspiration. In fact, I thought about leaving McLuhan a few years ago, but I stayed because of those lunches. And it's the best decision I could have made. . . . I'm a better teacher for it, and I am more aware of what's going on with the kids so I can reach them better.

This ethic was extended to IB classrooms, which were commonly arenas of scholarly debate.

The third reason for the evolution of these dialogues was that IB teachers were much more aware of current educational issues and were able to put them into the context of the school's history. For example, many IB teachers could name the school's past four principals (whose collective tenure spanned 10 years) and could discuss their relative merits and lead-

ership shortcomings. This institutional knowledge included that from veteran and neophyte teachers, and it afforded all a longitudinal perspective on their work, which was noticeably absent among many general education teachers. Moreover, the IB teachers' knowledge and discussions of up-to-the-minute policy discussions at the federal, state, and local levels meant that they were able to debate the relative merits of various initiatives and decide whether ideas "coming down the pipe" were worth instituting ahead of time. As one teacher explained, this forward thinking was a strength:

> We are able to keep things in context. We don't throw our hands in the air when something changes. We understand that education is about change and that things are not stable in the school or in the world. That's not a bad thing, and in fact it keeps things interesting and makes what we do relevant for us and the students.

BLACK LEADERS AS TRANSFORMATIONAL PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

A third and important leadership practice that was related to transformational public intellectualism was enacted by the school's Black leaders. Although there was variation among these leaders in terms of their perspectives on leadership, themes rose from interview and observational data (for a discussion of these themes, see Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007). Black leaders consistently explained that they felt a responsibility to individual students and to the town's Black community to be intellectual role models. To some leaders, such as one mathematics teacher, this meant recruiting Black students into advanced courses—specifically, showing them the career possibilities that can "come alive when you understand and love math. I want to show them that a Black man can have a good life doing brain work. Many kids don't see that in the community." To others, this meant adopting professional dress and mannerisms. Although these leaders were aware that dressing a certain way was not intellectual activity per se, several believed that this outward expression showed Black youth a dimension of their culture that was underrepresented outside of school. The principal explained: "I like for them to see that a Black man can look sharp—it implies something about having a sharp mind, too. I always tell them I have what I have because I studied hard."

BRIDGE WORK AS DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

Observation and interview data show that leaders throughout the school engaged in bridge-work leadership practice; that is, they sought to connect

individuals and groups to external resources intended to help them over-
come various forms of inequity. This leadership practice was a form of
leadership practice for social justice, which many educators were proud of
having facilitated. However, although most educators broadly believed in
leveraging external resources toward the end of providing student serv-
ices, we learned early in the study that bridge work was not without chal-
lenges and obstacles.

COMMUNICATION AND AWARENESS: CRITICAL ASPECTS OF BRIDGE WORK

Interviews revealed that although many dynamics are in play as educa-
tors seek to conduct bridge work for social justice, two key phenomena
have a tremendous influence over the success of this sort of leadership
practice: communication and awareness. With respect to communication,
leaders and followers alike expressed frustration with informal and formal
barriers that thwarted their efforts to reach out to external organizations
and people. One teacher explained:

> The physical layout of this building is a problem. You can't trust word of
> mouth as a communication strategy. Also, not everyone here has a working
> computer, so that is an issue within the school. Now, when you try to com-
> municate with parents in this community, many of them don't have access to
> a computer. Another thing I'd like to do is enlist the help of local Black
> churches, who are represented by some of the most respected leaders in the
> Black community. But we are all confused about what churches can and
> can't do in the schools.

This quote also addresses another source of frustration—namely, that the
tools and routines used to communicate were appropriate for some forms of
communication but ineffective for others. Some communications structures
in the school worked well, such as the way that the administrative team
worked with department chairs to distribute formal instructional and policy
information, but these same avenues of communication did not work for
other purposes, such communicating with parents, community members,
and other external stakeholders, particularly with respect to equity issues.
The following comments were typical of leaders' insights on this issue:

> I keep trying to explain to local businesses that I need resources, but they
> think there is some funding in the school to support the stuff I need to do so
> these students can excel. There is little funding for anything not related to
> math, science, and reading.

> I e-mail explaining that we need help, not even financial help, to fund rele-
> vant and nontraditional programming, but I get no response.

> The person I worked with last year [at a business that used to provide presenters for a work-study program] was promoted and transferred. The new person doesn't return my calls.

Although many leaders recognized the need to establish new tools and routines, none had stepped forward to lead the organization on this issue.

INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BRIDGE WORK

Bridge-work leadership practice at McLuhan generally took one of two forms: individual and institutional. That is, individual bridge-work leadership took place in those instances when a leader reached out to leverage external resources in a manner intended to benefit a single student. This happened infrequently, and it usually involved leaders' interacting with extraorganizational leaders and followers. This type of leadership was illustrated by an art teacher who explained how she made a student aware of an opportunity and helped him find an opportunity that allowed him to attend college, which the student would not have done but for her bridge work. As the teacher explained, the student came into her class as a senior:

> I was looking through his sketchbook. I said, "I love that school bus. Why don't you do a print out of it?" It took him almost a whole 6 weeks to do the print. . . . At the state art show, he won an award down there. And one of the judges happened to be a representative of a college. From one school bus, the kid won a $10,000 scholarship. . . . He didn't even know he had that opportunity. He didn't even know anyone besides me thought he was an artist.

Other bridge-work leadership for social justice was institutional, designed to address inequity for groups of students rather than individuals. These forms of leadership practice commonly took the form of community outreach programs, such as a school-to-work program, which offered employment prospects to students who needed to work to develop job skills and, in many instances, to help support their families. These programs and others like them offered systemic forms of support and were designed to address inequity borne of differential cultural capital and time pressures, given that students in this program left school early to make it on time for their shifts. This program had evolved over a number of years and was supported by locally owned businesses and national corporations.

DISTRIBUTED CRITICAL ACTIVISM

Many educational leaders throughout the school explained that because they were working at McLuhan High School, they had become aware of

equity issues and had developed their critical consciousness toward equity issues. That being said, although there is much promise in such assertions, it was clear that many of these potential leaders for social justice had difficulty making the transition from awareness to action.

DISTRIBUTED *CONSCIENTIZACÃO*

Teachers at McLuhan commonly talked about how their critical consciousness with regard to equity issues developed over time. Whereas each experience was certainly idiosyncratic, interviewees explained that there were certain issues that they all had to consider. First, educators suggested that they had to first make sense of the culture of the school and the community in situ. Educators came to McLuhan with diverse personal and professional experiences, ranging from experience in large inner-city school systems to that in culturally homogeneous rural settings. Each educator went through an assimilation process that prompted an evaluation of past experiences in light of equity concerns in the new environment. This process took educators varying amounts of time, and each admitted to making mistakes and erroneous assumptions along the way. For example, a teacher who came from an urban setting said,

> When I first got here, I kept acting like the kids in this school were wimps, like they weren't hard. I thought I had it rough and they couldn't understand how cushy their lives were. It took me awhile to get over that and realize that these students' equity issues are different than where I grew up, but they are very real. I'm embarrassed at some of things I said when I got here. . . . Now I let the students define equity instead of imposing [my] definition.

Second, educators suggested that in addition to taking in new information and combining it with their previous experiences, they had to learn the informal organizational norms, policies, and procedures of the school and district so that they understood the constraints on what they could and could not do professionally. To some educators, this was a process of trial and error wherein they did what they thought was right and found out later whether they had followed protocol. Other teachers felt compelled to learn the ins and outs of the system before acting. For example, the IB program coordinator was a civil rights activist as a teacher before she took her coordinator's position. Along with several other White women, she led a major curriculum revision on behalf of Black students in a rural Alabama town in the late 1960s. As she described it, this was a high-profile battle fought in the spotlight of national media attention:

> We took on everyone because everyone came out with guns blazing. The good old boys were out in force, so was the KKK. We received death threats,

and we were constantly told to shut up and be more ladylike. To me though, there was no higher calling, and really I still feel that way today. People like me—White people like me—have always enjoyed privilege in this country. I can use that privilege for myself, or I can try to use it for others; it's my choice and one I have to make every day. I don't always get it right, but I do my best to learn from my mistakes and to find new ways to make a difference. Mostly, that means recognizing issues and then intervening when something isn't being done above board or with all students' best interests in mind.

Not every educator was so outspoken, nor did every teacher claim or consistently exhibit such devotion to issues of equity. However, the IB coordinator behaved in accord with this attitude on many issues, and observations showed her a tireless activist for equity, particularly on racial issues, but also with respect to issues of sexual orientation, gender, and other issues of difference. However, although she was one of the more outspoken and visible critical activist leaders at McLuhan, the school encompassed many other forms of critical activism.

SOFT REVOLUTIONS AND HARD REVOLUTIONS: ACTIVISTS TAKING A STAND IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Critical activists take one of two basic approaches to leadership practice as critical activists, initiating soft or hard revolutions, as informed by the works of Postman and Weingartner (1971/2000). This meant that they acted as soft revolutionaries, who learned the informal and formal systems of the school and district and worked within these to lead for social justice, or they acted as hard revolutionaries, who worked from outside the system to effect change. The aforementioned IB coordinator is an example of a hard revolutionary. Upon identifying inequity, she believed that the best strategy was to confront the issue head-on by naming it and then articulating a manner in which the inequity could be addressed. This strategy was effective in many instances yet proved a poor tactic in others. Moreover, because of the coordinator's political capital, she felt empowered to use her outspoken tactics. Other critical activist leaders for social justice took a subtle approach. For example, one social studies teacher explained that he confined his activism to the classroom and sought to instill in his students a questioning mentality, rather then be an outspoken critic of a system that he saw as a largely unresponsive and threatening one:

> I respect what [the IB coordinator] does, and it's important. But it isn't the way I can effect change. I don't have tenure, and I'm fearful that I could be fired if I said some of the things she does. I see inequity, but my way of addressing it is through a critical approach to the teaching of history. I assign students to conduct critical histories of the school, of the community, of the

government, and even their families. My approach to addressing equity is more subtle, but I think it is effective. Kids walk out of here looking at the world through more critical eyes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study suggests that leadership for social justice is something practiced by not only activist-minded individuals but also formal and informal leaders in a fluid manner that fluctuates from situation to situation and over time as an organization evolves. On a conceptual level, knowledge and understanding about the link among social justice theory, distributed leadership models, and practices can benefit aspiring and practicing school leaders because it connects the social mission of most schools to the practice of everyday leadership activity. Research and practice that is grounded in concepts inspired by intellectual and social movements, such as that of civil and human rights, feminism, postmodernism, critical theories, or multiculturalism (Furman, 2004; Grogan, 1999; Marshall & Oliva, 2006), suggest that social justice leaders strive for critique rather than conformity, compassion rather than competition, democracy rather than bureaucracy, polyphony rather than silencing, inclusion rather than exclusion, liberation rather than domination, and action for change rather than inaction to preserve inequity (e.g., Beachum et al., in press; Brooks, 2006; Evans et al., 2004; Furman, 2004; Lambert et al., 1995; Larson & Murtahda, 2002; S. S. Lee & McKerrow, 2005).

Among common concepts discussed as part of leadership for social justice are equity, access, proportional outcomes, advocacy, equality, political change, and social and institutional change. Scholars such as Jean-Marie and Normore (2006) and Lambert and colleagues (1995) argue that equitable practices and behaviors from school leaders are needed to "transform systems that promote inclusively-oriented educational environments" (p. 6). Quick and Normore (2004) assert that true leaders understand that their "actions speak louder than words" and that they must "practice what they preach," for inevitably they "shall reap what they sow" (p. 345). Although in some respects these adages are cliché, they serve as a conceptual map to orient educational leaders and to help them make sense of injustice that they may encounter at an abstract level in their practice.

Educational leaders in this study explained that the culture, climate, and community that they influence in turn influences their leadership activity. Similar to the findings of other studies (e.g., Donaldson, 2006; Jazzar & Algozzine, 2007), ours indicates that the relationships created by the leader,

the philosophies and structures that she or he supports, and the decisions that she or he makes influence followers and institutions throughout the school and at many organizational levels throughout and even beyond the entire school. With this in mind, formal and informal leaders must consciously and intentionally take the actions that they believe are in the best interests of the students, while modeling caring and just relationships and understanding that their decisions have consequences across the entire system. For example, the town's dynamics of social and cultural norms (i.e., the city's being sharply segregated along racial lines) seem to have played a role in how formal school leaders failed to build trust and communicate with staff, students, and community. This finding is in keeping with Scheurich and Young's (1997) work that suggests that social phenomena simultaneously operate at multiple levels. There was an absence of viewing educational practice as a process of envisioning and achieving what might be, which involves the ability and desire to dialogue and critique for the common good. Doing this may afford the leader an opportunity to collaborate with all the stakeholders in a democratic learning community (Furman, 2004), ideally ensuring that the school will reflect the community's intended goals—to assist all students in fully realizing their potential with the understanding that they are connected to others through a web of interrelationships of which they may not even be conscious but that exists nonetheless.

Examining distributed leadership in the context of a school begins to describe ways that formal and informal leaders (i.e., leaders and followers, at times reciprocal) develop an understanding of and engage in social justice. At McLuhan High School, leaders, followers, and situations interacted in ways that developed over time to form forms and patterns of leadership practice. These leadership practices were at times dynamic and revolutionary but were regularly evolutionary and situated in the social and historical context of the organization and the community. Importantly, educators who promoted social justice were at times leaders for social justice and at other times followers. For example, transformational public intellectuals in one situation were then followers when practicing bridge leadership. Put differently, in this study, leadership for social justice was distributed in a fluid manner that evolved over time and varied as it was practiced by leaders and followers in various situations.

As Freire (1989) asserts, human beings can perform as transformative public intellectuals by constantly interpreting and giving meaning to the world and by participating in a conception of the world. At McLuhan, administrators and teachers could at times be touted as transformative public intellectuals who combined scholarly reflection and practice in the

service of educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens (Giroux, 1988; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Sernak, 2006). Whether it was the sub-community of scholars in the IB program who engaged one another and students in critical dialogues about social justice, the school's Black leaders (formal and informal) who felt a moral obligation to be role models to students and in the Black community, or the less outspoken teachers who in a subtle way (i.e., through classroom dialogues and activities) addressed issues of inequities, the educators at McLuhan were activists initiating soft and hard revolutions to change the conditions of the students whom they served. They had become aware of equity issues and had developed their critical consciousness toward equity issues. Although these assertions are promising, many of these potential leaders for social justice had difficulty making the transition from awareness to action. Yet the educators paid attention to the silenced voice of marginalized students to alter school policies that create inequities (Mitra, 2006; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Shoho et al., 2005). Those who were committed to this ideal grappled with the issue of how to advocate for social justice when the climate and structure of McLuhan made it impossible to do so.

At times, both formal and informal leaders were constrained by the organizational context because they experienced ambiguity about how to address issues of social justice that directly and indirectly had an impact on students and on teaching and learning, broadly construed. Many leaders had to consciously think strategy, individually and collectively, to find ways to dismantle the structural barriers at McLuhan in pursuit of social justice. Still, these leaders inspired commitment and action and led the school as peer problem solvers who built broad-based involvement. Above all, they sustained hope and participation by capitalizing on the need for overall improved communication and awareness of the issue. McLuhan school leaders essentially brought theoretical knowledge and ethical behaviors to the test of practicality, confronting organizational and institutional barriers to promoting social justice, and they learned to work with extant notions regarding social justice activity (Brooks & Normore, 2005).

The findings from this study have clear implications for the practice and preparation of educational leaders; they suggest that leadership for social justice as a practiced phenomenon is ripe with promise but fraught with complexity and contradiction. Furthermore, we contend that approaching the study of distributed leadership by supplementing it with complementary analytic concepts enriches our understanding of a promising and developing theory. Approaching leadership for social justice concepts from a distributed perspective helps to shed light on the dynamic nature of these concepts. Leadership bridge work, critical activism, and transformational

public intellectualism seem to be stretched over the school in a manner that is influenced by the interactions of leaders and followers as they shift and develop from situation to situation and over time. This means that leadership for social justice, as conceptualized in this manner, is dynamic and protean: It is a fluid phenomenon that does not necessarily reside in a superhero leaders who inspire those around them to rise up against inequity; rather, it may instead be something practiced between leaders and followers, mediated by the tools and routines that provide structure (and sometimes confusion) to these interactions and to the ways that leaders, followers, and situations evolve over time in a context (Donaldson, 2006).

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

In terms of educational leadership preparation and training, it is important to consider that if leaders intend to influence the future of social justice, they need to focus on reevaluating the socialization experiences, formal and informal, to determine how these experiences have helped or dissuaded them from promoting social justice issues. Such a reflection and discussion bring to light the practical applications, actionable strategies, and sharing of effective practices that educators might readily implement in their work. Focusing on problems that they are facing, triumphs that they have experienced, might help inform the way that educational leaders become prepared and socialized regarding issues of social justice in the workplace. Preparation programs ought to include in their curricula opportunities for preservice administrators to engage in discourse that raises awareness about social justice and so develop the knowledge and disposition to eradicate injustices perpetuated in policies and practices. In support of Starratt (2004) and Merchant and Shoho (2006), such a discourse can lead to proactive responsibility; personal and professional authenticity; and an affirming, critical, and enabling presence to the workers and the work involved in leading, teaching, and learning at all levels of education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings from this study suggest that although there may be ambiguity in the distributed leadership theory, when coupled with complementary theoretical constructs, it can help us identify and structure analyses of understudied conceptual phenomena. That is, distributed leadership may hold great explanatory promise on its own, but it may hold greater promise as a theoretical foundation than as a freestanding and discrete theory.

As school leaders seek to direct the activities of American schools in the 21st century, it is important that within the framework of distributive leadership, there is critique of cultural and contextual conditions within which this leadership takes place.

Further research utilizing this approach may lead to important theoretical breakthroughs in our understanding of important yet ambiguous subjects. For example, we can envision studies of gender, sexual orientation, teacher leadership, accountability, leadership preparation, and so on, from a distributed perspective. There is a need to provide a knowledge base in leadership preparation programs that examines issues regarding diverse school and cultural contexts if we are to adequately prepare school leaders to effectively lead schools in the 21st century.

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