

**Becoming an Educational Leader for Social Justice:
A Micro/Meso/Macro Examination of a Southern
U.S. Principal**

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Abstract

This descriptive case study examined how a principal in an urban elementary school in the southern United States became a leader working for social justice in education. The principal cited her parents' values as contributing to her own seemingly countercultural beliefs and behaviors relating to racial and ethnic diversity, and described schools as essentially middle class phenomena, requiring students and teachers on either side of the class divide to become bicultural. The principal enacted a vision for empowering her students with the same support and freedom of choice available to members of more privileged segments of society. Evidence of interdependent micro, meso, and macro contexts, nonlinearity, and self-organization in the complex system relate the framework of the study to theories of complex systems, offering opportunities to apply understandings of complex systems to the problems of social justice leaders.

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Introduction

The International School Leaders Development Network (ISLDN) is an international group of education researchers formed to investigate the work of social justice leaders in education. As defined by the ISLDN for purposes of this study, social justice leaders are principals (elementary or secondary) who are committed to reducing inequalities and make this aim a high priority in their leadership practice. By reducing inequalities based on socio-economic status, race, gender, ability, religion, or political structure, for example, social justice leaders may participate in building both individual and social capacity. Writing from the perspective of systems thinking, Serman (1994) describes learning as a feedback loop between the decisions and actions of an individual or organization and the outside world as it is altered by those behaviors. Individuals and their contexts are therefore engaged in cycles of mutual causation within the system of education. This study examines the complex system of individuals, organizations, and society contributing to the development of a social justice leader.

Since the 1990s, multidisciplinary, global researchers have recognized parallels between the system of education and other dynamic complex systems (Jacobson & Wilensky, 2006). Some study the condition of feedback loops between the micro scale of the learner and the meso scale of the school, either reinforcing or detracting from individual and/or organizational learning (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Simmons, 2001; Hmelo, Holton, & Kolodner, 2000; Serman, 1994). Others apply systems thinking to the problem of designing and implementing interventions for transformational educational change at the interface between the macro scale of the state or federal system and the meso scale of the school (Bar-Yam, 2004). Still others investigate how ideas and strategies developed by researchers studying dynamic complex systems in economics, computer science, or urban studies, for example, might be applied to the analysis of change in education (Barbera, 2004; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Mital, Moore, & Llewellyn, 2014).

When complex systems function optimally, the flow of information facilitates individual, organizational, and societal learning. In reality, various barriers interfere with the quantity and/or quality of feedback flowing across scales in a complex system. Examples of impediments to learning include poor awareness of internal or organizational cognitive maps, inadequate social resources in the form of interpersonal skills or organizational structures for constructive interaction, and misalignment of perception and/or purpose (Serman, 1994). The purpose of this study is to enhance understandings of how social justice leaders develop within the complex educational system connecting individuals, organizations, and the broader social fabric. The focus of this leadership story is how one individual from a Southern U.S. city became a social justice leader in education. Her story offers evidence responsive to the following question:

How does constructive feedback within and among micro, meso, and macro scales contribute to the development of an individual as a leader committed to reducing societal inequalities?

This leader's story also offers evidence of how destructive interference within and among micro, meso, and macro scales detracts from the development of individuals and communities and increases social inequalities. More broadly, this leader's story contributes to improved understanding of how social justice leaders can navigate the multi-scaled complex system of a culturally diverse society to fully develop all individuals and reduce social inequalities.

Conceptual and Contextual Framework

To accomplish its purpose, this exploratory, qualitative case study theorizes a social justice leadership story through the conceptual framework of the ISLDN. Respecting the ways in which individuals and society participate in mutual causation, the ISLDN framework investigates social justice leadership by examining interactions within and among three contextual scales: the micro scale of the individual's



personal narrative, the meso scale of the individual's school and community context, and the macro scale of state and national policy and discourse. This study places the ISLDN framework within the broader theoretical context of dynamic complex systems.

American social justice leaders practise within the historical context of generations of education reform initiatives. *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) began with words worthy of social justice leadership: "All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost" (¶1). The report also raised the alarm that graduates were losing ground when compared to graduates from previous generations and to contemporaries around the world, initiating a new wave of education reform that few would argue has achieved its intended purposes.

Education reform initiatives in the 1990s featured decentralization of control. Studying such an initiative in urban Chicago elementary schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that some schools improved under local control, while others did not. Using quantitative factor analysis on socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic factors, Bryk and Schneider found that the factor correlating most strongly with features of school improvement was the level of relational trust within and among the meso-micro contexts of the school: between parents and the school, among teachers, and between teachers and the principal. Bryk and Schneider identified relational trust as a core resource for school reform. Learning requires personal investment, and investment requires trust in the intentions and capabilities of teachers, principals, and schools.

Although successful at reducing inequalities in some schools, the local control movement of the 1990s failed to transfer those successes to the macro scale of the system. Likewise, Fullan (2007) argued that the top-down approaches that ensued failed to engage individual commitment. He examined how individuals have tried to make

meaning amidst waves of educational reforms at all scales in the system, often emerging from the process more skeptical and less willing to invest in the latest innovation.

Schlechty wrote in 1997, “Structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability” (p. 136). Fullan (2007) described why and how classroom and school cultures have typically resisted change, only succeeding provided that there is sustained support and investment from the system and that the schools have the social capacity for change. Fullan embraced the elusive goal of bringing isolated successes to scale in the system of education and identified challenges associated with the twentieth century vision of applying education to the task of reducing inequalities in society: “To the intrinsic complexity of changing one’s own practice was added the enormous difficulty of tackling the existing power structure and overcoming the prejudice and ignorance of ethnic, class, gender, and special differences of all kinds” (p. 6).

Micro, Meso, and Macro Contexts, Complex Systems, and Social Justice

Complex systems are composed of interdependent, interacting components, such as the micro, meso, and macro contexts of the ISLDN social justice framework. Even within these contexts, we see complex interactions among sub-components. The micro context consists of interactions among the school leader’s experiences, values, and perceptions as they relate to social justice decisions (Angelle & Ogden, 2014). In addition to interactions among individual micro contexts, the meso context encompasses interdependent features of the school and local community—their histories, demographic profiles, cultural values, and relative stability or mobility over time, for example. The national history and economy, political philosophy and policy, and cultural values and perceptions of the macro context frame decision making of social justice leaders in education,



potentially supporting or hindering efforts to reduce inequalities. Of particular interest to this study is how resonance among these contexts contributed to the development of a social justice leader acting to reduce inequalities in her school, community, and, by extension, society at large.

Nonlinearity and Self-organization in Social Justice Leadership

Complex systems are *nonlinear*, meaning that the net effects of the actions of the components of a complex system cannot be assessed as the linear sum of the effects of their independent actions. In a complex system, secondary effects emerging from interactions among components must be understood and taken into account (Sawyer, 2005). On the one hand, interactions may result in resonance among individuals, associations, and processes comprising the system so that advances in system resources are greater than the sum of the contributions of isolated components. On the other hand, system interactions may result in interference among components, resulting in losses to the system, inequitable distribution of resources within the system, or, at best, lost opportunities for constructive system effects (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Coleman, 1990). Successful social justice leaders find ways to mitigate destructive interference within contracting, lower capacity contexts and to reinforce constructive resonance among contexts, thereby expanding the material, personal, and social resources available to the system as a whole and/or improving equality of access to those resources (Dooley, 1997; Fullan, 2007; Tartar & Hoy, 2004).

Complex systems feature *self-organization* in dynamic change. Comfort (1994) describes self-organizing order in dynamical systems of communities as, “a creative process of reciprocal exchange, learning, adaptation, and choice among multiple participants operating at multiple levels of responsibility, experience, and knowledge” (p. 393). Self-organization on the scale of the system is mathematically analogous to decision making on the scale of the individual (Yukalov & Sornette, 2014). Cole (1991) describes the

phenomenon of *circular causality* in social systems, in which society and individuals mutually influence their respective developmental courses through the mechanism of micro-macro feedback loops. Social justice leaders aim to balance interactions within and among micro, meso, and macro, contexts aiming to shift system order so as to reduce inequalities in society. At the same time, self-organizing order emergent from interactions within complex, multi-scaled social systems shapes the development of all components within the system, including social justice leaders.

Methodology

Mital, Moore, and Llewellyn (2014) identified key features of a complex system in education: “The educational system is a complex system because of the following properties: constant change, tightly coupled parts, feedback loops, nonlinearity, self-organization, adaptation, and emergence” (p. 371). Systems engineers are now working with education researchers to apply system dynamics and agent-based modeling to the task of modeling the system of education, introducing new research strategies to join qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. However, understanding the journey of becoming a social justice leader in education is a task well served by the strategy of case studies. The “flexible, evolving, emergent” characteristics of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998, p. 9) are well matched to the multi-scaled, dynamically changing, emergent system of education.

This research is an exploratory, descriptive, qualitative case study of a school leader perceived to practise social justice leadership. This study is part of a larger longitudinal study of individual school leaders in diverse global contexts conducted by ISLDN researchers around the world. Using a modified snowball sampling approach (Goodman, 1961), each researcher identified elementary or secondary principals who are social justice leaders as defined by the ISLDN: school leaders who are committed to reducing inequalities and who make this aim a high priority in their leadership practice.



The leaders were interviewed using a standard protocol across countries. Interview times varied from 60-90 minutes. Leaders described their preparation and practice, features of their particular contexts, and supports and hindrances to their work as social justice leaders. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded and categorized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). No attempt was made to generalize findings to social justice preparation or practice in each country. Rather, this is an exploratory case study of the preparation and practice of one social justice leader in context.

The principal selected for this study was identified based on the purpose of the study. “Mary’s” story of preparation for social justice leadership offers opportunities to enhance understandings of how the complex system of micro, meso, and macro contexts contribute to how individuals learn to become social justice leaders within that system.

Findings

Mary’s story of preparation for social justice leadership begins with her upbringing in a suburban area of the same southern United States city where she now practises social justice leadership as the principal of an urban elementary school. To emphasize the interconnectedness of micro, meso, and macro contexts across time, all contexts will be interwoven in both of the following sections: Mary’s account of her multi-scaled path to social justice leadership and her perceptions of her social justice leadership practice within her current meso/macro context.

Mary’s Path to Social Justice Leadership

When asked how she came to be a principal, Mary joked about going to her college advisor every semester saying, “I don’t know what to do with my life.” Her advisor would tell her to sign up for certain classes and four years later she was a certified teacher of Physical Education. Mary allowed that she was actually quite committed to the profession after the first two years, but went on to

say, "I don't really have big long-term goals.... People say, 'Do you want to do this?' And I say, 'yes," or, 'no.'" Mary did request an urban schools placement for her teaching internship and was subsequently hired to replace her mentoring teacher, who relocated with her family. Mary taught at that school for 17 years and enthusiastically characterized her experience there as a "great, great job."

When asked what attracted Mary to an urban school placement, she expressed her appreciation for the experience of growing up in a home and neighborhood well equipped to give her choices, but added that she wanted to do something different in a more diverse setting than the suburban, middle class community of her upbringing. Mary quickly credited her experience as an eleven-year-old at Children's International Summer Village (CISV) as a seminal event in her development:

I got to go to the French West Indies when I was eleven as part of a group, and so I went to camp there and met people from all over the world.... I am still in contact with [some of] them.... All I asked for for Christmas that year was for my parents to give me money so that I could call these people that I had met.

Although Mary was reared in a middle class, suburban neighborhood in this southern American city and she speaks with a southern accent, Mary also credits her parents' California roots as influencing her interest in cultural diversity: "My parents didn't raise us as southerners, really.... Culturally, they were not southern, although you couldn't tell it now to hear any of us talk." When one of her sisters had a middle school relationship with an African American boy, people assumed that her parents were, "freaking out," but Mary replied, "No, my parents don't care." Mary's parents' mobility modeled a wider worldview for their children than that experienced by many peers, whose multi-generational roots in the community may have contributed to a more provincial outlook.

Motivated by a fundamental desire to "do the right thing," Mary selected the Urban Specialist program offered by her local university for her graduate studies. Emerging from a broadening meso and



macro context of regional and national dissatisfaction with achievement gaps that were becoming undeniable in the wake of desegregation, this program became part of Mary's meso context. Mary attributes this program and the Urban Administration concentration she would later complete in her doctoral studies with providing her with the "vocabulary and framework" to articulate decisions and actions she had already undertaken just because they were right. Mary's educational opportunities and choices developed her thinking about social justice and transformative leadership.

Beginning her teaching career in an inner city school, Mary shared that she enjoyed being the only white person in the room at her first teaching position: "Every white person should have that experience." Transitioning from 17 years of teaching in urban schools to administrative leadership, Mary served as Assistant Principal for a total of four years in two other urban elementary schools. At one of these schools, Mary additionally served in a newly created district level position as Magnet Facilitator. As part of a countywide initiative to reduce minority isolation, Valley City's school district had invested in enriched programming in schools located in economically disadvantaged situations, a program which Mary coordinated locally. The strategy was intended to attract students from wealthier, mostly white neighborhoods, in order to increase diversity and reduce inequalities for all. At the time of initial interviews for this study, Mary had served as head principal at Glenwood School for three years.

Mary's Perceptions of Her Practice of Social Justice Leadership

Mary is the principal of "Glenwood Elementary," an elementary school in the urban center of a southern United States city. Like many similarly situated cities, "Valley City" still exhibits evidence of the cultural isolation of subgroups formed within a historic context of explicit and de facto racial segregation. Mary reports that members of the African American community served by Glenwood Elementary still refer to Glenwood as the "white school," years after the end of

officially sanctioned segregation, and that the director of the now integrated recreation center confronts these residual issues daily: “It’s *not* the ‘white rec center.’ It’s the rec center for the *community*.” Mary believes that her willingness to dialog openly about the issues of race and poverty is an essential strategy for building bridges between isolated subgroups.

The racial profile of Valley City’s school system closely matches that of the broader community as reported in the 2010 US Census¹, suggesting that Valley City largely avoided the exodus of white populations from public schools experienced in some areas. Within those aggregated data for the 91 schools in the local system, however, neighborhood schools display widely varied demographic profiles, often determined by the economic segregation of Valley City into neighborhoods of greater poverty or wealth. While 29.9% of students in the school system as a whole are economically disadvantaged, 79.5% of students at Glenwood were designated as such in 2015-16. Mary identifies the problems of poverty, “gangs, drugs, and violence,” as challenges to her practice. State and local school system expenditures are about \$9098 per pupil. Because of high poverty, Glenwood also qualifies for federal funds allocated for children of poverty and attracts significant private funding for social supports ranging from food to medical care to help with bills, to English lessons for family members. Careful to explain strategies to avoid establishing cycles of dependence, Mary went on: “We need to kind of help them meet those needs, which then builds trust in us as a school, and then, hopefully allows us later to work on empowerment.”

Reflecting meso and macro demographic trends, the school features a dynamically changing population. The school had only about 180 students some 10-15 years ago. According to the State Report Card, that number had grown to 410 students by 2015-16,

¹(75.2% White and 16.1% Black or African American for the school district in 2013 vs. 76.1% and 17.1%, respectively for the City, according to the 2010 US Census)



leading Mary to cite lack of space as a hindrance to her practice. What was once a largely black and white student body has changed to include a quickly growing Latino/Hispanic majority population. Glenwood's population is now 9.3% white, 33.4% black, and 56.8% Latino/Hispanic. Mary reports that the white and Hispanic students largely live in the single family housing around the school, while black students tend to live in a nearby housing project. Within the third of the population that is black, a growing number are recent immigrants from Africa. Forty percent of Glenwood's students are identified as English Learners, speaking Spanish, Mayan, or Kirundi at home. Mary reports that a full-time Spanish-speaking liaison provided to the school by a private foundation is key to her work connecting the school with parents and parents with the broader community: "Our Spanish-speaking families know that she's here ... and she'll have lines of people to see her." The liaison helps families with educational and other needs. Mary cited efforts to ensure that her emerging population of Kirundi-speaking students receive, "the same level of service that we provide our Latino families," as part of her strategy to reduce inequalities in her school and to "do the right thing":

It is the right thing for me to make sure that every kid in our building receives the best education that they can receive. It is the right thing for me to make sure that parents have an interpreter at their IEP meeting or anywhere else.... and that their kids don't have to translate. It is the right thing for [our liaison] to help them to fill out their paperwork because they're not literate in Spanish.... And it's the thing that allows ... all of our families to be on equal footing.

Mary's perception of her practice as a social justice leader is couched in cultural terms, a focus expressing her early experiences with the Children's International Summer Village camp and exchange programs. Describing the traditional school experience in the U.S. as a white, middle class, suburban phenomenon, Mary sees multiculturalism as a strategy to address the challenges of poverty, race, ethnicity, and rapid change. Whether meeting with African American pastors or parents newly arrived from Guatemala, Mary conveys a willingness to learn their perspectives and an eagerness to

bring their unique contributions to the school. Mary is proud of her school's Hispanic night, in which the parents prepare and serve ethnic foods for some 200 guests at the school. Funded by a grant from a private foundation, the school purchases groceries as directed by the parents, and the parents do the rest. Mary and her team are looking for the right time of day and event to replicate this program and welcome the school's growing population of African families.

When speaking with her largely white, middle class faculty and staff, Mary intentionally aims to help teachers to develop the multi-cultural skills they need to transition from their middle class lives in suburbia to serve their diverse students in the economically disadvantaged urban center. If a staff member wonders why children who cannot afford to pay school fees come to school wearing new shoes, Mary explains: "In black culture, it is *very*, very culturally important to look good—that you don't look poor." If someone presumes that an immigrant parent doesn't care about education because she does not respond to communications from the school, Mary responds with feeling: "Yes, she *does* care, but she just doesn't understand or just doesn't feel welcome, or doesn't feel like she can come, or is working three jobs and can't get there."

Applying lessons learned in her University preparation as an Urban Specialist and her life's work in urban settings, Mary works with her faculty to reduce higher discipline referral rates for black boys by developing widespread understanding of student behaviors. The school also implements strategies to help these children to transition more seamlessly between the world beyond the school, where call-and-response and physicality are culturally appropriate behaviors, and the world of the classroom, where children are expected to raise their hands, wait to be recognized, and observe personal space. Mary emphasizes that targeting their language and behaviors for the varied contexts they experience through the day is a multi-cultural skill that will help students to achieve all they hope to achieve in life without sacrificing their family and community culture:



We need to teach our kids that both are good—we need to teach them to be bi-cultural so that they can do what they need to do. If I'm in a job interview, I'm going to talk one way. If I'm with my friends, I'm going to talk another way. If I'm in class, I may need to raise my hand, but at home or at church, I don't have to. And that's fine.

In addition to a history of racial isolation, the problems of poverty, and the challenges of a community absorbing rapid change towards cultural diversity, the first macro context challenge Mary cited for her practice was accountability. In the years following enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, high stakes testing was a means to enforce a policy of reducing achievement gaps among students from varied socioeconomic, racial, language, and special education subgroups. In the 2015-16 school year, the time-consuming regimen of testing in the state was suspended mid-administration owing to significant failures in testing structures. The state's accountability website states: "Because assessments in grades 3-8 were not fully administered during the 2015-16 school year, 2015-16 data is not available for grades 3-8." Mary was concerned about the capability of state testing structures to inform instructional decisions: "How will we know that these children are learning and growing as expected?"

In 2015, Glenwood's 4th and 5th grade students exhibited estimated school average achievement levels of 36.5 and 31.5 Norm Curve Equivalent (NCE), respectively, relative to the statewide achievement level of 50.0 NCEs, suggesting persistent achievement gaps related to the poverty and language challenges of the school's meso context. To assess student growth relative to expected outcomes, the state relies upon a growth model measuring how a student's test scores compare with his or her own performance the previous year. Glenwood's 4th graders growth was similar to the state's growth standard, but 5th graders offered evidence that students made significantly more progress than the statewide growth standard.

Discussion

In this section, we will discuss how Mary's story relates to the primary question framing this study: How does constructive feedback within and among micro, meso, and macro scales contribute to the development of an individual as a leader committed to reducing societal inequalities? We will also consider Mary's preparation to handle destructive interference evident in Mary's leadership story and the significance of findings relating to intercultural exchange as a strategy for social justice leadership.

Constructive Feedback

Constructive feedback loops within and among the micro, meso, and macro scales of Mary's development as a social justice leader were supported by resonance among signals from home, school, and community. Although Mary grew up in a time and place clearly marked by a history of institutional racism, her parents made decisions and took actions to change that cultural dynamic. Mary's parents were not alone. The family's partnership with CISV created a meso context signal reinforcing a value for cultural diversity and stimulating Mary's thirst for understanding of the beliefs and behaviors of new friends who stretched her cultural boundaries. In a linear system, one might evaluate the cumulative effect of these signals using simple addition, but their combined effect on Mary was amplified beyond simple addition. Mary's parents were able to achieve the transformative task of overcoming prevailing cultural values and raising Mary's awareness of her own cultural blind spots. This step in Mary's development as a social justice leader exemplifies the effects of constructive feedback among resonant signal and of nonlinearity in complex systems developing individual capacity.

Mary's development as a social justice leader also demonstrates self-organization in a complex system. Recall that Mary did not really set out to become a social justice leader. Beginning with an imperative to "do the right thing," Mary's social justice leadership



was nurtured, but also emerged from constructive interactions in her system of micro, meso, and macro contexts. Reinforcing the micro scale influence of her parents and the meso scale influence of CISV and other cultural exchange opportunities, for example, Mary's love of sports led her to enroll in a Physical Education program at University, creating another meso channel reinforcing her commitment to education as a long term strategy for relational social justice:

I believe whole-heartedly that education is the key to whatever our kids want to do... regardless of what that is.... The thing I love about my position ... and what I really loved about teaching physical education...was when the kids [come] to us..., because we have pre-K, we can have them for 7 years. And we develop this really great relationship with families and with kids and really watch them grow.

As Mary progressed to graduate school, she chose an Urban Specialist program, intentionally joining a community of professional educators committed to social justice. These life events occurred against the backdrop of the macro context of educational and social reform in the 1990s. When Mary began to teach, she found mentors and partners in the system, who were working to reduce minority isolation by investing in magnet programming. When Mary became a principal, she connected with community partners in the form of private foundation support and local communities of faith. From the home, to the school, to the workplace, there was significant resonance among her experience, values, and perceptions. Such is often the case in high capacity segments of society, such as Mary's upwardly mobile, middle class community. Parents, schools and community forces work together to develop high capacity individuals.

Subverting Destructive Interference

The picture is not perfectly coherent. Within the meso context, for example, Mary has found it more difficult than expected to move the local system to do something as simple as adding spaces on computer generated forms to accommodate her Hispanic students' hyphenated names. Within the macro context, the picture is even more conflicted.

On the one hand, broad trends and policies such as the Civil Rights Movement, federal funding to enhance education for the poor, and private partners in community development reinforce Mary's development and practice as a social justice leader. On the other hand, seemingly well intentioned state and national policies intended to challenge the "soft bigotry of low expectations" (Bush, 2006, ¶24), have created challenges to Mary's practice when implemented, as in the case of the state testing failure. Mary identified national immigration policy as a barrier to parents feeling free to engage with the school. Mary is well prepared, however, to balance interactions within and among these contexts to notice and act on opportunities to reduce inequalities in the system.

Most of Mary's students come from poverty. On the day of her interview, Mary had visited a classroom where the teacher had assigned a project in which students identified their favorite things. One student had listed two favorites: her family and clean water. Although Mary has worked for decades addressing the unique needs of students in poverty, the simplicity of the list stopped her in her tracks with a fresh realization of the challenges facing some of her students. Mary's school and community have access to a rich array of outside resources, including emergency help with food, utility bills and/or medical care, to name a few. However, poverty often comes with a lack of social resources needed for the optimal development enjoyed by Mary in her own richly supported upbringing. Mary's families are often disadvantaged by their lack of awareness of the societal cognitive maps and organizational structures identified by Serman (1994). Mary understands the implications of her students' parents' relative disempowerment as it relates to their capacity to lobby the School Board for much needed space for the school, for example, and she must account for that deficit in order to provide for the needs of her school.

Mary also understands that barriers exist in these parents' minds to engagement with what Mary calls the middle class, white culture of American schools. To overcome such barriers, Mary intentionally



develops her own bicultural understanding and skills by engaging in conversations, applying life experiences, and performing academic research to increase her own understanding of these families so that she can develop and convey a genuine respect for what they bring with them to school. Mary shares these findings with her faculty so that they have the information they need to create the welcoming environment she wants for her school. Mary's sensitivity to parents' efforts to make sure that their children do not look poor, for example, and her understanding of the importance of sustaining even the illusion of connection to the middle class life for these parents provides a basis for a constructive relationship between the school and parents on behalf of their children. Such relationships can provide the intercultural bridge these students need to participate in the constructive reinforcement that came naturally to Mary and her parents as their birthright.

Intercultural Exchange as a Strategy for Social Justice Leadership

Mary has collaborated with a rich network of social supports to develop Glenwood School as a hub for parents and families to enter into relationship with the broader society, strengthening families' sometimes tenuous connections to macro contexts beyond community and school so that her students can enjoy the benefits of Mary's own empowering preparation. Mary's strategy of teaching multi-cultural skills to students and staff and celebrating diversity develops relational trust in her school and helps her students to enjoy the best of the many social worlds they will ultimately navigate. It is easy to recognize how Mary's personal pathway through the multi-cultural immersion program of CISV in the French Indies, continuing through training as an Urban Specialist in Education led to this style of social justice leadership. Reinforcing constructive practices, providing feedback to correct destructive presumptions or behaviors, and celebrating successes help her staff to trust that what they are doing is important and is making a difference.

Conclusion

The complex system of education may support or hinder the development of social justice leaders and their work. Micro, meso, and macro contexts are interdependent components of a complex system. They reinforce one another when in resonance and work against one another when out of phase, resulting in either amplification or damping of the efforts of those aiming to effect change. When purpose, capacity, and practice align, individuals develop the confidence and trust to invest in the system, creating the conditions for nonlinear growth of both individual and society. Conversely, misalignment of disadvantaged individuals' micro and meso contexts with the prevailing majority culture means that individuals and society miss opportunities to build individual and social capacity. Even worse, the principle of nonlinearity means that when negative trends across contexts reinforce one another, they may actually contribute to increasing isolation and accelerated decline in individuals' access to material, human, and social resources.

Prevailing conditions of social inequality may be viewed as self-organizing equilibrium states of a complex system, even in the absence of any specific nefarious intent. As Schlechty (1997) observed, cultural equilibria may prove to be quite intransigent to the decisions and actions of social justice leaders. When the equilibrium state of a complex system is very far removed from a desired transition state, as in the case of institutionalized racism in the mid-twentieth century, for example, social justice leaders may need to work in concert over an extended period of time in order to initiate, nurture, and sustain evolutionary change. When positive results are not immediately evident, however, individuals and organizations tend to move on to the next initiative, risking disruption of the evolution of constructive feedback loops towards reducing inequalities. As Fullan observed (2007), this cycle contributes to diminished willingness to invest in subsequent innovative initiatives. To support sustained investment in reversing generations of inequalities, successful leaders like Mary look for, report, and



celebrate longitudinal evidence of incremental progress, even as they document evidence of ongoing gaps.

Sustained work over time may seem to yield small returns, even as the system is moving slowly towards a transition state. Systems very close to a transition between two or more equilibrium states, however, may be quite volatile, meaning that even relatively small interventions may result in a revolutionary change from one state to another. Mary's strategic investment in developing the multicultural skills of parents and students, teachers and staff, and community partners may be such a high yield intervention, which was only possible because of the decades of incremental change moving towards this moment. Mary honors the work of those who went before for the results she is seeing:

The culture in this building, from the time I got here, was very supportive of trying to empower our community and trying to empower our kids, trying to give them a voice, and our families, trying to give them a voice.... The culture in this building has just been supportive of continuing that.

In the same way that Mary is building on the foundation laid by those who went immediately before her, those predecessors built on the work of pioneers in teaching English Language Learners, advocates for students with disabilities, and Civil Rights leaders, some of whom never lived to enter the Promised Land of their dreams. Successful social justice leaders in education target their interventions to present micro, meso, and macro contexts of their schools. But to be effective at reducing inequalities additionally requires sensitivity to the dimension of time, viewing one's work within the scope of previous and future generations.

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