Inadvertent Exemplars: Life History Portraits of Two Socially Just Principals

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ABSTRACT: This study creates life history portraits of two White middle-class native-English-speaking principals demonstrating commitments to social justice in their work in public elementary schools serving disproportionately high populations of students who are marginalized by poverty, race, and linguistic heritage. Through self-reported life histories of these principals, I create portraits that illustrate how these practitioners draw motivation, commitment, and sustenance in varied, complicated, and at times contradictory ways.

Why do principals choose to work in schools primarily serving traditionally marginalized students? What are the motivations behind such choices? From whence do commitments to such work arise? What sustains leaders in this work? The research study reported here explores these questions by creating life history portraits of two White middle-class native-English-speaking principals demonstrating commitments to social justice in their work in public elementary schools serving disproportionately high populations of students who are marginalized by poverty, race, and linguistic heritage. These portraits explore each principal's vocational journey and commitments to ameliorate educational inequities. The study suggests that principals may inadvertently emerge as exemplars of social justice leadership.

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SOCIALLY JUST EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Schools in the United States have historically marginalized children across multiple dimensions of diversity (Desclennes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Kastle, 1983; Tyack, 1974). Reform efforts striving to redress these inequities frequently focus on school structures, curriculum, and pedagogy. Desegregation, bilingual education, and multicultural education are three examples of such efforts (Nieto, 2005). At times mischaracterized as a binary contest between progressives promoting cultural integrity and collective change conservatives promoting assimilation and individual responsibility, pursuits of educational equity are in fact complicated and paradoxical (Williamson, Rhodes, & Dunson, 2007). For instance, motivation to curtail racially segregated schools privileging Whites has led some to promote desegregated schooling and others to establishing or strengthening schools focused on specific races, ethnicities, and national origins.

In this historical context, the field of socially just educational leadership has emerged. Three broad trends in this field emphasize school improvement (the principal as the instructional leader), democratic community (the principal as a community builder), and social justice (the principal as a moral steward) (Murphy, 2002). Starratt (2003) recasts these into three central roles for school leaders: cultivating meaning, community, and responsibility:

The phrase cultivating meaning ... [focuses] on the outcome of teaching and learning, which is the construction of meaning. The phrase cultivating community ... [signifies] an education in pluralistic sociality, collaborative civility, and participatory self-governance. The phrase "cultivating responsibility" ... [speaks] both to the neglected issues of social justice in the education of poor and minority children, as well as to the education of the young in moral values of justice, care, and critique. (p. 12)

According to this model, educational leaders provide vision and direction, shaping the structures and policies of their school communities. These areas of focus are unambiguous yet complex. For instance, Starratt describes cultivating meaning as generative: “When we learn, we make meaning. We do not learn information; we learn from information to make meaning. We extract the meanings encoded in information and align that meaning with previously constructed meanings” (p. 34). The dimensions are also overlapping. For instance, Starratt describes the challenge for school leaders as fostering “an ecology of community that promotes the richest form of individual human life within the richest form of community life” (p. 81). This points toward the way that our understanding of what things mean (at an individual level) is inextricably connected to our sense of community. Starratt argues that these two are further linked to our responsibility to improve the teaching and learning environment in tangible ways, demonstrated by student learning gains, particularly for traditionally marginalized students (cf. Larson & Murat, 2002; Normore, 2008).

The field of socially just educational leadership recognizes that leadership is distributed across many individuals within school communities, including teacher leaders, administrators, and board members (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007; Spillane, Hiebert, & Diamond, 2004; Wohltestetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003). This article focuses on the educational leadership of the principal. Extant literature suggests that principals play an important role in educational leadership. Principals facilitate school improvement (Boscardin, 2005; Fullan, 1997, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Waters & Grubb, 2004). Successful principals set the direction in the school by articulating a shared vision, build the capacity of the school by fostering professional growth, and modify organizational structures to support a culture and practices that reflect this vision (Wallace Foundation, 2008).

Scholarship about principals promoting social justice explores both theoretical underpinnings (e.g., Brown, 2004; Theoharis, 2007) and practical applications (e.g., Bogotch, 2002; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Building theory, for example, Brown (2004) describes an approach to preparing school principals for the work of promoting educational equity drawing from adult learning theory, transformative learning theory, and critical social theory. Supporting practice, for example, Frattura and Capper (2007) describe strategies for reforming service delivery to meet the needs of all students in integrated and comprehensive manners. The field of socially just educational leadership emphasizes blending theoretical and practical knowledge. Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) describe this as praxis supporting school principals “who engage in critical analysis of conditions that have perpetuated historical inequities in schools and who work to change institutional structures and culture” (p. 202). Theoharis operationalizes four dimensions of this praxis: “(a) raising student achievement, (b) improving school structures, (c) recentering and enhancing staff capacity, and (d) strengthening school culture and community” (p. 231).

Bogotch (2002) points out how theories and practice of social justice leadership are contingent and recreated in the changing contexts: “Educational leadership creates, responds, and reconstructs different meanings
of justice, educationally and socially” (p. 138). Bogotch argues against essentialized notions of social justice:

The educational leader of a school needs to create an environment that permits a variety of programs based on the diverse needs and beliefs of others and adjust practices to changing conditions. Thus, the meanings of social justice emerge without prediction, control, or permanence. (p. 142)

This literature, focused on such praxis, builds our understanding of requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions of socially just educational leaders. However, this literature tells us little of how practitioners are motivated, committed, and sustained in this work. In other words, while describing theories and practices of socially just educational leaders, the literature does little to unpack the paths socially just educational leaders have taken to these roles. These dimensions are potentially important to the recruitment, retention, and training of principals. We know that the principalship is a stressful position, making recruitment and retention difficult (Hertling, 2001). Such difficulties are more pronounced within the field of socially just educational leadership, where principals frequently face multifarious forms of resistance to their work (Theoharis, 2007). Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007) describe many of the challenges for recruiting strong principals to work in high-poverty urban schools, including a dearth of qualified candidates and leaders in these schools. The field may be able to more successfully address these problems by improving our knowledge base regarding what motivates principals who are enacting social justice, how they describe their commitments to this work, and what sustains them in this work. As Bogotch (2002) points out, meanings of social justice are not fixed, static, or predictable but emerge through engagement in educational leadership and “must be deliberately and continuously reinvented and critiqued” (p. 154). This study examines this emergence by analyzing the self-reported life histories of two principals committed to working in elementary schools serving traditionally marginalized students.

METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

I approached this study of the life histories of socially just principals from a critical interpretivist epistemology. Critical epistemologies investigate, interpret, and critique suffering and oppression within society (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995). Applied to school leaders, a critical approach attends to how “educational practices address social justice and empowerment for oppressed persons” (Capper, 1998, p. 356). Interpretivist epistemologies attend to the construction of meanings by individuals as they describe their situations, behaviors, and rationales (Jacob, 1992).

I applied this critical interpretivist epistemology through life history portraiture. As Cole and Knowles (2001) state, life history inquiry is not meant “to convey a particular meaning or ‘truth’” (p. 10) but instead represent experiences that allow others to make meaning, form judgments, and deepen their own understandings. Portraiture also involves telling a story, not the story, through a verbal portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe this as follows:

The data must be scrutinized carefully, searching for the story line that emerges from the material. However, there is never a single story; many could be told. So the portraittist is active in selecting the themes that will be used to tell the story, strategic in deciding on points of focus and emphasis, and creative in defining the sequence and rhythm of the narrative. What gets left out is often as important as what gets included—the blank spaces, the silences, also shape the form of the story. For the portraittist, then, there is a crucial dynamic between documenting and creating the narrative, between receiving and shaping, reflecting and imposing, mirroring and improving... a string of paradoxes. The effort to reach coherence must both flow organically from the data and from the interpretive witness of the portraittist. (p. 12; emphasis added)

My critical interpretivist epistemology directed my attention to certain themes, namely, to aspects of social justice in the life history portraiture. Social justice can signify different meanings depending on the context (Bogotch, 2002). Theoharis (2007) operationalizes social justice leadership as illustrated in principals who “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). Ryan (2006) emphasizes a similar meaning: “Social justice will be achieved... when changes to the system allow for meaningful inclusion of everyone, particularly those who are consistently disadvantaged or marginalized.” These definitions capture the understanding of social justice that guided my research. Simply put, I was interested in learning about the dispositions and understandings of inclusivity through the life histories of school leaders who were promoting social justice in education through their work in schools serving traditionally marginalized students. I wanted to know the degree to which the decisions of these leaders reflected acting “on their passionate beliefs” (Bogotch, 2002, p. 139).
Empirical studies suggest a significant relationship between the private life histories of principals and their professional practice as school leaders. Fraynd and Capper (2003) show that school leaders who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender can find their sexuality to be something they need to mask in their school settings and an impetus to fight against homophobia in these same settings. Hernandez (2005) found that the racial identity of Latino principals affected their leadership practice. Theoharis (2005, 2007) shows that school leaders who promote social justice paradoxically blend arrogant self-confidence with humble self-doubt. A leader’s sense of spirituality is widely recognized as a significant component of their practice (Capper, Keyes, & Theoharis, 2000; Dantley, 2003, 2005; Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999; Oldenski & Carlson, 2002; Palmer, 2000; Riaz & Normore, 2008). Knowledge of personal biographies facilitates a richer understanding of how and why effective school leaders do what they do (Dillard, 1995).

The concept of vocation also informs my examination of how life histories affect choices of professional practice. Dawson (2005) traces the historical shifts of the term vocation. Originally, it had a strictly religious connotation: “Derived from the Latin term vocatio, it was a term used to describe a call away from the world of productive activity in order to dedicate one’s life to prayer and contemplation” (p. 223). Over time “the idea of vocation took on an increasingly secular connotation, and occupational work concurrently became an increasingly central dimension of human worth and dignity” (p. 224). Building from this, “the meaning of vocation has come to reflect a quest for personal meaning and singular life purpose” (p. 226). Palmer’s (1989) description of vocation as a calling illustrates this: “Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear” (p. 4). Palmer asserts that we are called to “let our lives speak” through a discerning process that demands ongoing critical reflection. Critical reflection has long been identified as a core goal of education. In 1933, John Dewey argued that such thinking—characterized by open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility—was a core educational goal (Dewey, 1964). I examined the reported life histories for indications of whether or how participants seem to reflect critically on their career paths and the degree to which they seemed to understand them as a calling or vocational journey. I was particularly attentive to how principals described their motivations to choose to work in schools serving traditionally marginalized students, the depth of their commitment, and what sustained them in this work.

A final dimension of the critical interpretivist epistemology that frames this research is the acknowledgment that my positionality as a researcher affects my work. I recognize that as a positioned subject, I shape the data that I produce as I formulate research questions, interact with research participants, and analyze data (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 2001; Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, & Rouston, 2007). Accordingly, part of my critical interpretivist epistemology is thoughtfully examining how my personal history affects my research. Life history inquiry and portraiture reflect the dispositions and inclinations of the researcher as well as the participants (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). As Chapman (2007) explains, “the decisions made, the relationships formed, and the narratives that represent people’s lives are deeply connected to the present experiences of researchers and their epistemologies concerning the research topic and participants” (p. 158). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis make a similar point: “The identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to the manner of listening, selecting, interpreting, and composing the story” (p. 13).

As a White male and a former elementary/middle school educator with over a decade in teaching and administration, I approached these interviews mindful of my life history. Other aspects of my personhood, such as my sexual orientation, familial experience, and personal approach to spirituality, are just some of the dimensions shaping my epistemology. Working as an educator in four school communities primarily serving students of color, low socioeconomic status, and bilingualism shaped my interest in these school communities. My understanding of and commitments to equity in education have been fundamentally shaped by these experiences working with students and families. I drew on my personal experiences in the field to establish credibility in my interactions with the research participants. I also drew on my perspective from the field to inform my questions when pushing participants to reflect upon their own career path in education.

**METHOD**

Grounded in these perspectives, the study I present here explores the self-reported life histories of two principals working in elementary schools serving traditionally marginalized students. Through in-depth life history interviews I examine the motivation, commitment, and sustenance of such principals. This refinement (from the general focus on social justice) again reflects how, as a portraitist, I was “active in selecting the themes . . . used to tell the story” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 5). I present two portraits of White middle-class native-English-speaking principals.
choosing to work in schools serving disproportionately high populations of students who are marginalized by race, poverty, and linguistic heritage.

I report a mult case qualitative study using constant comparative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glesne, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Within the heterogeneity of approaches to qualitative research, as Freeman and colleagues (2007) explain, "qualitative researchers use data as evidence to warrant claims within different theoretical frameworks and specific communities of practice" (p. 27). Qualitative methods provide a direct approach for investigating social action, subjective experiences, and conditions that influence action and experiences—phenomena not lent to quantitative methods (Carspecken, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

The portraits presented here are drawn from a broader study of five principals across a variety of contexts (elementary and secondary, rural and urban, public and private). In all five schools, over half the students met one or more of the following criteria: qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches, being people of color, or being identified as English-language learners. Since I did not want to study principals who were novice in their roles, I considered only principals who had served in such a capacity for more than 5 years. Convenience criteria delimited my search to individuals with whom I could regularly meet to conduct in-person interviews. Employing these criteria, I purposefully selected the sample based on recommendations from public school district-level administrators. I identified five research participants who met these criteria and were interested in participating in the research. In this article, I examine two of these five.

With each participant I conducted three semistructured interviews spread over a period of 3 months. Each interview ranged from 1 to 2 hours in length and was guided by broad themes illustrating how understandings of justice and inclusivity intersected with personal journeys to the principalship. The initial interview was guided by two overarching foci. First, I inquired how the research participant conceptualized social justice and inclusivity. Second, I asked about how the research participant might distinguish one's personal and professional time and commitments. Table 1 illustrates questions and spectrums that I used to organize notes on the participants' responses in these areas.

In the initial interview, I also asked participants to describe in broad strokes their paths toward educational leadership. For example, I asked whether such stages as preteaching, teaching, quasi-administrative roles, and formal administrative roles were appropriate to their journey and how much time was spent in various stages. These stages, along with the responses to the initial foci, framed the rest of the interview process. I

used the stages of the path toward educational leadership to create some general periods to examine. In each interview, I focused on one or two stages by asking a series of questions about each stage that attempted to uncover dimensions of motivation, commitment, and sustenance. Essentially, I tried to get the research participants to candidly reflect on what motivated their career decisions, how their commitments unfolded, and what sustained them on these journeys. I was interested in the degrees to which these reflections illustrate these paths as vocational. Table 2 illustrates examples of the questions I posed. Furthermore, during these semistructured interviews, I attempted to allow the participants to play an

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<th>Table 1. Initial Interview Overarching Foci</th>
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<td><strong>Focus 1: Social Justice and Inclusivity</strong></td>
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<td>• What is your conception of social justice in general?</td>
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<td>• What is your conception of social justice, specifically as it applies to the field of education?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is your conception of inclusivity in general?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is your conception of inclusivity, specifically as it applies to the field of education?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Considering your foci as a school leader, how would you position yourself on these two spectrums:</td>
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| Social justice is at the core ———— Social justice is peripheral
| Inclusivity is at the core ———— Inclusivity is peripheral |

| **Focus 2: Personal Versus Professional Time and Commitments** |
| • How would you divide your time priorities (e.g., personal/professional/familial/other)? |
| • What percent of your time would you estimate each of these priorities receives? |
| • What are some of the threads running through these? |
| • How would you characterize the boundaries between these priorities on this spectrum: |
| Distinct boundaries ———— Fluid boundaries |

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<th>Table 2. Typical Questions About Each Stage</th>
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<td>• Storied lives—what stories do you tell about this period?</td>
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<td>• What mattered? What priorities?</td>
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<td>• What were key events?</td>
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<td>• What artifacts do you still hold dear from this period?</td>
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<td>• Who were key influences? Stories about them?</td>
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<td>• How do you think you would have defined social justice in this stage? Why?</td>
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<td>• How do you think you would have defined inclusivity in this stage? Why?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Do you think about this period much?</td>
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<td>• Do you think this period is important to who you are now, as an educational leader?</td>
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active role in shaping the focus of their accounts. Thus, in my approach to each interviewee and as I conducted the interviews, I strived to be holistic, empirical, interpretive, and empathetic (Toma, 2006).

I transcribed these interviews and coded and analyzed these data through an interactive process of categorizing, contextualizing the relationships among these categories, and building theory (Maxwell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I coded within themes of motivation, commitment, and sustenance. Guided by the critical interpretivist epistemology and vocational conceptual framework described here, I analyzed these data looking for patterns illustrating why these principals choose to work in schools serving disproportionately high populations of students who are marginalized by race, poverty, and linguistic heritage.

CREATING THE PORTRAITS OF BILL AND MARLENE

In this article, I present portraits of Marlene and Bill (pseudonyms). At first blush, Marlene and Bill appear as conventional school leaders, privileged by race (White), socioeconomic status (middle class), and linguistic heritage (native English speakers). Other characteristics place them in positions of privilege, including their faith traditions (both identified as Christian, although Bill described spirituality as playing a much more central role in his life history than did Marlene). Bill and Marlene were both raised in the same Midwestern state where they were currently working. At the time of this research, each had spent over 14 years as a school principal, and neither indicated plans to leave the field in the near future. They described having comfortable middle-class lifestyles. For instance, Marlene enjoys spending weekends at a lake home in a rural section of the state, and Bill described his love of cycling. Both are active in other segments of the community, such as volunteering in faith communities. In short, at a surface level of analysis, neither of these individuals can easily be characterized as an outlier of the community.

I focus on Marlene and Bill because they shared these dimensions of being “mainstream.” I wanted to closely examine how White middle-class native-English-speaking principals described their life journeys as leading them to work in schools primarily serving students marginalized by race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and home language. In their context, Marlene and Bill are “typical.” For instance, over 4 in 5 of school principals (82%) are White, a figure that has been stable since the early 1990s (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). In the district in which they work, all the administrators are White, with 58% female and 42% male.

As a percentage of the overall population, immigrants in this state form a small percentage (3%), a figure that has remained stable for the past four decades (New York Times, 2009). In addition, the population in general is overwhelmingly Christian (75%), with an even higher percentage in this state (78%; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, n.d.).

The schools in which Marlene and Bill were principals are public elementary schools with 250 to 300 students and situated in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) but in close proximity to rural settings. Across the three dimensions of diversity that I examined, each school showed a substantial level of diversity (see Table 3 and Figure 1). Regarding socioeconomic status, over half the students qualified for subsidized lunch in both schools. This is significantly higher than the rest of the district and the state (36%). In terms of racial and ethnic diversity, nearly 3 in 4 students in the district (73%) and state (74%) are White. While Bill and Marlene’s schools are also majority White (59% and 60%, respectively), they are more racially and ethnically diverse than the district and the state, especially across specific dimensions. For instance, while few (3%) students in the district identify as Hispanic, 12% of students in Marlene’s school do. Worth noting, Asian students (the highest percentage of students of color in both schools as well as in the district as a whole) are among the most marginalized students of color in the district. For instance, they have the lowest rates of reading proficiency in the district. Significant numbers of students (Asian and Hispanic) were identified as having limited English proficiency: over 1 in 4 students (27%) in Bill’s school and 1 in 3 (34%) in Marlene’s school. This is lower than the district average but above the state average.

In this study I examined why these “typical” individuals assumed leadership roles in schools serving high populations of traditionally marginalized students. Were they motivated by social justice values to become educators in the first place? Did they have strong, abiding commitments to enacting these values? How did they sustain themselves in this challenging work? The following textual portraits explore three aspects of these questions: motivation, commitment, and sustenance. Paradoxes emerge

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<th>Table 3</th>
<th>School and Principal Characteristics (in Percentages)</th>
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<td>2004–2005 Data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students eligible for subsidized lunch</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students of color</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Limited English proficiency</td>
<td>11</td>
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in looking through these three lenses. On one hand, Bill and Marlene both articulate desires to lead their schools in manners reflecting social justice. On the other, social justice values do not emerge as central features to their motivation, commitment, and sustenance. The portraits that follow illustrate how these leaders enact social justice leadership without necessarily identifying social justice values explicitly. In the subsequent discussion, I explore the implications of this for the field of socially just educational leadership.

PORTRAITS OF MOTIVATION TO THE VOCATION OF EDUCATION

The life histories of Bill and Marlene offer different perspectives on what motivates their careers in education. In exploring the vocation of education for each of them, it is clear that neither set out to become a principal; rather, both were dedicated teachers who found themselves drawn into this administrative role due to a series of life events. Unpacking their motivation toward school leadership starts with considering their grounding in deep commitments to being educators.

BILL’S PATH TO TEACHING

Bill describes himself as “one of the first ones in the family to go to college.” He recounts two factors that motivated this. One was a teacher:

I had an English teacher who was very influential. There was not an assumption in my family that kids would go to college, so I think he helped me realize that there is a joy in being a student, and just being in some sort of academic setting, that I would enjoy that. He was very encouraging.

A second factor was a scholarship he received from a local country club where he worked as a caddie. He did not know about this, but as he tells the story, “My friends told me about it and we all applied, and ironically I got it!” The scholarship, which paid room, board, and tuition, made college accessible. Reflecting on this, he mused, “I guess I probably would have gone to college eventually [without that scholarship] . . . I’m just not sure how.”

Attending a large public university, Bill first studied communication in college. Toward the end of his undergraduate studies, however, he discovered an interest in special education. He describes how this shift unfolded:

My dad worked at a mill, and I worked during the summers there and made spending money during college. My girlfriend was working in the park department with disabled kids. I worked on the swing shift so during the day I had time off, and so I would go and hang out [with her]. That was really my first experience working with kids . . . [and] that’s what got me going on going back to get a completely different degree [in special education].

Bill also had a niece who was born with Down syndrome, which piqued his interest in this field. After finishing his undergraduate degree, he shifted gears and began a master’s degree in special education from the same university: “Now that I look back at it, I think, ‘What a change in mind-set! I was doing something totally different, thinking of traveling in Europe. It was so different!’ He married this girlfriend, and they both started in the field of special education. She worked as an aide while he pursued his degree. When asked what changed his mind-set, he recalls the thrill of working with the children:

I think the kids, ultimately. There are so unique. We kind of paint them with a broad brush . . . [but] they are so different. Some of them are great people and some of them are kind of jerks! It was the chance to work with them and also the challenge of getting them to a point where they could be more productive. Knowing that these are folks who really have learning difficulties. . . . [In my master’s degree] I found that I was very interested relating to kids. [My wife] really enjoyed working with the kids and I kind of caught that fire too!
Thus, Bill became a teacher, specifically working in a special education classroom. This journey toward becoming an educator—in particular, a teacher working with students with disabilities—grounded his motivation to become a principal.

MARLENE’S PATH TO TEACHING

In contrast to Bill, Marlene had a straightforward path to becoming an educator. Marlene grew up with three sisters in a rural area in the Midwest. Her father and mother had a hobby farm, and the girls had a lot of responsibilities and chores on it. Taking care of animals was an important aspect to her childhood:

I think when you’re around animals... and have those responsibilities, that that influences your feelings of what’s fair and what’s right and what’s kind. Taking care of animals, they’re really vulnerable, and they don’t always have... all the survival things that we would have to do to survive on their own. If you have to take care of animals and pets and be around them you have to develop a nurturing... we had a pony when I was growing up and that was very important to us. I think taking care of animals had an influence on me.

Music was also important, with her mother playing the organ at church and with herself playing band and choir in high school. Marlene stated, “All of my sisters and all of us were into music.” Her grandmother was a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse and encouraged her to become a teacher. Consequently, Marlene found herself drawn to the field of education from an early age:

I have a teacher I had in my 8th grade, that every now and then I’ll still run into and he reminds me that when I was in 8th grade I wrote a paper that I was going to be a music teacher. So I guess I had that idea for a long time... I guess I didn’t know what else I would do. At that time, if you had the aptitude to go to college, the counselor encouraged females to go to teaching or nursing. Those were the expectations... I didn’t see any other options and I didn’t have any desire to explore any other options.

Marlene became a music teacher and proceeded to teach in this area for 12 years. She then became an elementary guidance counselor and was subsequently encouraged by colleagues to go into administration. While not directly drawn toward leadership, she described her personality characteristics as independent and strong willed.

MOTIVATION TOWARD EDUCATION, NOT SOCIAL JUSTICE

As these sketches suggest, Bill and Marlene’s motivations to becoming school leaders emerged from their original journeys to become educators. Both report a sense of calling to the field, and in this sense, the journeys are vocational. While drawn to the broad field of education, neither Bill nor Marlene was drawn to the specific field of socially just educational leadership. Neither explicitly identified with a social justice motivation. Rather, they each unambiguously located their personal motivations as becoming educators and working with children in general.

This was interesting on several levels. Personally, I was surprised to not hear any direct connection to values of social justice, probably because of the stark contrast with my own vocational journey into the field of education. Social justice values were central to my motivation toward working in schools, and I anticipated hearing some indications of this in Bill and Marlene’s stories. In addition, the way that I organized the interviews invited connection between personal motivation and values of social justice. The structure of the initial interview (Table 1) led the participants to think first and foremost about how they understood social justice and inclusivity. Yet in both Bill and Marlene’s stories, this did not lead them to frame their motivations to working in their current schools as grounded directly in social justice values.

Finally, neither life history narrative pointed toward social justice motivations, even in instances where such motivations seem apt. This was surprising because, given the long-term role of each as a school leader working closely with culturally and linguistically diverse students and families, I anticipated hearing them describe roots of this throughout their vocational journeys. Marlene’s account of her vocational journey emphasized a love for the content (music) and a zeal for overcoming obstacles. In her role as a music teacher, she consistently described her focus on engaging students in the various music opportunities (band, choir, musicals). Yet even when prompted to delve more deeply into dimensions of this and explore values of social justice—as in response to questions about the dimensions of diversity within her schools and whether music was a tool that bridged barriers or promoted engagement—no strong connections emerged.

As Bill’s life history narrative unfolded, it seemed even more likely that he would connect his path toward educational leadership with some desire to serve traditionally marginalized students. As Bill described his initial work with students with disabilities, he identifies dimensions of
injustice in the field: “Everything was so segregated then.... There was no inclusionary program. That wasn’t even on the radar screen.... We didn’t give the kids [with disabilities] any opportunity to be with ‘regular kids,’ ‘normal kids.’”

At the time our mind-set was “This is what it is” rather than “Wouldn’t it make sense to have these kids with better role models than kids that have a tough time expressing themselves, and being appropriate socially, and all that?” I wish I could say something else but that wasn’t what we thought about.

Bill unambiguously indicates that, knowing what he knows now, he finds the segregation of children with disabilities problematic. But in no way did he claim a mantle of inclusion advocacy as driving his work as an educator. Rather, he described his satisfaction in figuring out how to work with these students:

The kids were all so unique—in some ways even more so than a typical grade-level class would be, in my experience. I have one student who was very autistic, and another student who was almost incapable of doing anything physical, and very low functioning. I don’t remember what the syndrome was called, but he needed to be carried. He broke a leg in class one day. He was very vulnerable. These kids were so involved. What I remember is how great the kids were in terms of when you got to know them, they all had neat personalities. And the parents were very—I think they were just grateful that the kids were in school and that somebody was working with them, period.

There was a sense of hope—gosh, my kids are getting services. I think that now everyone kind of assimilates that, but back then I had more than one child that could have been in [a no-defunct residential institution for students with disabilities]....

These parents loved their kids were glad that somebody was working with them. Even though often I was thinking, I’m not sure where to go with this.

Their narratives illustrate how school leaders can have vocational journeys into the field of education broadly speaking but wind up taking more circuitous routes onto the frontlines in socially just educational leadership. For Bill and Marlene, the guiding question (Why do White middle-class native-English-speaking principals choose to work in schools serving disproportionately high populations of students who are marginalized by race, poverty, and linguistic heritage?) is not answered directly with a deep-seeded, abiding motivation toward social justice work. Their life histories do not reflect this direct “calling.” This becomes even clearer in examining their specific commitments to social justice leadership, to which we now turn.

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**PORTRAITS OF COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP**

To varying degrees, Bill and Marlene’s current practices show commitments to enacting social justice. Both serve as dedicated school leaders promoting equity and excellence in schools serving significant numbers of traditionally marginalized students. Yet their life history reflections suggest that their commitments to this work were not explicit drivers in their career trajectories. Instead, these commitments were understated, unfolding and changing over time.

**“I’M NO CRUSADER”**

Bill and Marlene consistently described their work as being fundamentally about education, not justice. When asked directly whether their work reflected social justice commitments, they were diffident and ambiguous. Both leaders were wont to prone to portray their work in reserved and general manners when asked about social justice. For instance, Bill used phrasing such as “I’m no crusader” three times in the course of this section of the conversation. He explained efforts to help marginalized students such as those with special needs as part of his general role as an educator: “I always just wanted to do the right thing for kids as they develop.” Marlene spoke in similar terms:

I’ve never tried to separate out the values I’m trying to promote through leadership.... I don’t sit down and say, “Now I’m working on social justice,” “Now I’m working on reading for everyone.” To me I don’t separate it out.... it’s all going on at the same time.

Despite the principals’ reluctance to explicitly stake claims in this manner, social justice values nevertheless emerged as they described their educational leadership practices. These commitments include attentiveness to inequities in schools around various dimensions of diversity—particularly, class and language. For instance, Marlene brought up her efforts at analyzing data on summer school students:

I’ve been tracking data—entering first graders in the fall each year, tracking back to kindergarten—looking at who came to summer school and who didn’t. Economically deprived students who don’t come to summer school seem to regress. Noneconomically deprived students didn’t seem to regress.... so here in [school name] we get our economically deprived students into summer school and have eliminated the gap [in language arts achievement].
She continued by showing data trends over the last few years illustrating that gaps in achievement by class and language proficiency were basically closed. She attributed this to more than just the summer school program: “I think the after-school program also has a lot to do with it. We do lots of things to support language in fun ways. It’s a combination of lots of things.” Data from Marlene’s school supported her assertions. For instance, 3 of 4 students of low socioeconomic status scored at proficient or advanced levels in language arts and reading, higher than students who were not of low socioeconomic status (see Figure 2).

Bill also emphasized how issues of equity and education overlap in his school. One feature of this that emerged numerous times in his reflections on leadership was the difficulty that he had balancing the provision of nonacademic supports to the students and with the focus on the academic goals of the school:

Here you really see effects of poverty—and the breakdown of the family—and I don’t think people see that if they’re not working in the context of schools. . . . We try to keep our eye on the ball, academically—but to ignore the other aspects of the students—we can’t do that.

Bill also emphasized the ways that he focused on ameliorating the marginalization of students that emerged from the multiple, overlapping dimensions of diversity of language, culture, and poverty. He focused on cultivating a school community that emphasized welcome:

There’s a lot of racial tension under the surface [in the broader community]. The tension isn’t in the school. . . . We’re a little island, and it’s not that we’re perfect—that everyone is so enlightened that they just accept everybody—but I felt that we [created] an island where kids could be themselves and staff was together in terms of being accepting of kids.

He described first coming into this new school community and recognizing the importance of focusing on the parents as well as the students:

I was really interested in helping parents feel like it was their school—because I really don’t think that they did. And I don’t know if I was that successful with it but my feeling was, I want them to feel that this is a friendly place, a place they can come into and not be afraid or wonder what’s going on. So our bilingual aides were at a moment’s notice, so if a parent came to school, or if we needed to make a phone call, we tried to do whatever we could [to engage them].

Furthermore, he described how dependent he was on the expertise of others (such as his bilingual resource personnel and ESL teachers) in supporting him in responding to culturally and linguistically diverse students.

I think I was used to kids who were different than whatever the majority of kids. . . . So I think all of that in terms of an attitude, that was the biggest thing. I had no clue in terms of best practices for English-language learners, and also, culturally, no clue about how male-dominated the Hmong culture was and what that meant for who you talked to and what do you talk to them about—kind of street smarts that you find out as you go along—much less, what are some best practices for instruction for kids who are learning English at the same time they’re supposed to be learning academics.

Accordingly, he drew on the support of colleagues for advice and direction in cultivating a school community that was both welcoming and effective with this diversity of learners.

Thus, an important element of commitments to social justice that emerges in the cases of Bill and Marlene is that these leaders reflect values of social justice—such as placing an emphasis advocating for those on the margins—while at the same time resisting being labeled as “social justice leaders.”

EMERGING IN SITU

A second aspect of Bill and Marlene’s commitments to social justice school leadership is that the principals appear to have grown out of their
experiences of the principalship itself. The commitments did not drive them to select certain schools (e.g., schools serving significant numbers of students in poverty) but rather emerged in situ, as they worked within such schools. Both Bill and Marlene served as principals in different schools during their careers. For instance, Marlene reported that early in her career as a school principal, she served a relatively affluent school and had no desire to work with more traditionally marginalized students. It was only due to the district’s tapping her shoulder to transfer to another school context with a less privileged population that caused her to make this radical shift in settings. In this situation, however, she did not ascribe motivation and commitment to issues of social justice:

We take everybody. It’s our job to make them be the best that they can be.
... That’s related to social justice. For some we have to expose them to opportunities that they might not otherwise have. This school is set up—we have extensive after-school programs that provide opportunities that the kids wouldn’t otherwise have, like band. But we didn’t set out to do these to these things for social justice. We did them to attract kids.

Bill’s first principalship was different from Marlene’s in that his school was culturally and linguistically diverse. This took Bill by surprise: “I’d never worked with any diverse ethnic groups. I can’t think of any kids other than Caucasians that I’d worked with.” No aspects of racial and ethnic diversity came up in the interview process, so when he arrived at his first school, he discovered that 1 in 4 students had limited English proficiency (nearly all of Hmong or Laotian descent), and nearly half the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. He recounts that these dimensions of diversity were new to him (“I just had no experience with that whatsoever”) and that he was not expecting this when interviewing:

I was too dumb to ask any questions, and was just happy to be interviewing for a position. And when we interviewed, it was a rotating thing—they had a group of parents, a group of teachers, and a group of administrators—it just never came up.

He noted that the interview committees were all White and that “it would have been hard, at that time, to find a Hmong or Laotian parent who spoke English.”

After several years at this school, Bill moved to his current one. Like Marlene, the district administration asked him to move to this second school, which was even more diverse across these same dimensions. “Now that I think about it, I think [my first school] was a relatively easy school,” he reflected, and having a modicum of success in working across these dimensions of diversity in the first school prepared him for the second. As described earlier, while his history as a special educator oriented him dispositionally toward students placed on the margins, he continued to rely on collegial support from more experienced teachers and staff to help him develop the knowledge and skills to effectively work with culturally and linguistically diverse students and families.

DEVELOPMENTAL DIMENSIONS

Another dimension of these commitments emerging in situ is developmental. For Bill, the commitments emerge within his personal life cycle, particularly his spiritual transformation. For Marlene, they emerge within her professional life cycle, moving from teacher to counselor to principal.

Unpacking Bill’s commitments to the principalship in a school serving traditionally marginalized students is inseparable from his life journey. His narratives weave references to family and faith throughout. The illness of his mother led him and his wife to leave their teaching positions and find new jobs allowing them to live closer to her. Bill struggled to find his niche, directing a group home, serving as a substitute special education teacher, and even leaving education altogether to work in insurance to pay the bills. He expressed doubts in his future in the field: “I remember being unsure if this was what I’d stay with. There were a few [teaching] positions I applied for and didn’t get—so then I was wondering if this was going to work out.”

His life journey took a profound shift during this period due to a faith transformation:

I think that making a profession to Christianity, that made a huge difference in my life. I never had that before. I was raised Catholic and that was fine, but it wasn’t there for me. And this was key for [my wife] as well. She had made a profession earlier. And this made a big difference for us. It made a big difference for us. Things were tight. I was making beans selling insurance, and I was gone a lot of nights... We had a congregation and [my wife] had started going there, and the people helped us through in some financial situations. And more than that, they were just very accepting... They just accepted us just the way we were—it was really cool.

I had no religious/spiritual life before. It surprised me—because I feel like my mind-set changed. My psychology had always been working for me—but now, and it’s true to this day—that I consider this as a vocation. Ironically, I wasn’t in education at that time. But when I got back into it... had more a sense of serving people rather than acting on them. I did love the kids before, but my mind-set was more of working on them. And now it’s kind of serving.
Throughout the life history interviews, Bill continued to reference his spirituality and family as key features that directed his decisions to work as a school leader in service to marginalized communities.

As Bill’s personal life cycle was central to his commitment, Marlene’s professional life cycle was central to hers. Marlene’s professionalism combined deep confidence in her skills with an abiding hunger for new knowledge. Her reflections on a challenging part of her early years teaching music illustrate this combination. In an early job as a high school music and choir teacher, she became responsible for teaching middle school students:

I found it hard to teach fifth- through sixth-grade music... it was hard to do what I considered meaningful lessons... There were really no materials to teach fifth- through sixth-grade music. It hadn’t been a focus at all [in the school]. So there were old music books and that was it. There were no instruments, no manipulatives, nothing. And I didn’t have a lot of skill in teaching younger students either. So I’m not sure if I would have had that stuff I’d have known what to do with it. And there was really no curriculum for it. So I had to take coursework and learn from other elementary music teachers as to what I needed to do to really engage those kids. Because if you didn’t engage them, you’re not going to get them for seventh and eighth grade and for high school. It’s key as to what happens in elementary to get those kids to sign up. Here I have all this opportunity to make the fifth and sixth graders think that music is terrific and this is great and I should continue in music and I should sing.

In recounting this, Marlene reveals confidence in her skills, tempered by humility in her limitations. She sought the help of others, such as peers, but embraced the task as her own. As she moved across roles in her professional life cycle—first as a music teacher, then a counselor, then the school principal—she saw a common thread running throughout:

It’s a curriculum shift—but not a shift in expectations for results. Because in all the areas, the bottom line is results. I want students to be the best they can be, whether it’s in their musical performance, whether it’s in their reading, whether it’s in another subject area, whether it’s in their emotional well-being, it’s all about being their best, being confident, and then taking those things outside of school and using them in life. That’s the same, that’s the constant.

At the same time, her perspective clearly shifted as she moved across these roles. Attention to narrow dimensions (e.g., improving the music education of middle school students to build a stronger pool of students interested in high school band and chorus and musicals) gave way to broader, schoolwide, equity-oriented dimensions (e.g., creating academic enrichment opportunities for students receiving free and reduced-price lunches).

These portraits show different aspects of the commitments of Bill and Marlene to work in schools serving high populations of traditionally marginalized students. These commitments appear to be understated, unacknowledged, and even resisted. Furthermore, they seem to have unfolded and developed within the particular context of the job as well as the leaders’ professional (Marlene) and personal (Bill) life cycles. Like the previous section, which illustrated that their motivation was more directly toward education than social justice per se, these portraits show that commitments to social justice educational leadership can be indirect, potentially fragile, and contingent. Before examining these nuances, we turn from portraits of motivation and commitment to an examination of how Bill and Marlene sustained themselves as school leaders promoting social justice.

PORTraits of sustenance in social justice leadership

A final dimension of Bill and Marlene’s life histories is how both principals seem to be successfully sustaining themselves in their work. As veteran administrators serving in the most diverse schools in their region (Table 3), Bill and Marlene appeared stable in their roles. Their life histories indicated that they derived sustenance from a variety of sources.

Systems of routines

One of the most consistent sources of sustenance that Bill and Marlene both described was developing systems of routines in their work. The best illustration of this was Bill’s system of organizing his time. He described the origins to developing this system when he came to his current school 9 years earlier:

What I’ve seen happen is that things have gotten a lot more complicated in terms of the number of demands that are made on middle-management folks in education... I mean if you’re trying to be a principal really you ought thinking about being in the middle. Middle management is a good term. I understand that the term manager is kind of a negative term, and we’re all supposed to be thinking about being instructional leaders, I understand that. But what happened for me over time especially when I change schools (and I knew I was asked to do this—I wasn’t told I had to. I’d been at [my previous school] for 9 years and I thought things were going pretty well. But they obviously thought highly of me at central office so they asked me to come here). There’d been a lot of issues at this school, a lot of turnover in administration and stuff. When I came, they, apart from all of the standardized testing and all
the bits and pieces of things that have been added on, any one of the things is not a big deal—but add all of them together and they are. And then you come into a building that is much more complicated, I think. When I started, there were a lot of staff issues, a lot of things swirling around.

In the face of this added complexity, Bill sought a new way to manage his time to balance competing demands:

What I've found is that the typical principle is torn. When you're out in the classrooms—which is really where you ought to be, that's where the action is—you're always thinking. "Gosh, there's a report I need to do or I have 12 teacher evaluations and I haven't written any of them yet." And then when you're in the office you're thinking, "This isn't where the action is. I wonder at what is happening in the classrooms right now?"

He adopted a system of dividing his week into building days and office days:

I have what I call "building days" and those days I'm not in the office at all. And I try to set up two per week. . . I told my secretary if I wander into the office and look longingly at paperwork, tell me it's a building day. And the other days are office days. Building days are out, office days are in. In my office days I'll actually shut my door, and people who want to see me have to see me by appointment. . . . It's an attempt to be efficient and not drive yourself crazy.

This is a prime example of the system of routines that Bill and Marlene both described as being central to how they sustained themselves in their work. "You know how it is," Marlene quipped at one point, reflecting on how she was always being tapped by the district to do a little more in terms of leadership beyond her own school. "Find the person who's busy and give them the task, then it will get done!" Having clear systems to balance their work and organize their time was an essential tool to help them sustain themselves.

DISTRIBUTION OF LEADERSHIP

A second form of sustenance that was particularly apparent in Marlene was the sharing of responsibilities with colleagues as a strategy to be more effective and less overwhelmed in her school. One of the best descriptions of this came when Marlene was showing the data on closing the gaps in achievement and describing the various supports and approaches behind this, including early interventions for students who were struggling, additional literacy supports after school, and strategies to engaging their families:

To me it's not just one factor, it's many things, but you have to be working on all of them simultaneously. But I see the role of leadership is, I'm developing leaders in the building so we can work on all these things simultaneously. The thing that I need to do is, first of all, I need to have the vision. They have to see that I have the vision. You have to be action oriented. You have to be able to say it, but then you have to do it. Because you can get bogged down in the data, looking at this [data reflecting student achievement gaps], and never do anything about it. You also have to develop the leadership in the building. Because I can't produce all these charts and graphs . . . I need everyone in the building doing something. So recognizing them in their expertise, and supporting them in their expertise, and then bringing them all together and keeping everybody motivated is key!

Developing shared leadership and facilitating the contribution of others to school improvement was, to Marlene, an extension of how she had always approached the vocation of teaching:

For me it's been a natural thing that I'm good at. I think it has a lot to do with being a music teacher. You don't put on a good musical unless you can get everybody to work together. I've directed many musicals in my life. You have a timeframe for doing that. There are people who don't get parts who wanted parts but you still need them. You have to massage their ego if that's what you have to do, help someone recognize that they have talent and develop their confidence so they can use talent. To me it's a lot like orchestrating a concert or a musical; I have to orchestrate all these things to happen. And lead them and have the expertise to orchestrate it all. But I couldn't get up onstage and perform the musical by myself.

She described how building on the diversity of talents within her school developed over time:

You have to work with people in the building . . . bring their talents together and orchestrate the vision, and tell them that we can achieve this. It's not like being a cheerleader. That's different. I will use the music reference. It's not about soloists; it's about the group. We do this together. Everyone's doing different pieces, but we do it together.

This distribution of leadership was something that Marlene described as a fundamental source of strength for her own work and for the work of her colleagues in the school:

The motivation eventually comes from each other. At first I'm the one who's doing everything. Then as people see that I could do this I develop multiple leaders. This is my 8th year here. It wasn't like this at first. At first people wouldn't even talk. People were silent and not saying anything. That's not good—if people are silent they're not participating. . . . Everything's not
rosy—we have great challenges in this building with student behavior. . . . We have children growing up in families who have gang leaders. Some days it’s hard to come back. And how you come back is you realize you’re not in it on your own.

BALANCING THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

In addition to distributing leadership and developing a system of routines, a third source of sustenance for Bill and Marlene was balancing their personal and professional lives. For instance, they each cited specific ways they got their minds off school and recharged their levels of energy. Crocheting, knitting, and, more recently, quilting were important hobbies to Marlene. “It’s definitely a total stress reducer. My husband will say things like ‘Hm, looks like there’s a lot going on’ if he sees me doing a lot of crocheting!” When asked about boundaries between personal and professional time, Marlene responded,

Do I have boundaries? No. Some days I might leave at 4:00, other days I leave at 7:00. Multitasking works well for me. I try to optimize my time. I don’t work well if I have to work for a long period of time. Short bursts of time work well. Which is good because you’re always doing lots of things. I don’t come in over the weekend. . . . My boundaries are more about rewards. Sometimes I do work in the vehicle as we drive up to the lake. Then when we get to the lake, I don’t take it out again. That’s the reward. You could work all the time in this job and still not get it all done.

Bill cited his faith as being central to grounding and nourishing him in his leadership role. He believed that he was led in his life journey, which included coming to be the principal in this particular setting: “You know how we sometimes blunder into things? This is where my faith comes in. I think it was all part of the grand plan.” He described adapting a system to protect his personal time:

My goal has been to reduce my week from say 60 to 50 hours and I would say more weeks than not I’ve been able to do that—it’s worked out pretty well. . . . One of the mantras in [my] system is “Don’t take any work home with you. Just don’t take your briefcase home—don’t do it.” And I think if you were sitting with a bunch of principals and they were really candid with you, this would be the case. You get in this cycle of having this briefcase full of stuff and you bring it home and it sits and I do other things and then I bring it back. And I end up doing most of it at school anyways. And I was working Saturdays consistently. And this year I bet I’ve only worked four Saturdays. I’m at a point where I’m kind of reaching critical mass again and I probably need to do that again. But it used to be every Saturday at least half a day sometimes more like an 8-hour day. So that’s gotten better. And what I’m finding is at home I’m devoting more time. My wife and I have one child and she’s married and lives in town but isn’t living with us so I have more time for my wife and I am big cyclist and I like to get out on the bike and do more of that, it and . . . my faith is very important to me so I have more time to take for that, I teach Bible study every week. And I think this system has helped. It’s not perfect but I don’t feel like I’m quite as much of a ping-pong ball.

A further dimension of balancing the personal and the professional involved the abiding connection that Bill and Marlene both held to working with children. In their life history narratives, Bill and Marlene consistently returned to describing how important connecting to children was to them. Bill worked in district-level administration before coming into the principalship. He described missing working with kids as a huge motivator to coming back into schools: “I found that I liked working with adults, but I really missed the kids,” Bill explained. Marlene also reflected often on how keeping kids front and center grounded her:

If we give up on them, then they give up on themselves. It is amazing what kids can do. . . . For some kids, this is their safe haven. We have to stay positive. The day I stop liking this is the day I have to get out of it. Because there are some real challenging days.

This grounding in the fundamental relationships with children seemed to help these leaders balance the tensions between personal and professional demands.

SUSTENANCE AS LEADERS MORE THAN AS SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERS

The life history interviews revealed multiple ways that Bill and Marlene sustained themselves in their leadership practice, including implementing systems of routines, distributing their leadership responsibilities, and balancing their personal and professional lives. Both were relatively successful in handling their professional demands without burning out and showing signs of continued growth and change in their own leadership practice, despite having served as principals for well over a decade. Noteworthy in this, however, is that nothing in their descriptions of sustenance relates directly to social justice leadership per se. Rather than identifying struggles in terms of fighting to overcome ubiquitous and intractable problems of educational inequities, Bill and Marlene both framed the barriers to their work in broader, generic terms: organizing time between being a leader within the school while getting the paperwork done, fostering a professional learning community with a culture of shared leadership,
pointed toward structures that correlated to positive student learning gains and reduced gaps in achievement. Both were highly regarded in their district, recommended by their superintendent as strong school leaders, and assumed multiple leadership roles within the district. Their narratives also point toward proactive strategies (Theoharis, 2007) that serve to sustain themselves in their work. They exemplify Bogotch’s (2002) description of an educational leader as one who “creates, responds, and reconstructs different meanings of justice, educationally and socially” (p. 138).

At the same time, explicit commitments to social justice did not consciously motivate Bill and Marlene. These principals were reluctant to frame their work as in these terms, insisting that their work was not activism but professionalism. Each had a particular path to his or her current role that drew on a mix of personal and professional experiences, and each expressed an abiding satisfaction to lead in his or her current school setting. When the district leadership recognized Bill and Marlene as strong leaders and moved them to schools serving larger populations of traditionally marginalized students, they accepted, even embraced, this call. Yet they made sense of it in their own terms, a language largely devoid of references to social justice values.

As these life histories suggest, motivation, commitment, and sustenance to school leadership that reflects social justice values (i.e., reducing inequities) at times neither emerge nor manifest from social justice frameworks. Principals may dive into this work for mundane and nuanced reasons. The principals presented here were not driven to the field by a desire to change the world or reduce educational inequities. Marlene wanted to be a music teacher, Bill a special education teacher. Through a series of circumstances—some personal desires, some encouragement from colleagues, some life situations—both found themselves emerging into leadership roles in schools that called for social justice leadership. While characterizing the leadership that they exhibited in these roles as promoting social justice education is fair, their motivations and commitments toward this work are varied.

COMPILING THE FIELD

These life history narratives point toward an underexamined complexity within the field of socially just educational leadership. As discussed at the outset, scholarship in school leadership is pointing toward three core foci: school improvement (the principal as the instructional leader), democratic community (the principal as a community builder), and social justice (the...
principal as a moral steward; Murphy, 2002). What happens when the very leaders who are positioned to most powerfully enact the focus on social justice (because they are working in schools with the most blatant examples of educational inequity) do not recognize their work as such?

Literature in the field of socially just educational leadership at times implies that this recognition is essential. For instance, Theocharis (2007) describes social justice leaders as ones who “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) speak in similar tones, describing such leaders as critically analyzing educational inequities in schools and changing institutional structures and cultures in response to these analyses. These life histories suggest an alternative: inadvertent social justice leaders.

In ways, Bill and Marlene’s lack of explicit social justice awareness and agenda may limit their work. It may explain their lack of critical self-reflection that other leaders for social justice at times exhibit. For instance, neither Marlene nor Bill engaged in self-reflection about his or her racial identity as an element that affected his or her approach to leadership. Clearly, issues of race and ethnicity existed in both their school communities, yet these issues were downplayed. Class and, to a lesser degree, language seemed more comfortable dimensions of diversity for them to discuss but still were not dimensions upon which they focused their self-reflection. Leaders lacking a strong social justice conceptual framework seem less likely to recognize the multiple dimensions to diversity and privilege within the members of the school community and to examine how practices and policies in the school either exacerbate or ameliorate educational inequities.

In other ways, a social justice awareness and agenda may be latent in the motivation, commitments, and sustenance of Bill and Marlene and simply not have emerged in the course of the life history interviews I conducted. Other research approaches—such as case studies drawing on observational data and reflections of colleagues, for instance—might uncover dimensions of social justice that are present but went undetected due to the limitations of this study. Indeed, some dimensions of the motivations, commitments, and sustenance in the life histories of Bill and Marlene affirm extant scholarship in the field of socially just educational leadership.

An example of this is the importance of spirituality. Spirituality, increasingly recognized as a salient dimension of social justice school leadership (e.g., Riaz & Normore, 2006), was key to the motivation and sustenance of Bill’s work.

Bill and Marlene’s lack of this explicit focus on social justice leadership adds complexity to our understanding of the nature of the field of socially just educational leadership. Social justice leadership in schools can happen unwittingly. Some White middle-class native-English-speaking principals work in schools serving disproportionately high populations of students who are marginalized by race, poverty, and linguistic heritage for reasons that might have little or nothing to do with social justice. Each person’s vocational journey toward social justice leadership is unique.

This complements Bogotch’s (2002) analysis of different paths to social justice leadership in schools. Bogotch contrasts community-based approaches, drawing from multiple visions and practices that are socially constructed, with individual-based approaches, drawing from singular visions of dedicated individuals working as mavericks:

My point was not to argue which educational leadership path was the right one. Rather my point was to argue that objective criteria do not exist. Instead, we choose to work in education in order to make a difference. Social justice breathes meaning and life into our educational practices. (p. 153)

A fundamental point, Bogotch insists, is that regardless the path, the leadership matters: “There are always consequences to our ideas, words, and actions: whenever educators act on their passionate beliefs, it can and does make a difference” (p. 139).

CONCLUSION

Life histories provide a distinct and valuable perspective into social justice leadership in schools. Self-reported life histories are low inference in that the results do not extend beyond this sample and situation (Erickan & Rolf, 2006). The histories reported here of Bill and Marlene, however, do point toward the individual nature of each person’s vocational journey toward social justice leadership. Several implications of this emerge for scholarship and practice.

This study implies that examining life histories can contribute toward a more nuanced and complex understanding of the praxis of socially just educational leadership. School leaders who embrace school communities with disproportionately high populations of traditionally marginalized students might be well served by reflecting on their own life histories. One option might be projects in university departments of educational leadership in which prospective principals create life history portraits of veteran school leaders. This could serve two purposes. First, it would allow the
current practitioners opportunities to conceptualize a narrative of their journeys in educational leadership. Such portraits can be useful because they force the narrator to articulate the larger context to his or her current situation, providing some long-term perspective on the immediate issues. Second, such life history interviews would foster a professional dialogue between veteran and novice school leaders about motivation, commitment, and sustenance. These are crucial issues in school leadership, where the attrition rate is alarmingly high, especially in schools serving disadvantaged students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). These might serve as an avenue to catalyze growth of not only the novice leaders but also the veteran principals who find themselves working in schools with dimensions of diversity and marginalization that stretch their understanding of social justice and cultural competence.

The study also has implications for scholarship in the field of socially just educational leadership. As Riehl (2000) points out, “if practice is connected to identity, then it matters who administrators are” (p. 70). Recruiting and retaining principals is difficult for school communities. Attrition rates are frequently attributed to the heavy workload of the principalship (extending to numerous night and weekend expectations), the increasing complex educational and social environments, and the relatively low levels of compensation for administrators compared to experienced teachers (Hertling, 2001; Peterson & Kelley, 2001). These dynamics are exacerbated for leaders in schools serving traditionally marginalized students (Theoharis, 2007). Accordingly, research that deepens our understanding of what attracts and sustains effective leaders committed to such schools makes an important contribution to the broader field of educational leadership. For example, longitudinal studies of aspiring principals placed in schools serving significant numbers of traditionally marginalized students could provide deep insights into how knowledge, skills, and dispositions toward social justice leadership evolve.

In the final analysis, our schools need leaders motivated and committed to promoting social justice by working to eradicate educational inequities. Scholarship in the field must therefore focus on increasing the pool of candidates with the requisite dispositions, knowledge, and skills to pursue this. Examining the life histories of school leaders currently in such roles is one step toward this end.

NOTES

1. The five principals were 3 to 160 miles away from me, with the average being 100 miles. The participants and contexts in which these leaders worked varied across multiple dimensions of diversity. Of the research participants, three are women and two are men. One identified as a lesbian and four as heterosexual. Three identified as Christian, and two did not identify a faith practice or religious affiliation. Regarding race/ethnicity, four are White and one is Latina. At the time of this research, the amount of time that each of these principals had spent in school administration ranged from 7 to 18 years. One of the participants was retiring the year after this research was conducted, but the other four indicated no plans to leave the field in the near future. In terms of school contexts, two participants were high school principals, and the other three were elementary school principals. The majority of the schools were public, but one was an independent Catholic school. Regarding race/ethnicity, three of the schools comprised homogeneous students (one predominantly Latino, one predominantly Native American, and one predominantly White), and two represented heterogeneous populations. Four schools were situated in three urban settings, and one was in a rural region.

2. Throughout her professional career, Marlene was almost perpetually taking classes. “Why not?” she explained. “If you want to get a raise, you have to move along, get credits. Why not apply it to something? Things change—you have to be flexible.”

REFERENCES


Inadvertent Exemplars

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