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# Leadership for Social Justice: An Agenda for 21st Century Schools

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## ***Abstract***

*The shift in the demographic data highlights the growth in minority, second language learner, and economically disadvantaged student populations that traditionally have been underserved in public schools (Marshall and Oliva 2006). The purpose of this discussion is to explore the leadership praxis of four female secondary school leaders faced with challenges of social justice, democracy, and equity in their schools. The principals could be characterized as stewards of social justice in their school communities.*

Achieving more equitable school structures (Berry and Ginsberg 1989; Padron, Waxman, and Rivera 2002; Noguera 2003; Scheurich and Skrla 2003; Merchant 2005) is a challenge for school leaders who have to contend with paradoxes and dilemmas associated with the shifting educational landscapes (i.e., increased standards, teacher retention and attrition, student demographic shift). The shift in the demographic data highlights the growth in minority, second language learner, and economically disadvantaged student populations that traditionally have been underserved in public schools (Marshall and Oliva 2006). A growing number of scholars argue that to address inequities for diverse student populations, educational leaders must have a heightened awareness of social justice issues in a field struggling to meet the needs of all children (Strike 1999; Smulyan 2000; Winant 2004; Bogotch 2005; Furman and Shields 2005; Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin 2005; Merchant and Shoho 2006). According to Walker and Dimmock (2005), the challenges accompanying the education of diverse groups and the development of ways to provide worthwhile, socially responsible, and equitable education are both exhilarating and alarming.

This article explores the leadership praxis of four female secondary school leaders faced with challenges of social justice, democracy, and equity in their schools. Praxis involves

self-reflection, critical thinking (Lather 1986; Lum 1993; Freire 1998), values orientation within democracy (Furman and Shields 2005), and social justice and equity (Freire 1998; Giroux 2002; Scheurich and Skrla 2003; Valverde 2003; Marshall and Ward 2004). As the participants shared their leadership experiences, what emerged from the data are how the four principals demystify the work of social justice and move it to a more empowered stance (Sanders-Lawson, Smith-Campbell, and Benham 2006). The principals could be characterized as stewards of social justice in their school communities.

### ***Background of Study***

This analysis is based on a larger study conducted in 2005 that examined the professional experiences (formal and informal leadership preparation; leadership and management practices; and issues of diversity, race, and gender) and challenges of 11 female high school principals in one southwestern state. The participants from this earlier study represented six urban and suburban districts. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured 1.5 to 2.5 hour interviews and supported by document analyses of school and statistical data related to the demographic composition of the schools. Interviews were recorded, and contextual analysis of the interview data were used to develop categories and derive patterns from the data (Lightfoot 1983).

Among the findings from the original study was a philosophy also reflected in the subsequent four female high school principals; they believed that school leaders can make a change in education through the development of certain leadership styles (such as transformative). This specific finding warranted further examination to gain insight on how the four principals' leadership practices embraced social justice, democratic schooling, and issues of equity.

### ***Participants***

Of the participants, two were African-American and two were Caucasian. They ranged from 48 to 59 years of age. Three were married, and one was not. All four had advanced graduate degrees (doctoral degrees) from two major universities within the state. Their school administrative experience ranged from 9 to 23 years. Using pseudonyms, the participants are identified here as Jocelyn, Annette, Linda, and Gertrude.

Jocelyn and Annette worked in the same urban school district. The district had more than 40,000 students in 89 schools from grades PreK–12. Jocelyn, an African-American female, had 28 years of experience in public education and was a principal at an alternative education high school. She began her first principalship at age 41; four years later, she became a principal at Gerthart High School, a Title I school.

Annette, a Caucasian female principal at Star High School, had 26 years of experience in public education. At the age of 32, she began her first principalship at the secondary level. Of the four participants, Annette was the only principal with a doctorate in counseling. After several years as an administrator, she left her high school to start her own counseling business. However, the business was short lived because she was asked by the district to accept a principalship position in a "hard to teach school" to help increase student achievement. Grudgingly, she agreed to come back because of her passion for

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kids. She said, "I was happy with my company and making good money." Nonetheless, she left her lucrative counseling business to return to public education.

Gertrude, an African-American female principal, had been in public education for 18 years. She began her first principalship position at the age of 44 and had been a principal at Albert High School for eight years. Albert High was located in a suburban school district with more than 14,000 students in 25 schools from grades PreK–12. A native New Yorker, Gertrude settled with her family in this suburban community. During the interview, she expressed a desire to pursue other professional opportunities since completing her doctorate. Her desire to leave had to do with the never-ending challenges she faced as a school principal. Quickly dismissing the idea, she asked, "Who will take care of my kids?"

Linda, a Caucasian female principal with 35 years of experience in public education, began her first principalship at age 50 at Chester High School. She was born and raised in the town where she was a principal. Over the years, she had developed strong ties with her constituents (parents, community, elected officials, university partners, etc.) in an effort to build strong community support for her school. She commented, "I'm a political person. I put all my energy into the school." Similar to Gertrude, Linda contemplated retiring, but she indicated that she would remain for several more years. She was mentoring one of her female assistant principals to eventually replace her as principal. She stated:

*I started my own mentoring with a young woman because I want this school to carry on with some of things we have here. ... We have worked so hard to build the culture of this school. ... I'm scared the next male principal may not see this as a priority.*

*The principals' socialization experiences in educational leadership programs enabled them to challenge their own assumptions; clarify and strengthen their values; and work on aligning their behaviors and practices with beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies about student learning.*

While the professional backgrounds of the participants gave insight into their leadership preparation, their motivation and aspiration for pursuing the principalship provided more perspective about their values orientation to leadership.

### ***Responding to the Call to Lead***

The ways women approach the job of school leadership are related to the models of leadership they encounter in their careers and the goals they hope to achieve through their positions as school leaders (Young and McLeod 2001; Jean-Marie 2005). For the four principals, their leadership was the enactment of values-orientation and socialization experiences and opportunities. Their socialization experiences in educational leadership programs enabled them to challenge

their own assumptions; clarify and strengthen their values; and work on aligning their behaviors and practices with beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies about student learning.

Gertrude and Linda endeavored to lead and serve in public education to make a difference for all students. Both Jocelyn and Annette believed their roles as teachers were of equal significance to their leadership role. They became principals because of a commitment to impact the educational system (what they hope to accomplish and how). Jocelyn expressed concerns about teacher retention and attrition:

*When I first began teaching in 1978, there were seven 1st-year teachers and by the end of the 3rd year, most of them left. There was something that was not encouraging those young teachers to stay. I had a real concern that there wasn't a lot of support there. It didn't benefit students to lose those teachers. Something needed to be changed about this process to keep these young teachers because that's the life of your school.*

Jocelyn's early teaching career helped define her calling to pursue the principalship. Stanford-Blair and Dickmann (2005, 31) described such an experience as one that "clarifies what the young leaders wanted to do with their lives and how they might go about it." Similar to Jocelyn, Annette explained, "I had a desire to lead teachers into making positive decisions that would help students be successful." In one fashion or another, the early work experience of the participants created opportunities in which they could live out their values through their work, marking the distinction between a job and a vocational calling.

Listening closely to the experiences of these school leaders, a values orientation toward social justice, democracy, and equity emerged in the data. The principals identified influences that reinforced their core values and prompted exploration of vocational calling. Annette and Jocelyn entered the field of educational administration with the philosophy that they could make a change in education through the manifestations of leadership styles obtained in their professional preparation and experiences as teachers. Jocelyn stated, "You have to have a philosophy of what the purpose of school is. It's looking at what practices that we're putting into place that are going to improve student achievement and help them be successful." Jocelyn emphasized that the educational experience provided by schools ought to be comparable to an experience that "anyone would want their child to have." By personalizing the education each person receives, schools then

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have a moral compass to guide their practices. As she summarized, "It has to be personal because that's what guides what we do as leaders to make a difference in the lives of students. A leader will make good decisions, and it's making good decisions that paves the way to everything else." As school leaders who are faced with increased accountability and high-stakes testing, they must think critically and act courageously to ensure that the children they serve have access to public education at its best (Jackson 2005).

Linda, whose high school student population was 77 percent Caucasian, valued opportunities to engage in teaching and learning processes that impacted the minority student population in her school. Briefly recalling her childhood years, Linda talked about her upbringing with regard to diversity and values, and stated:

*I was lucky to be raised by parents who weren't prejudiced. Growing up, I didn't understand prejudice until I watched it on TV in the 1960s. It was then I recognized there were racial problems. I didn't grow up that way. We must recognize that everyone doesn't think or come from the same background the way "you" do. We can work together no matter what the situations are.*

Linda's core leadership values were influenced by her family and cultural context.

During the interview in Linda's office, she shared several books that she and her staff were reading: Alfred Tatum's (2005) *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*; Jawanza Kunjufu's (2002) *Black Students, Middle Class Teachers*; and Alan Blankstein's (2004) *Failure Is Not an Option*. She fostered ongoing conversations with her school community about the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind and heart she believed essential in developing and nurturing all her students into informed citizens (Jackson 2005). As Linda reflected on her leadership development, she stated that she had the opportunity to co-teach a staff development course during her graduate studies at the local university. She said, "The opportunity provided me with practical experience ... increased my knowledge of best practices on staff development ... the necessity to address the needs of diverse student populations. ... I'm reading things all the time and that informs my practice on a daily basis." Similar to the other principals, Linda continued to challenge unequal power relationships based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, and other systems of oppression (Irby and Brown 2004; Lee and McKerrow 2005).

Similarly, Gertrude credited her former professor, who helped her leadership development and formalized the strategies she had put in place. Reflecting on her administrative experience, she also relied on current research practices to guide her work (i.e., Marzano's work on instructional strategies, educational leadership journals, involvement in national and local school organizations). As a further extension of using research-based practices, Gertrude sought ways to motivate teachers to help transform their instructional practices to serve the needs of the diverse student population in the school. For example, she regularly visited different classrooms to participate with teachers and students in multicultural activities. She asserted, "I'll jump in there, do various exercises and motivational techniques. I want to model this for my teachers."

Not only have the principals clearly and regularly articulated their expectations that their schools support a social justice agenda, but they also modeled how these values should drive school policies, decision-making, and instructional practices. They go beyond the “rhetorical” by linking their social justice priority to effective actions (i.e., school activities, missions, improvement plans, teaching, and planning) that embed the values needed to eradicate injustices that permeate schools’ policies and practices (Dantley and Tillman 2005; Loder 2005; Walker and Dimmock 2005). Many educational scholars (Furman and Shields 2005; Gross et al. 2005) argued for the moral imperative, including issues of social justice and principles of democracy in educational leadership. A values orientation allowed these women to evaluate current practices and assess their work amidst a seemingly never-ending onslaught of instructional fads, trends, methodologies, and ideologies (Smylie, Conley, and Marks 2002).

### *Embracing and Celebrating Diversity*

A common thread among the principals was that they believed in, valued, and were committed to the educability of all (Lyman, Ashby, and Tripses 2005; Ubben, Huges, and Norris 2007). They approached this by recognizing and embracing the diversity of their students’ demographic and promoting efforts (i.e., instructional leadership) to build on the strength of students’ diversity. Dominating the experiences of Gertrude and Linda was their commitment to advance the conversations of issues related to diversity, equity, social justice, and ethics in school practices. In pursuit of social justice for marginalized students, these two women fostered and enhanced social justice through ongoing professional development in their schools. Gertrude’s student population was not only diverse in terms of ethnicities but also in terms of class and race. In making reference to the diversity of her suburban high school, she emphasized:

*Diversity is about difference not deference ... we have students on the high and low end of the socio-economic status [SES]. We have a strong middle class school; but we have some kids who are way up in terms of SES. Then we have kids who are just trying to make it.*

Probing deeper into the data, Gertrude mentioned the in-depth multicultural training she conducted annually for her teachers and occasionally for her district. Drawing from the work of James Banks (1996), a multicultural education scholar,

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Gertrude discussed her staff training, which grew into a two-week series with teachers and students:

*At the beginning of each school year, I provide a one-hour staff development training session with my staff. We ask teachers to implement instructional strategies by putting students in dyads to examine issues of race. Teachers ask students in their groups to respond to this question, "Have you ever been looked upon unfavorably because of your ethnicity?" Students share their experiences. I do this so that my teachers are more cognizant of ethnic awareness, students' contributions, and different learning styles. I want all my teachers to become aware of the composition of their classes and school by listening to the voices of students. I call it the three prongs: Accept. Accommodate. Affirm. We have to accept our students, accommodate them based on their learning styles, and affirm them.*

Gertrude also encouraged staff members to view the school and society through the eyes of students and the communities they served.

Like Gertrude, the other principals held strong, equity-focused values and were aggressive in communicating these values inside and outside of school boundaries (Lyman, Ashby, and Tripses 2005; Walker and Dimmock 2005). They were committed to dismantling barriers that hindered the practice of social justice. For example, Linda engaged issues of social justice through various study groups with her staff. She reiterated the importance of having teachers involved in these study groups "because they are the ones who can make a difference in what goes on in the classrooms. I want my teachers to believe they can make a difference." Linda believed that embracing the diversity of her student population is what makes the difference. In addition to implementing vertical and horizontal teams and curriculum partners throughout the school year, Linda also developed teacher study groups during the summer months that focused on African-American student achievement, Hispanic English language learners, and ninth grade intervention. These study groups provided opportunities for teachers to come together and discuss best practices for addressing the needs of all students. According to Linda:

*We have 45 different cultures in our school, and we have 17 Katrina kids here. So everybody's diverse. Everybody has a different way of learning. There are 1,750 ways of looking at learning as far as our kids go. We have to be specialists in looking at individual needs. What we believe here at Chester is it's good to see your [ethnic] group and to be part of your [ethnic] group. We want to celebrate all the different kinds of people and groups.*

In an effort to promote and embrace diversity (i.e., race, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation), Linda spoke of the different student groups that were present in her school (e.g., Black Student Association; Latino Group; Gay, Straight Alliance). She proudly affirmed, "We want kids to join different groups and integrate into these groups ... our students need to have an identity and have outlets where they can personalize how they feel." This was a demonstration of her ethic of care toward students, a critical dimension of her transformative leadership style. Further, to ensure that her school was led in a democratic,

ethical, and nurturing manner, she encouraged leadership practices among many actors (i.e., teachers, students, parents, and community).

Having been in public education for many years and working with urban youth, Annette and Jocelyn had an understanding of the daily challenges their students confronted. Research on public schools (Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy 2002) concluded that urban districts face complex and dysfunctional bureaucracies, high student mobility, disconnection from families, high levels of poverty, persistent achievement gaps, and large numbers of adults who hold low expectations for certain groups of students. Supporting research on urban public schools (Brooks and Jean-Marie 2007; Brooks et al. 2007), Annette's and Jocelyn's students often came from low-income circumstances, and many had low educational aspirations. These school leaders understood how the ever-present poverty reduced their students' opportunity to learn. In the context of students' life circumstances, Jocelyn looked at the diversity of her school and was deeply concerned about the many challenges her students faced. She expanded on other social issues related to diversity by taking into consideration students' life experiences (e.g., relating to teen pregnancy and parenting, juvenile justice, and unstable home environments):

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*I have pregnant teens, students who are in the juvenile justice system, gay and lesbian students, students who are self-supported and out on their own, students who are victims of sexual abuse, and parents who are incarcerated. Defining diversity for me is just a step beyond the norm. There's just so much going on in their lives.*

Jocelyn raised concerns about the challenges that many urban schools confront. Too often, these challenges get in the way of what school leaders hope to accomplish in their school buildings.

Annette contextualized diversity through relationship building. With great concern, she stated, "racism is alive and well." However, she believed that it is more about how individuals interacted with one another—in other words, relationships. Expanding on this, she stated, "If you're going to live in this world right, you have to really examine, 'how can we live together?' What we have to understand is that we must live God-like." She also added the importance of spiritual development: "When we are spiritually connected, our job on a daily basis is to treat each other with mutual respect and embrace the differences in people. For me, diversity is our differences in behavior. When I come into my school, I don't think about who is White or who is Black today."

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Annette further shared some thoughts about the current state of racism and how important it was for students to understand how the torchbearers of the civil rights era contributed to their present day educational opportunity and access. She stated: "I don't like racism. But, it's coming back, even stronger than it's been. The gains that we've made are disappearing." She added:

*The day Rosa Parks passed away, I brought my autographed picture of her and put it in the front office with two candles. So when the children come through and say, Dr. [Annette], who's that? I'll say, "Well I'm glad you asked." I did that on purpose because my friends like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and a few local activists fought just to go potty and eat! It was a terrible time. Our children have never had to face those issues. Eating at any restaurant is a luxury that they have because people have fought so they can have access. I want them to know about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. I want them to understand these people fought for their rights. I want them to ask, "How can we live together?" That's what I create.*

Annette expressed concern about her students' lack of knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement and sought ways to engage and promote dialogue about pivotal moments in society that had an impact on students' access to education. Blackmore (2005, 191) viewed this kind of practice as "revitalizing the notions of teaching and leading as passionate work" where one is able to "foreground in all aspects of their work the issue of social justice."

### ***Instructional Leadership for Improved Cultural Understanding***

Fundamentally rooted in cultural understanding and democratic ideals, Linda and Gertrude advanced their school communities' levels of understanding about social inequities through initiatives they implemented to raise awareness about and begin to address these issues. In discussing the kind of impact they wanted to have on the academic and professional lives of students and teachers, they expressed a belief in restructuring school programs into new designs to support their students' learning and professional communities. Both principals placed a general emphasis on providing support programs or structures to assist students with their academic goals, educational planning (such as individualized student development plans and graduation plans), and instructional leadership practices (i.e., study groups, monthly and quarterly progress reports, and extended day tutoring). These elements of instructional support helped improve core teaching, learning processes, and outcomes. Jazzar and Algozzine (2006) contended that leaders who support such environments provide opportunities for the creation of classes that lead to heightened participation and empower both teachers and students to share and achieve. Students become more connected in school, and teachers are able to have more impact on students' learning experience.

Similar to Linda, Gertrude focused her efforts on developing educational programs that attracted and retained students. She provided more instructional time and development programs for low-performing students. Programs to help students succeed included "Saturday for Success," a two-hour Saturday program for students who have less than a C average, academic lunchtime for students who needed individualized instruction from the principal and assistant principal, and after-school tutoring. Gertrude articulated the

importance of fostering high academic achievement for all students by rewarding students (academic lunch bunch), recognizing higher achievers with an “academic bowl” (all subject-area preparation for ACTs), and presenting a letter jacket (indication of school pride) at school assemblies to motivate students. Echoing a similar sentiment, Linda emphasized an equity focus for all students:

*I believe in equity for every student and we work a lot on this. There's no elitism. We don't engage in the practice of "good for some kids, and not good for others." ... The kind of education provided for all children ought to be one that "touches another person's life." It's also about raising students' self-esteem ... broadening their horizons ... providing opportunities to change a life. ... It's about doing something right for each child to have a fair chance at success.*

Both Annette and Jocelyn shared their perspectives about quality education for their students despite students' past and present life circumstances. In fostering a high school community, Annette discussed a commitment to recruit teachers who were interested in her African-American, Latino, and Asian students—all students. As research (Gehrke 2005) has indicated, a mismatch exists between the backgrounds of most teachers and the students for whom they are responsible. Concerned with this, Annette placed a priority on recruiting and retaining staff members with cultural and ethnic backgrounds similar to those present in her school. She stated: “My school is 88 percent Black.” With a cynicism toward culturally insensitive teachers, she stated:

*I call administration at the board and request that they not send me teachers who don't want to come to my Black school because they're uncomfortable. They're also culturally disconnected and can't make it here. Anybody who wants to get out will get out. Teachers who are recruited for this school must want to be here. Otherwise, these teachers are forced to be in a school that they don't want to come to because they are uncomfortable and unhappy. Ultimately, an unhappy teacher makes an unhappy student, which is reflected in the teaching and learning process.*

Jocelyn believed the responsibility for educating and caring for all students was attainable through a collective commitment with her staff. Drawing from research-based knowledge (e.g., Marzano's instructional strategies, the state's Pass Key objectives, Skill Banks), she asserted, “We [teachers] are doing book studies on classroom instructions that work and on building background knowledge. We also spoke about professional learning communities really stressing the emphasis on teacher professional development and training.” Likewise, Annette challenged her staff to be the “experts” in their content areas, encouraging them to continuously “work in the ideas” and set high expectations for students. For both Annette and Jocelyn, the critical focus of attention was on the behavior of teachers as they engaged in instructional practices and activities that directly affect the academic and personal growth of students and improve students' quality of life.

### **Leadership Challenges and Frustrations**

Like school districts across the nation, these principals are faced with the ever-shifting priorities of their school districts and communities (Noguera 2003; Jackson 2005).

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Though all four women capitalized on their successes and triumphs as leaders in their schools, each faced daily challenges and frustrations related to the educational and social issues of the school community. Jocelyn and Linda shared the daily struggles they faced with their student populations.

Jocelyn (urban high school):  
*Our challenges are with some of my students. They come from dysfunctional homes. They are in homes where they haven't been supervised by any adult. They may be in the juvenile system or they're pregnant for the*

*second or third time. With my staff, I try to help students break some of those cycles, model and encourage them. Being aware of my constituents—students and parents—is important in our efforts to work with them.*

Linda (suburban high school): *There are many things that get in the way of leading my school to success. Some parents don't care about their kids. Kids have substance abuse problems ... lots of drugs. Kids don't want to learn. My teachers are trying hard through interventions to get second-year 9th graders to the next grade. Another challenge for me is time. It's the biggest challenge.*

Amid federal mandates such as those imposed by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) concerning the laudable aim for closing the achievement gap, Jocelyn worked to address issues of diversity in areas of organizational structure, task, and reward systems. She explained:

*We are experiencing a process of organizational health where we move from a previous focus of teacher-centered to our current focus of student-centered. We realize that the resistance of some teachers to participate is not necessarily due to their lack of will to engage in the process, but instead it's due to their lack of skill. My role in this is to encourage and support those who have the will to move forward to embrace the skill for the sake of the organization's health. I'd like to see the barriers and obstacles removed so we can forge ahead and do what they know is best—to educate all of our students.*

Both Gertrude and Annette embodied culturally responsive leadership—modeling a philosophy of student-centeredness, engaging in practices committed to social justice, and having the ability to see issues from multiple perspectives. In her suburban high school, however, Gertrude expressed a great deal of frustration about teachers' resistance toward NCLB, and the unreasonable expectations and compliance from the state Department of Education:

*We are faced with high-stakes testing. It's not all about NCLB ... it's not about data ... it's not about test scores. These are items that you have no control over. We're expected to perform miracles. We're not factories. Students have personal issues at home, but we expect them to perform without coping mechanisms. They are worried about, "I'm not going to have a meal tonight." Many of my teachers are on board, but some of them are stuck. Some don't want to change. They look at the mandates and feel it's going to go away. It's not.*

Annette, in an urban high school, reiterated the importance of the local media and community relationships to solicit support and funding for her school population:

*At Spencer, we have to fight the norm. People don't want to give us money. They don't want to help us. They don't give a damn. People don't care what happens out here! They don't come to see us, which is fine. But, I thank Jesus for good relationships with the press. So, I started getting stories out to them. I'd call them up. They'll come out and do them. Children are selling green bands, rubber band bracelets for Darfur, Sudan. I want to tell the positive stories about what my students are doing.*

Alluding to the challenges school leaders for social justice encounter, Oliva and Anderson (2006) asserted that leaders cannot be naïve in thinking that their efforts will not meet resistance, both from within the school and from the external environment. Relying on the wisdom of their own experiences, the four principals sought to serve the learning needs of all children in their care by staying abreast with current educational research, being leaders of learning, and refusing to become disenchanted by the slow process to get teachers involved or the external pressures of increased accountability and high-stakes testing.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

As educational leaders, the high school principals in this study were guided by personal, ethical, thoughtful, and considered action to attain personal and organizational goals that can directly affect the process of leadership socialization for social justice (Starratt 2004). They identified how they engaged in transformative leadership that supports social justice and works to create democratic and equitable schools. They did not rest on the rhetoric of their values and beliefs, but expended considerable strategic and practical energy toward the realization of their vision (Walker and Dimmock 2005). They also described their leadership experiences, motivations, and actions from a values orientation exemplified in their practices.

The four school leaders' belief in and commitment to quality education was more than a motto; it was realized in the experiences they provided for students. Their interest in students' success began with developing an authentic relationship between themselves as school leaders and their students (Bascia and Young 2001; Furman and Starratt 2002; Jean-Marie 2005). Recognizing that they were in a position to make a difference, these principals were guided by a vision for young people that focused on developing students' talents and gifts to contribute to their community and society (Noguera 2003). They played a significant role in improving access and opportunity for children historically

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marginalized by mainstream public schooling (Larson and Murtadha 2002; Merchant 2005). They also articulated a selfless desire to both serve and prepare others by creating an organizational system that was committed to developing relationships that drove goodness and fostered spiritual connection.

Further, their leadership practices promoted discourse on various aspects of social justice. They were opened to critique and engaged in democratic discourse and practices by creating identities informed by principles of equality and social justice (Giroux 2002; Winant 2004; Marshall and Young 2006). In support of Furman and Shields (2005), these school leaders worked to create a climate, culture, and community that exemplified values they espoused. They continued to critique the definition and enactment of democracy to develop school initiatives that were inclusive, understanding, and supportive of diverse constructs and knowledge of students and parents. Their actions were representative of the way in which they instructed, guided, and led on a daily basis (e.g., Gertrude's hands-on approach to teaching about and modeling diverse learning styles; Linda's study groups on instruction, African-American achievement, and diversity issues; Jocelyn's staff development on Marzano's instructional strategies for improving and encouraging the organizational health of her faculty; Annette's recruitment of culturally sensitive teachers and practice of teaching students about the civil rights movement). They also engaged in authentic, concrete struggles and practices that found expression in social relations, daily life, and memories of resistance and struggles that shaped their leadership praxis (Gross et al. 2005; Jean-Marie 2005; Marshall and Young 2006).

The principals in this study were concerned with exercising democracy in their leadership practices that ultimately led to their quest for developing equitable and democratic cultures in their schools. The demand that schools achieve high standards has promoted alternative educational programs to help meet the expectations for achievement. Gertrude, Linda, Jocelyn, and Annette regularly engaged in self-reflective, critical, and collaborative work relationships, which created conditions that empowered the staff and community members with whom they worked. The learning and democratic leadership practices of the four principals helped them to foster a transformative culture. In addition, these practices served as catalysts for creating conditions that prepared students, staff, and community members to become immersed in knowledge and find courage in the struggle to "make despair unconvincing and hope practical" (Giroux 2002, 1158).

*Gertrude, Linda, Jocelyn, and Annette regularly engaged in self-reflective, critical, and collaborative work relationships, which created conditions that empowered the staff and community members with whom they worked.*

Finally, the principals' insight as to what brought them to principalship is of great interest and value to practitioners and scholars alike. Equally, the question of

what social justice leadership is, what it entails, and why it matters in school leadership is answered in myriad ways by the school principals in this study. As school leaders, they were driven by moral purposes of social justice, democratic community, and an understanding of learning for all children that does not conflate learning with measurable student achievement (Furman 2003). Within their schools, they made choices on a daily basis in their actions and interactions, which shaped their ability to affect change beyond the school into the broader local school community. Their leadership experiences were filled with challenges and uncertainties, but they also included triumphs and possibilities. They led with purpose, knowledge, courage, and commitment in the midst of increased accountability and high-stakes testing. Energized to change the conditions of students' learning, these principals—by chronicling how stewards of social justice can lead in their school communities—provide a snapshot of the kind of transformative leadership needed in the 21st century.

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