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# education policy analysis archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,  
open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

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Volume 25 Number 1

January 9, 2017

ISSN 1068-2341

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## Righting Past Wrongs: A Superintendent's Social Justice Leadership for Dual Language Education Along the U.S.- Mexico Border

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**Citation:** DeMatthews, D., Izquierdo, E., & Knight, D. S. (2017). Righting past wrongs: A superintendent's social justice leadership for dual language education along the U.S.-Mexico border. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2436>

**Abstract:** The role of superintendents in adopting and developing dual language education and other equity-oriented reforms that support the unique needs of Latina/o emergent bilinguals is a relatively unexplored area in educational leadership and policy research. Drawing upon theories of social justice leadership, this article examines how one superintendent in the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) engaged in leadership to address injustices against Mexican and Mexican-American emergent bilinguals through the implementation of district-wide dual language education. EPISD provided a strategic site for this study because the previous superintendent and administration were part of a large-scale cheating scandal that “disappeared” hundreds of Mexican and Mexican-American students. This study highlights the important role of the superintendent in supporting equity-oriented school reforms such as dual language education, identifies

specific actions and values pertinent to social justice leadership at the district level, and describes the ways leaders can take advantage of political opportunities, frame educational injustices in ways that mobilize key stakeholders, and utilize networks and grassroots movements for social justice means. The article concludes with implications for future research.

**Keywords:** bilingual education; dual language education; superintendent; social justice; leadership

### **Corrigiendo errores pasados: El liderato enfocado en la justicia social de un superintendente para la educación en dos idiomas a través de la frontera de México y los Estados Unidos**

**Resumen:** El rol de los superintendentes en la adopción y el desarrollo de la educación bilingüe y otras reformas orientadas a la equidad que apoyan las necesidades especiales de los estudiantes bilingües es una área relativamente inexplorada en el liderato educativo y en la investigación de las políticas educativas. Este artículo examina cómo un superintendente en el Distrito Escolar Independiente de El Paso (EPISD) se involucró en el liderato para abordar las injusticias contra los bilingües emergentes Mexicanos y México-Americanos a través de la implementación de la educación dual en todo el distrito. EPISD proporcionó un sitio estratégico para este estudio debido a que la administración y el superintendente anterior formaron parte de “un escándalo de trampa en exámenes que resultó en la desaparición” de cientos de estudiantes Mexicanos y México-Americanos. Este estudio destaca el importante rol que desempeña el superintendente en el apoyo a reformas escolares orientadas a la equidad, como la educación en dos idiomas, identifica acciones y valores específicos pertinentes al liderato de justicia social a nivel distrital y describe las maneras en que los líderes pueden aprovechar de las oportunidades políticas, formulando injusticias educativas de manera que movilizan a las partes interesadas y utilizan las redes y movimientos de base para la justicia social. Este artículo concluye con implicaciones para futuras investigaciones.

**Palabras-clave:** educación bilingüe; educación en dos idiomas; superintendente; justicia social; liderato

### **Corrigindo erros do passado: A liderança focada na justiça social para um superintendente de educação em duas línguas além da fronteira do México e dos Estados Unidos**

**Resumo:** O papel dos superintendentes na adoção e desenvolvimento da educação bilingüe e outras reformas destinadas a capital para suportar as necessidades especiais dos estudantes bilingües é uma área relativamente inexplorada na liderança educacional e de pesquisa de políticas educacionais. Este artigo examina como um superintendente na DSI El Paso (EPISD) envolveu-se na liderança para enfrentar as injustiças contra a emergente bilingües Mexicano-Americanos e do Mexicanos através da implementação de formação dual em todo o distrito. EPISD forneceu um local estratégico para este estudo porque a administração eo ex-superintendente eram parte de “um escândalo de fraude em exames que resultou no desaparecimento” de centenas de estudantes Mexicanos e México-Americanos. Este estudo destaca o importante papel desempenhado pelo superintendente em apoio a reformas de escolas destinadas a equidade, como a educação em duas línguas, identifica as ações pertinentes e valores específicos a liderança da justiça social a nível distrital e descreve as maneiras em que os líderes eles podem tirar proveito das

oportunidades políticas, formulação de injustiças educacionais para que mobilizar as partes interessadas e utilizar as redes e movimentos de base para a justiça social. Este artigo conclui com implicações para futuras pesquisas.

**Palavras-chave:** educação bilíngüe; educação em duas línguas; superintendente; justiça social; liderança

## Introduction

Despite intentions to promote academic achievement among Latina/o student populations, many districts provide exclusionary and subtractive educational programs that do not value family language as an asset.<sup>1</sup> Dual language education has been put forth by many scholars, researchers, social justice advocates, and practitioners as an approach to transforming schools because of its emphasis on valuing linguistic diversity, inclusivity, and rigorous and culturally sustaining curriculum (Collier & Thomas, 2004; Lindholm-Leary & Block, 2010). Yet, many districts continue to maintain the status quo, fail to value family language as an asset, and leave Latina/o students vulnerable to academic failure (Menken & Kleyn, 2010; Valenzuela, 2010; Wiley & Wright, 2004). Principals are often unprepared to respond to or even identify the unique academic and social needs of this growing student population (Nelson & Guerra, 2013). A lack of pre-service and in-service preparation for both principals and teachers translates into schools unable to recognize the importance of providing Latina/o emergent bilinguals with uninterrupted cognitive development in their first language while also providing access to high-quality instruction in English within inclusive and socio-culturally supportive classrooms. Serving Latina/o families and communities is further complicated by fractured, one-sided, or non-existent family-school relationships. Family-school relationships are often damaged from racialized narratives that “the school knows best” and leaves students in a place of even greater vulnerability (Auerbach, 2009; De Gaetano, 2007). Thus, it should come as no surprise that emergent bilinguals, the overwhelming majority of whom are Latina/o, are rarely proficient in reading (4%) or mathematics (6%) by eighth grade and are not graduating at the same rate as those students who are English proficient (NCES, 2015).

Research on second language learning has documented that English proficiency is not quickly obtained by one hard-working teacher or a result of one or two years of targeted instructional support (Hukta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Students learn a second language through a long process that cultivates academic English proficiency over a four to seven-year period (Cummins, 1981). Supporting Latina/o emergent bilinguals requires that teachers and principals have access to extensive professional development and ongoing coaching that can perhaps only come through a long-term district-wide improvement process (Cheung & Slavin, 2012; Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). The role of the superintendent is therefore critical, given their positional authority to envision and make such investments at the district level.

Scholars argue that superintendents are “pivotal actors in the complex algorithm for managing districts and leading policy implementation efforts” (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014, p. 444). At the same time, superintendents’ power is constricted and shaped by social, political, and economic forces stemming from school board and community politics, state and federal education policies, financial concerns, unequal power dynamics between different communities, and

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term emergent bilinguals rather than the term English Language Learners (ELLs) or Limited English Proficient (LEP). ELLs or LEP students are those students who speak a language other than English and are acquiring English in school. We prefer to use the term emergent bilinguals because we believe that when policymakers, educators, and researchers ignore bilingualism and its role in schooling, they perpetuate numerous inequities and discount the needs of children from linguistically diverse backgrounds.

influential constituents who disagree or oppose reforms based on their own interests or ideologies. Thus, just because an initiative is socially just or might benefit Latina/o emergent bilinguals, does not mean superintendents can make a unilateral decision to adopt a particular instructional model.

Drawing upon theories of social justice leadership (Anderson, 2009; DeMatthews, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Theoharis, 2007), we explore how one superintendent in the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) in Texas engaged in leadership to address injustices against Mexican and Mexican American emergent bilinguals through the implementation of district-wide dual language education. Specifically, we investigate three questions: (a) what was the role of the superintendent in supporting dual language; (b) what specific actions and orientations were necessary to bring about dual language; and (c) what beliefs and understandings did the superintendent draw from to inform his action? EPISD provided a strategic site for this study not only because of longstanding and well-documented history of institutionalized inequity in public education for Mexican-American communities in Texas (Alemán, 2007, 2009), but also because a new superintendent and school board mandated a district-wide dual language model soon after a large-scale cheating scandal that “disappeared” hundreds of Mexican and Mexican American students through improper promotion, demotion, and forced dropout/pushout. The well-documented cheating scandal is the primary reason for the study being undisguised, as this story was reported in multiple national and regional media outlets (Anderson, 2016; Fernandez, 2012; Kreighbaum, 2013; Weaver & Tidwell, 2013).

What follows is a brief overview of literature focused on the miseducation of Latina/o emergent bilinguals and the justification of dual language as a social justice-oriented approach to schooling. Next, a theoretical framework focused on social justice leadership from the position of the superintendent is presented. Following the theoretical framework is a section describing the methods used to conduct this study. Findings are presenting beginning with a brief overview of the EPISD cheating scandal followed by major themes that emerged through the analysis of data. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the superintendent’s role in creating dual language education and how it relates to our theoretical framework as well as implications for future research and practice.

## **Emergent Bilinguals and Dual Language Education**

While Latina/o emergent bilinguals were marginalized and subjected to subtractive forms of schooling prior to No Child Left Behind, the current testing and accountability context makes these students even more vulnerable because educators are under greater pressure and more likely to view Latina/o students as liabilities on state-mandated assessments (Menken, 2010; Reyes, 2016; Valenzuela, 2010; Wiley & Wright, 2004). The EPISD cheating scandal provides direct evidence of the framing of Latina/o students as liabilities, in part because they were viewed as poor test takers that would inevitably drag down school and district scores. Framing Latina/o students as liabilities also creates a perception that these students need to be separated, immersed in English, and subjected to a narrow curriculum rather than a well-rounded education building upon their cultural and linguistic assets. Such perceptions and practices are not only unjust and inherently racist, but also outside what research suggests is most beneficial for this student population (e.g., Hukta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

An overemphasis on English at the expense of simultaneously developing the student’s first language is a significant contributing factor to achievement gaps, because it limits students’ ability to develop biliteracy skills and transfer these skills from their first language to English (Reyes, 2006). Schools that focus on simultaneously developing students’ first language with English help students acquire academic English faster, because biliteracy relates to the length of time it takes students to

acquire academic English (Menken & Kleyn, 2010). Furthermore, a rich body of literature supports the argument that emergent bilinguals who learn English while further developing their first language to a high cognitive level are likely to outperform other similar students in English-only programs and also narrow achievement gaps with their English speaking peers (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Although closing academic gaps is important, it is not sufficient. Improving student achievement and other academic outcomes is inextricably linked to a well-rounded and socially just education that respects and builds upon the social and cultural resources that are present in Latina/o families and communities (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Huerta, 2011).

Dual language education is centered upon a notion of social justice because it emphasizes biliteracy and bilingualism where Latina/o emergent bilinguals are educated with English proficient students in the same classroom. Both student groups gain access to academic instruction through two languages with the goals of bilingualism and biliteracy, and both student groups can serve as language and cultural brokers for each other (Amrein & Peña, 2000). Research on cognitive and academic functioning has shown the enhanced benefits of dual language education (Bialystok, 2007; Collier & Thomas, 2004; Lindholm-Leary & Block, 2010). Dual language promotes important social and cultural outcomes, such as healthy multi-generational cultural and linguistic communities while also presenting a counter narrative to dominant racial ideologies that disregard Latina/o culture (Fránquiz, Salazar, & DeNicolo, 2011; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015). Dual language education values diversity and fosters cultural acceptance; requires collaborative, flexible, and tailored professional development for educators and parents; welcomes and connects different communities; maintains high expectations for all students and views diversity as an asset; and develops curricula that is developmentally appropriate and attentive to context and culture (García, 2005; McLaughlin, 2013; Schachter & Gass, 2013). The academic and cultural imperatives of dual language education make it a social justice-oriented approach to addressing the academic and cultural injustices that Latina/o emergent bilinguals have been subjected to in EPISD and school districts across the US.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Three theoretical concepts are useful in thinking about how superintendents engage in social justice leadership. Superintendents should have a situational awareness, an understanding of advocacy, and a refined ability to enact a leadership praxis that is dialogical, critical, and focused on the ongoing creation and/or acquisition of knowledge. Before exploring these concepts, we discuss how the superintendency has been traditionally defined and how social justice leadership has been conceptualized and linked to the role of the superintendent.

### **Positioning Superintendent Leadership and Action**

Few studies have investigated how superintendents support equity-oriented reforms in general, or the development of dual language education specifically. However, the superintendent's relevance to such reforms is apparent given their unique position to organize reform through collaboration, communication, and community engagement. The superintendent's "pivotal organizational perch has direct and proximate access to board members, building principals, and community residents, as well as direct and proximate influence on vision inception, resource distribution, and operational procedures" (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013, p. 77). Marzano and Waters (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 studies and found that the following district activities impact student achievement: goal-setting processes, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment with and support of district goals, monitoring goals, and use of

resources to support goals. The superintendent's position and leadership could support the structures, resource allocations, and long-term commitments necessary for dual language education or other equity-oriented reforms, especially if she is aware of the broad range of educational injustices present within schools/communities and critically reflective of her practice (Beard, 2012).

On the other hand, superintendents have multiple obligations and operate in a contested and political workspace. These obligations and conflicts induce superintendents to build symbiotic relationships with various communities and organizations, communicate with the public and different interest groups about the needs of particular schools as well as district needs, co-develop a district vision with different stakeholders that may have different or competing expectations, generate support for district and board initiatives, and exert influence to shape public opinion to support district proposals (Horton & Martin, 2012; Kowalski, 2013). This work requires multiple roles and thinking across multiple planes to solve complex problems. Such roles include teacher-scholar: one who is knowledgeable of curriculum, pedagogy, instructional leadership and driven by an educational philosophy; organizational manager: one who is knowledgeable of law, finance, collective bargaining, facilities, and other administrative duties; democratic-political leader: one who is skilled in community relations, shared decision making, and community and state politics; applied social scientist: one who understands and can make decisions based on qualitative and quantitative research; and effective communicator: skilled listener with strong public speaking, verbal, and written communication skills (Kowalski, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2010; Kowalski & Björk, 2005).

### **Superintendents as Social Justice Leaders**

Leadership for social justice at the campus level has been found to be a key component in addressing the needs of Latina/o emergent bilinguals through dual language education (Hunt, 2011; Shaw, 2003; Scanlan & López, 2012; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015). Clearly, the superintendency differs from the principalship, but the literature is useful for describing how any educational leader acts to change organizational and cultural values, structures, and practices that marginalize students. Social justice leadership is broadly aimed toward creating an inclusive approach to challenging dominant beliefs, co-constructing new and empowering narratives, advocating for comprehensive change, and publicly engaging in ongoing candid discussions about race, ethnicity, social class, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and other marginalization conditions (Furman, 2012; Jean-Marie, 2008; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009; Theoharis, 2007). In regard to dual language education, this might include (a) dismantling segregated classes or teaching practices that isolate emergent bilinguals; (b) addressing faculty deficit perspectives; (c) engaging community and broadening curriculum beyond a traditional Euro-centric focus and eliminating language barriers to family engagement; and (d) providing teachers and principals with meaningful and sustained professional learning opportunities on dual language education. Dantley and Tillman (2010) describe a social justice leader as one who "investigates and poses solutions for issues that generate and reproduce societal inequities" (p. 19). Social justice "supports the notion that educational leaders have a social and moral obligation to foster equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for learners of different racial, socioeconomic, gender, cultural, disability, and sexual orientation backgrounds" (Evans, 2007, p. 250).

The aims of social justice leadership, key actions and practices targeted toward creating more equitable and inclusive schools, and the political and civic mindedness necessary to navigate challenges is not mutually exclusive to the principal, but rather is highly relevant and generalizable to the superintendent. Moreover, the internal and external challenges as well as the social justice dilemmas confronted by principals in schools (DeMatthews, 2016; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014) is also germane to understanding social justice leadership for the superintendent. Unpacking

the complexity of social justice further elucidates its applicability and pertinence to superintendents. For example, social justice can mean different things to different people and groups, making it possible for two groups to act in opposition to each other both in the name of social justice (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009). We argue that superintendents should be aware of different stakeholder concerns. A focus on social justice requires superintendents recognize different facets of social justice and how each facet interacts with others. Social justice is generally defined through three facets: (a) distributive justice: concerned with marginalized groups struggling to end exploitation with the purpose of winning reallocation of goods, services, money, and/or opportunity; (b) cultural justice: concerned with identity and addressing cultural domination and non-recognition of marginalized groups; and (c) associational justice: concerned with marginalized groups gaining access to fully participate in decisions related to distributive and cultural justice (Fraser, 1997; Gewirtz 2006). Honneth (2004) adds emphasis to the importance of identity formation and the ability of marginalized groups to participate in the public realm without shame, worry, or fear of reprisals. These facets play out differently at the district level in comparison to campuses, because superintendents more frequently confront larger social, political, economic, and legal issues from federal and state organizations or businesses and grassroots organizations in comparison with principals. Moreover, different communities with a district can coalesce or quarrel to generate social and institutional problems or demands for superintendents to manage (Björk et al., 2014).

Superintendents can lead for social justice when they are cognizant of different facets of social justice and how related social and institutional challenges impact their ability to create equity-oriented change. According to Kowalski (2013), social challenges are evolving conditions, “such as a lack of citizen involvement and a lack of political support, and problems, such as poverty, violence, illegal drugs and racism” (p. 315). Institutional challenges are related to the intensity, magnitude, and duration of education reform and the ways ongoing systemic reforms impact teachers, principals, and central office administrators (Björk et al., 2014). Kowalski (2013) identified two primary institutional challenges confronted by superintendents, strategic planning and changing district organizational cultures. These interrelated issues are directly related to issues of social justice and reflect a “widely accepted assumption that underperforming schools will not improve unless they have more positive institutional climates” (Kowalski, 2013, p. 318). Superintendents are placed in the midst of controversial and competing political interests, which “describe the rough-and-tumble world in which superintendents will invariably be forced to make unpopular decisions” (Björk et al., 2014, p. 458). Leadership in this context necessitates a situational awareness related to local politics and challenges coupled with a community, regional, and national awareness of marginalization (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Furman, 2012; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Ryan, 2016). This *situational awareness* informs and relates to *advocacy* and *praxis*. Superintendents can address institutional challenges and create more equitable schools by drawing on these components of social justice leadership, a topic we turn to next.

### **Components of Superintendent Social Justice Leadership**

**Situational awareness.** Superintendents confront powerful constituents, including chambers of commerce, business leaders, school boards, regional politicians, and conservative non-governmental organizations with diverse sets of interests. Powerful groups rarely include marginalized student and family voices. *Situational awareness* is necessary for superintendents to understand the evolving context, history, power dynamics, politics, and competing priorities surrounding districts. Waters, Marzano, & McNulty (2003) define situational awareness for educational leaders as the extent to which one is “aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems” (p. 12).

Other definitions suggest that leaders are aware of crises, grasp the significance of underlying events, how these events impact their organization and stakeholders, and inform a strategic approach to leadership (Ryan, 2016; Walker & Byas, 2003).

Social justice leadership at the district level necessitates a deep understanding of power and influence and how it relates to the marginalization of communities and student groups since equity-oriented reform is typically political and complicated. For example, numerous studies have documented how privileged families utilize their networks and social capital to advance their interests at the expense of low-income communities of color (Tarasaw & Waggoner, 2015). Similar to principals and the micro-politics of schools (Blasé & Anderson, 1995; Iannaccone, 1991; Malen, 1994; Mawhinney, 1999), superintendents should also be aware of and engaged in ongoing political interactions. They should consider how both organizations and “actors seek to promote and protect their vested material and ideological interests” (Malen, 2006, p. 87). This includes a consideration of how principals, teachers, and parents come to understand potential changes or new policies.

*Situational awareness* is tied to what Alinsky (2010) believed was necessary of community organizers: a “constant hunt for patterns, universalities, and meanings, is always building up a body of experience...he [or she] is constantly moving in on the happenings of others, identifying with them and extracting their happenings into his own mental digestive system” (p. 70). This inquisitive awareness is both political and social, and provides an opportunity to gain deeper insights into inequities and how different stakeholders conceive notions of the public good and the purposes of education.

**Advocacy.** To push back against conservative forces and social and institutional challenges, superintendents should change or take advantage of the political landscape. Conflict and contradictory opinions about how to proceed are inherent to social justice work. The nature of conflict and the context of district leadership necessitates a form of advocacy leadership that is critical, problem-posing, and process- and problem-solving oriented. Education scholars have rightly pointed out that public education has multiple goals, which are often in conflict. Labaree (1997) characterizes the goals of public education as the following: (a) Democratic Equality (citizenship); (b) Social Efficiency (success); and, (c) Social Mobility (competition). Often, the most divisive educational debates are about which of these goals to prioritize, as they determine policies concerning educational funding, special education, extracurricular offerings, curriculum, racial integration, etc. Parents, students, policy makers, and bureaucrats often have different and conflictive positions on these debates.

Theoharis (2007) draws on autoethnographic research to describe how principals take inclusive approaches to challenging dominant beliefs, advocating for widespread change, and visibly engaging in ongoing truthful dialogue. Yet, challenging the status quo using conventional means or only by utilizing one’s formal authority might prove difficult as many educational injustices are entrenched within district policies, cultures, and practices, but also in society. For Anderson and Cohen (2015), advocacy is part of a broad strategy to build a new alliance of educators, students, parents, and communities who can “advocate for diverse, equitable and culturally responsive schools” (p. 17). Anderson (2009) describes advocacy leadership as a “politicized notion of leadership... that acknowledges that schools are sites of struggle over material and cultural resources and ideological commitments” (p. 13). Bogotch (2014) goes even further, asserting that, “Educational leaders have a moral and political responsibility to educate (attend to) others – both children and adults – about the dynamics of power” (p. 52). Crawford, Witherspoon, & Brown (2014) argue that advocacy leadership skills include the ability to successfully communicate key ideas with others, the capacity to synthesize and present data, a creative ability to generate solutions, and the wherewithal to promote the development of policies that protect marginalized students.

To be clear, these skills cannot be used in isolation, but rather superintendents should use these skills to engage multiple audiences. They should pose important questions to their communities to instigate change, such as: “what constitutes an appropriate course of action or an appropriate distribution of utilization of time, attention, talent, money, and other individual or organizational resources” (Malen, 2006, p. 84). Superintendents should recognize that overt activism can be risky for them and their employment, and while they can make a play for power through creating networks, they should carefully consider whether or not visible actions are worthwhile or if they should engage in implicit forms of advocacy that are less noticeable but still reasonably effective at mobilizing change (Ryan, 2016). In describing micropolitical theory and district action, Marsh (2012) notes that formal and informal power can be used to achieve desired goals or protect interests, but is intricately related to a district’s situational awareness. At times, this means framing issues in ways that communities and districts can be propelled to act on their own behalf or can legitimate an equity-oriented reform. Benford and Snow (2000), describe “framing” as a tool of organizers and social movements, which refers to “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meaning that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). Framing allows leaders to talk about their struggle in ways that unite a variety of stakeholders. In other instances, superintendents can be visible and “problem-pose” to shape public opinion by highlighting injustices and asking the “why” questions. Advocacy can encompass a broad set of skills that includes framing equity issues, reclaiming problem-solving processes, and engaging in community organizing processes to alter inequitable power dynamics and advance inherent human rights (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002).

**Praxis.** The merging of *situational awareness* and *advocacy* contributes to a superintendent *praxis* for social justice. Numerous definitions of *praxis* emerge across education and educational leadership literature (Black & Murtadha, 2007; Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Furman, 2012). Freire (2007) uses the term “conscientização” as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). We define *praxis* as an iterative and ongoing process where individual and/or community/organizational-based learning instigates action and subsequent reflection. This process leads to further learning with a larger purpose of bringing about equitable changes in a complex and changing world. Superintendents leading for social justice engage in *praxis* through traditional superintendent practices (described above) aligned to social justice principles and their *situational awareness* and ongoing *advocacy*.

*Praxis*, rather than practice, provides some protection from ignoring the daily realities of the superintendency (e.g., shifting policy environments, technology changes, growing/shrinking organizations and budgets) as well as the toll these daily realities have on one’s ability to reimagine their districts and schools. In this real world context, *praxis* contributes to “new institutional possibilities” (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002, p. 162). Therefore, *praxis* and a more socially just district is a product of understanding how previous structures worked and failed, the necessity of adapting new socially just district goals, by experimenting with new processes, practices, and systems, and retaining those that work (Bolman & Deal, 2003). *Praxis* is inherently dialogical, because generating new ideas, processes, systems, and opportunities is most useful and innovative when drawing from a diversity of experiences and expertise.

## Methodology

In the previous section we highlighted how empirical research focused on social justice leadership was primarily focused on principals and not superintendents, but theorized three components of social justice leadership that we believe are applicable to superintendents seeking to

address equity issues in their districts. Drawing on our theoretical framework, this qualitative case study examines the leadership of the EPISD superintendent in supporting dual language education, his specific actions and orientations, and his beliefs and understandings that informed his leadership. EPISD is an ideal location for our study because the district made dual language the cornerstone of educational reform under a new superintendent's leadership. In January 2014, the district created a task force to study dual language education. The superintendent, Juan Cabrera, supported the task force's recommendation to adopt dual language and the board of managers unanimously agreed. The selection of EPISD provided a rich context to explore the superintendent's role in promoting and implementing dual language district-wide. We invited the superintendent, deputy superintendent, task force members, and the central office administrators focused on dual language, curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and human resources to participate in this study. Each participant agreed to be interviewed. Principals, teachers, and parents were also interviewed to triangulate findings and add depth and different perspectives to the case. The superintendent encouraged the study in order to learn about ongoing challenges of district-wide dual language implementation, but also to openly document EPISD's story for other districts interested in dual language.

### **Data Collection**

Our data came from observations of school board meetings, task force meetings, and district professional development sessions and from interviews with the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and other key stakeholders. In total, we observed more than 650 hours between January 2014 and August 2015.<sup>2</sup> During each observation, either one or two researchers were on site, typed notes to identify key quotes, and collected relevant documents. In particular, we paid close attention to how the superintendent talked about dual language and social justice issues, justified dual language education for all emergent bilinguals, and advocated for change. The researchers wrote low-inference descriptions of the observation site, dynamics between participants, and main purposes and insights from the observations. Following each observation, the researchers reviewed observation notes, linked any collected documents to the notes, and created a file for the observation. These documents included meeting agendas, introductions to the concepts of dual language and its research base, professional development notes, and student, school, district, and Texas Education Agency (TEA) data reports.

We supplemented observations and document reviews with semi-structured interviews. The superintendent was formally interviewed four times for approximately seven hours total and informally during observations and district-related events.<sup>3</sup> Each interview had a predetermined set of questions to guide discussions partly derived from our theoretical framework. In addition, the district's deputy superintendent was interviewed three times for more than 200 minutes to shed greater insight on the role of the superintendent in the reform process. To triangulate their interview responses, additional interviews were conducted with central office administrators, task force members, principals, teachers, and parents. Although the case reports the actual names of the

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<sup>2</sup> This study is part of a larger study investigating dual language implementation across the district, with a particular focus on six schools with various levels of SES, principal experience, and parental engagement. In total, 13 principals, 20 teachers, and 103 parents were interviewed.

<sup>3</sup> The superintendent's busy schedule limited our ability to conduct ongoing and lengthy interviews, but he consistently made himself available during various events we observed. We also communicated with him via email and during onsite observations to clarify interview transcripts and discuss emerging issues. We were never out of contact with the superintendent for more than a week throughout the study.

district, superintendent, and deputy superintendent, we used pseudonyms for all other participants and schools described.

After the initial report was completed with pseudonyms and shared with the district, the superintendent and deputy superintendent believed the study should include the identification of the school district, which would then indirectly identify themselves given their high level positions.<sup>4</sup> Together with EPISD, we recognized the uniqueness of this case: a large urban district along the U.S.-Mexico border that had previously been involved in a large-scale cheating scandal that would go on to implement dual language for all emergent bilinguals. The district's identity was important. The public in the region are widely aware of the cheating scandal and shift to dual language education. Although some of our findings may seem provocative to a reader outside of the region, our research findings broadly represent what has been openly discussed in national media, local media, city council and school board meetings, parent-teacher association meetings, and other public forums. Moreover, EPISD was interested in having other districts learn from their successes and ongoing challenges. As a general practice, EPISD consistently invites other districts to visit dual language campuses to engage in collaborative learning processes where best practices can be shared. They hoped this research could start a dialogue with other districts. A group of local stakeholders reviewed the manuscript to ensure other individuals could not be identified. The district made no attempts to change our findings or conclusions. This article presents findings, analysis, and conclusions of the authors.

### **Data Analysis**

We coded data using NVivo 10 software in multiple phases. First, we read all field notes, documents, and transcripts several times and recorded data by type, source, and date in order to triangulate findings and chronologically track events. Next, we began with an initial coding phase that involved low-inference codes derived from our theoretical framework in order to classify data associated with social justice leadership and their relation to the superintendent and the emergence and implementation of dual language. We reviewed these codes and wrote analytic memos to facilitate our own thoughts with each other (Maxwell, 2012). Then, we inductively coded data related to social justice leadership in the following areas: advocacy, vision, challenging the status quo, leadership orientation and beliefs, politics/power/influence, and social/personal interactions. We also focused on how these codes were tied to the superintendent's personal beliefs and to the context of the district. This round of coding allowed us to examine the superintendent's priorities, actions, and approaches to leadership and understand how these aspects were situated in the district/community context and history.

Several methodological aspects of this study helped to ensure our evidence represented what actually occurred. First, when the initial report was written, we applied a member checking strategy to validate findings (Maxwell, 2012). We provided two task force members as well as the superintendent and deputy superintendent with the opportunity to review the report and provide revisions and feedback. We met in person with the superintendent and deputy superintendent and discussed the summary and the final manuscript presented here. Based on these conversations we were able to develop deeper understandings of our own interpretations. In addition, the two lead researchers met every week over the course of the study to discuss findings and interpretations. We each kept a reflective journal to track our assumptions, interpretations, and unanswered questions. Furthermore, we used triangulation to understand the superintendent and deputy superintendent's leadership actions, orientations, and priorities in relation to the district context through ongoing

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<sup>4</sup> This research was conducted with official approval of the Institutional Review Board of EPISD and the University of Texas at El Paso.

observations and stakeholder interviews. Finally, we maintained prolonged engagement at the research site over the course of the study that allowed us to build trust with the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and other participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## **Findings**

We present findings across five sections related to context of EPISD and the role of Superintendent Cabrera's leadership. First, we describe the district context and culture of cheating prior to Superintendent Cabrera's arrival. Second, we highlight Cabrera's initial perspectives and steps to move dual language from a boutique program in nine schools in affluent communities to a district-wide reform. Third, we examine the institutional challenges of dual language, which required a strong awareness of context and an ability to reflect on how structural issues. Fourth, we detail Cabrera's role as an advocate at the school, community, and state level to show how a well-organized movement solved seemingly impossible problems. Finally, we conclude with the specific district practices that contributed to teacher/principal capacity building.

### **Setting the Stage: Injustice, Disappearances, and Dual for Some**

EPISD is a large urban school district located in Texas along the U.S.-Mexico border and serves some of the poorest zip codes in the nation. The district enrolls more than 60,000 students – approximately 80% of students are Hispanic, 12% White, 70% economically disadvantaged, and 25% emergent bilinguals. District demographics mask stratification, as some schools have emergent bilingual populations over 70% while others serve very low percentages of Hispanic students and economically disadvantaged families.

Table 1 provides a brief timeline that ties the cheating scandal with the emergence of dual language. One significant aspect of the cheating scandal was associated with the former superintendent, district administrators, and principals inappropriately keeping low-performing students out of tested grade levels by improperly promoting or holding back students, preventing students from enrollment, or forcing students to drop out (Weaver & Tidwell, 2013).

Table 1  
*Timeline of EPISD Events*

Date	Event
August-October 2009	Initial cheating allegations are brought forth to the public and TEA
May 2010	State senator accuses Superintendent of “disappearing students”
Oct 2010	TEA completes a preliminary review and concludes there is insufficient evidence
December 2010	U.S. Department of Education begins investigation of EPISD; FBI begins investigation of superintendent
Jun 2011	U.S. Department of Education finds cheating and prompts district to a corrective action plan
July 2011	Superintendent Lorenzo Garcia is indicted by the federal government; placed on leave; Interim superintendent is hired who was a former assistant superintendent and chief of staff in EPISD
September 2012	Cheating allegations of interim superintendent emerge; New interim superintendent is hired
September 2013	Superintendent Cabrera named superintendent
January 2014	Board of Managers initiates dual language task force
February 2014	Task force recommends district-wide dual language; Board unanimously approves
February 2014-August 2014	Initial and ongoing professional development sessions for principals, teachers, and parents at elementary and middle schools
August 2014	Summer Institute; Beginning dual language in all pre-k, kindergarten, and 6 <sup>th</sup> grade classes/grade levels in dual language elementary school feeder patterns; Received certification waiver from TEA
May 2015	Texas Education Code amended for bilingual education certification amended for dual language
August 2015	Dual language continues implementation to 1 <sup>st</sup> and 7 <sup>th</sup> grades

The local media, a state senator, and other community stakeholders implored the U.S. Department of Education and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to investigate the district. Eventually, an independent audit found systemic noncompliance with state and district policy and that numerous district administrators encouraged cheating or looked the other way. The report

noted that EPISD was involved in “an extensive scheme that deprived students of an education by denying them access to school, manipulating their official records and providing scam credit-recovery methods disguised as legitimate education” (Weaver & Tidwell, 2013, p. 1). Despite widespread cheating that enabled some schools to escape accountability sanctions, emergent bilinguals were still significantly less likely to score satisfactory or above on the Texas state assessments in reading and mathematics (47% and 66%, respectively) in relation to White students in the district (90% and 89%).

Meanwhile, nine elementary schools in a more affluent part of the city, one high school, and one middle school independently developed dual language models in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Reveles ES, one of the city’s most reputable elementary schools, had received national attention for its excellence in dual language education. Consequently, Reveles ES partnered with a middle school and high school to continue dual language for Reveles ES students through high school graduation. Reveles ES and other dual language schools primarily served students from higher socio-economic backgrounds and with more engaged parents interested in dual language as an additive program for their native English speaking children. For the rest of EPISD, early exit bilingual education was implemented. At the beginning of school year 2013-2014, Superintendent Juan Cabrera, an attorney and businessman, was appointed superintendent. His appointment came with criticism as he lacked school leadership experience (although he had been a bilingual education teacher 20 years prior).

Upon his appointment, Cabrera was viewed as an outsider to some and his selection represented the power of conservative Texas politics despite the fact that he was a Mexican-American born in Texas and grew up in a Spanish-speaking household. Cabrera served on local and national boards and advocated for dual language across the state and nation. He promised to “clean up” the district and continue to investigate cheating allegations. During an interview, Cabrera reflected on his initial challenges:

You know, my predecessor had been incarcerated and there was a lot of turmoil...The challenges were too many to name almost...I had to spend time with local authorities, federal authorities, state authorities...We had to make drastic moves quickly including trying to find money to fill a twenty-million-dollar hole...addressing a decline in enrollment. There were a number of challenges facing the district. Because of the entire cheating scandal, the other challenges have been left unattended.

In December 2013, the district’s Board of Managers commissioned a community task force on dual language with three goals: (a) to identify and describe successful dual language models with associated costs; (b) to propose a timeline for district-wide implementation; and (c) to recommend a plan for parental and community support. The task force included parents, professors, and community members. Between January 2014 and February 2014 the task force met every week.

A member of the task force posited that the task force was created because (a) middle and upper middle class families wanted access to Reveles ES and the other dual language schools across the city; (b) existing English immersion models were not working for emergent bilinguals; and (c) the cheating scandal had negatively impacted the district’s reputation. Another member believed influential high-SES parents wanted to see dual language continued in middle schools and connected to existing dual language schools. In February, the task force recommended the district implement dual language district-wide from grades Pre-K through 12. In school year 2014-2015, EPISD would start in grades Pre-k and kindergarten and would add an additional grade each subsequent year. Middle schools within the feeder patterns of dual language elementary schools would implement dual language immediately for incoming sixth graders and add new grades (seventh, and then eighth)

in subsequent years. These events created a sense of immediacy within the central office and produced numerous challenges to be addressed within schools, the central office, and at the state level.

### Initial Perspectives and Framing a Crisis

While the emergence of dual language was initially driven by high-SES families, Cabrera and others used grassroots momentum to frame dual language as a needed response to the EPISD cheating scandal. Superintendent Cabrera, visibly upset during an interview, said, “What the previous administration did to kids just should never happen. It is just the antithesis of a public institution. It’s horrible.” Cabrera framed this injustice as a necessity for systemic and ideological change. He acknowledged that dual language was not his idea alone nor could he have initiated it in isolation, but he was excited that a community task force made the recommendation. He drew personal connections to dual language, stating: “I grew up as an English language learner. I know what it’s like trying to learn English and what those experiences are like.” He shared a vision for how dual language fit for the district:

We wanted to be holistic in our education in terms of educating the whole child whether that be academic, linguistically, extracurricular activities, arts, all of these things are critically important and to me I think that academics in your K-12 career isn’t just about your academic scores, it’s about what we can do to help folks develop in a lot of different ways...we want young children to develop into promising young adults because of the holistic education that we can afford them.

He also believed the district made a commitment to students currently in dual language and moving into middle school: “They’ve worked hard and learned in two languages. We owe them the opportunity to continue their education in two languages.”

Cabrera began by recruiting a deputy superintendent with the experience and passion for dual language district-wide. Deputy Superintendent (DS) Ivonne Durant is a veteran principal and chief academic officer who implemented dual language as a principal and district administrator. She is a Mexican-American woman born in Mexico and a native Spanish speaker. As a child, she recalled “not speaking English, sitting in the back of the room at a table and auditing first grade...It was the most humiliating time of my life.” Like Superintendent Cabrera, she was dismayed by the actions of the previous administration and returned to the region to support the implementation of dual language. DS Durant emerged as a central figure in Cabrera’s leadership.

### Institutional Challenges

Superintendent Cabrera demonstrated a situational awareness of the challenges associated with implementing dual language across the district, which included *teacher certification challenges* and *competing interests within the district bureaucracy*. Both challenges had the potential to impact the district’s climate and stop the implementation of dual language at a district level.

**District bureaucracy and culture.** EPISD confronted an organizational obstacle in the initial stages of planning for dual language. EPISD maintained separate offices for general education curriculum and bilingual education. Cabrera believed this was problematic because it provided a structural separation in “thought, resources, and objectives.” Cabrera added, “For an organization to be effective, its priorities should be aligned. This is something simple people know in business... How can we be a district serving a large portion of ELLs with these siloes?” He also recognized the negative cultural impact of the cheating scandal on principals and teachers. The district still had an

active federal investigation into the cheating scandal, which included principals and district administrators. A community member said of the overall central office staff:

They were viewed as part of the old brigade...there was a horrible culture there and the new principals had a lot of trust issues. They didn't want to see those people [involved or allegedly involved in cheating] in their buildings. They just couldn't trust and principals didn't feel like they could do their job without a clean house.

Other stakeholders talked about a culture of "complacency and a CYA ["Cover Your Ass"] mentality." Cabrera understood that change in this context would be difficult.

DS Durant was empowered by Cabrera to create a more collaborative and cohesive central office "where general education and dual language are at the table together... and that the people we hire in the district and as principals and assistant principals are supportive and knowledgeable of dual language." She added a reflection of how she felt the district was run, "Information wasn't shared and people in different offices weren't working together, they didn't share the same goals or the same vision." DS Durant said, "Both offices needed to be under one umbrella." Cabrera's recognition of both the culture and structure of central office led to a shift in hiring policies and creating a more inclusive central office bureaucracy that did not view the needs of emergent bilinguals as separate or in competition with the general education curriculum.

**District bureaucracy and culture.** Cabrera learned that a Texas certification policy required that English-only teachers working in dual language programs needed to be certified in bilingual education even if they only taught the English component. This policy made a shift from traditional English immersion model to dual language problematic because: (a) the district had a high proportion of teachers with bilingual certifications teaching in English only classrooms; (b) the district had pre-existing certification issues with uncertified teachers in dual language classrooms; and (c) TEA had doubts about granting certification waivers because of the existing proportion of teachers with bilingual certifications in English only classrooms. DS Durant noted the impact of pre-existing certification problems:

TEA didn't like the idea of giving us a waiver for teachers without certification. They said, "do you realize you have over 1,000 excessed bilingual educators teaching in other areas?" Their point was, if you had an abundance of bilingual educators, why are you asking for a waiver?

Cabrera recognized the power dynamics that would make dual language untenable if the district was forced remove or transfer English speaking dual language teachers. A task force member described these challenges:

To uproot current bilingually certified teachers working in English only classrooms would be so disruptive and would create widespread vacancies. Also, to now say that dual language teachers who teach explicitly English needed a bilingual certification meant what? You would have to fire or remove those teachers, or shift them to another school? That type of upheaval across a school district...It would be too much, a district couldn't create that much disruption, the loss of teachers and trust would be too immense.

Cabrera challenged the policy at the state level and recruited principals, a state senator, a U.S. Congressman, the city's mayor, and others to strategize on how to address the certification problems. They petitioned TEA's commissioner and were advised to help rewrite state policy. Cabrera and other EPISD leaders and educators visited the state capitol, testified in legislative sessions, met with representatives, and helped to have the policy changed. The change allowed

EPISD to keep their current teachers and made the implementation of dual language easier for all districts across the state. A local professor said, “It was important to see how that kind of advocacy made a difference throughout the state.”

### Rebuilding Trust and Moral Standing

Cabrera recognized EPISD’s reputation was injured. DS Durant recalled a phone call she received while working as a district administrator elsewhere in Texas:

I received a phone call saying he [the former superintendent] was arrested. I was angered that our students were disappearing and appalled about what happened. Later, I got a phone call from Superintendent Cabrera saying, “I need you to apply for the deputy position. We need to clean up the mess that he made.”

One former task force member and EPISD parent said: “It’s horrible what they did and it really set back the district. There’s no trust, plus, the harm they did to so many kids. You can’t just repair that damage overnight.” According to Cabrera, the situation dictated a need for the district to do two things, (a) listen to parent concerns and use those concerns to drive reform and (b) publicly acknowledge emergent bilinguals have been harmed and address these issues at a district level. He explicitly said “I must be an advocate for our ELL’s. They must be our priority now.”

Cabrera advocated to empower parents to engage in district-level shared governance. He explained how he was strategic in elevating powerful voices to promote equity for all students. When discussing the emergence of dual language, Cabrera reflected, “It was really a grassroots community effort. I think that there were a number of parents who started dual language in the nine schools and their primary concern was getting more middle schools.” These parents were mostly from high socio-economic status (SES) communities and included many native English-speaking students. Cabrera’s *situational awareness* helped him recognize how these influential parents’ power and voice could be used to advocate for dual language for all emergent bilinguals and particularly those hurt by the cheating scandal. He added:

I think from there that a lot of community members got involved, folks from the university and for me, I was blessed, being a native Spanish speaker it was something that I really believed in...but of course these decisions are subject to Board approval given the financial components and you know, the grassroots efforts and the community members behind it recognized and advocated that if we didn’t do this we are not taking care of this wonderful asset.

Cabrera talked about capitalizing on the grassroots efforts of parents to champion dual language across the district and to strategically apply the power of high SES parents to potential resistance so that EPISD could provide a holistic education allowing emergent bilinguals to access their culture, Spanish-speaking elders, and future economic opportunities. As Cabrera engaged with the school board, community members, principals, and teachers, he continually retold how emergent bilinguals were historically marginalized and must be offered a more ideal future. He used stories in speeches and school board meetings that described how children lost their Spanish and could no longer talk to a parent or grandparent, or how companies were seeking engineers who speak English and Spanish.

Cabrera and DS Durant framed injustices as a cause for action, an opportunity for change, and a sense of purpose connected to their own stories of being isolated and embarrassed during their public schooling. Although many teachers and principals reported that they remained skeptical of the EPISD’s commitment and ability to successfully implement dual language, most parents and

teachers reported a belief that the district's efforts were morally driven and authentic. A teacher reported, "It's nice to at least know they've been through it. A lot of times, the central office is just so detached from what our kids need."

During a pre-service training for all principals in 2014, Cabrera explained to teachers and staff, "Dual language is a long-term investment in our schools, in our communities, in our families, and in our local economy." Across various observations and interviews, Superintendent Cabrera was insistent upon the notion that schools should provide "a holistic education." One set of comments particularly stood out as advocacy-oriented. Cabrera said:

We could do an English immersion program where we drill these kids in English all day, after school, everything, and we can have a nice big bump in test scores. I know that we could do that and then say look at what we did. But, we are doing dual not for a test bump, but for the long-term success. I want our students to have long-term academic success that translates to economic success, to life success... That's what bilingualism and biliteracy is about... Whatever the challenges are, including a few tough years of test scores, it doesn't matter.

He continually acknowledged how implementing dual language education would be challenging and exhausting, but absolutely necessary to challenge the status quo.

Despite ongoing attempts to advocate for dual language and repair distrust, parent, teacher, and principal interviews revealed trust had not been fully restored. Cabrera remained optimistic, responding to questions of mistrust with:

What keeps me up at night is the change and I so bought into the change and I really do believe from the feedback I'm getting and talking to administrators that people believe in the benefit of it. If they believe in the benefit of it for children then working through the change is a lot easier for them.

This remark highlights Cabrera's belief in the inherent good of educators and their ability to do what is best for students. Observations revealed most stakeholders agreed with dual language at a general level, but were less optimistic about implementation. Some parents and community advocates argued that Cabrera only promoted district-wide dual language after significant pushback from the community. Many principals reported that their schools were unprepared to rollout dual language and that they had too small a window of time for successful implementation. They worried about test scores in the short term. One principal asked, "Do they really want us to do this well? If so, wouldn't we have more training and more time? Instead, we just find out in the spring that we will be starting dual in the fall." Many teachers felt unprepared as well. Conversely, few parents were against dual language for emergent bilinguals or as an option for native English speaking students. Cabrera listened and publicly acknowledged these challenges were real, but that change should happen despite potential dips in test scores or self-doubts over preparedness. Privately, he acknowledged that it was important to ensure dual language was implemented and solidified given the potential for shifting beliefs with new school boards and Texas state policies.

### **Managing Frustration and Building Capacity**

EPISD had a short time window between the task force recommendation and the next school year when all elementary schools across the district would implement dual language in pre-k and kindergarten (See Table 1). EPISD initiated professional development for principals, teachers, and parents the day after dual language was approved. Cabrera and DS Durant recognized that these groups needed immediate training given the complexity of dual language and the ideological shift it

required. Cabrera recognized the symbolism of starting immediately: “The fact that we started immediately communicated to schools that this was serious, that dual was coming.” Principals began to meet monthly with central office leaders, consultants, and principals experienced in dual language education. Teachers also met monthly through various venues such as roundtables and committees. Parents and community members were provided with various informational sessions to learn more about dual language education, its benefits, and how it would impact schooling. In August 2014, the district kicked-off the school year with training institutes.

Summer institutes provided opportunities for teachers and administrators to develop teacher and school schedules specific to the 50:50 dual language model implementation and facilitated discussion, which means students receive 50% of instruction in Spanish and 50% of instruction in English each day. Cabrera and other stakeholders recognized they were rapidly disseminating a large amount of information. To answer questions and ease tensions, teachers were provided opportunities to have small group discussions with Cabrera and DS Durant.

Observations of the pre-service institute revealed that training teachers via lecture and PowerPoint was difficult because teachers were not always ready to learn. Several district administrators agreed with our interpretation. One stated, “We ended up spending a lot of time debunking misconceptions about dual language, about how different models work, and what these changes will mean for their daily work.” Teachers shared how they felt a wide array of emotions, including nervousness, anxiety, excitement, and fear. In an internally developed district survey, 93% of the pre-k and kindergarten teachers reported that teaching in a dual language model was significantly more difficult. They asked questions about extra training, if people could come in and observe their classrooms, and if they could choose co-teachers. They also had concerns about how the implementation for dual language would impact test scores.

When 2014-2015 began, many teachers and principals were frustrated by dual language and its rapid implementation. They did not understand why it had to be implemented immediately. Cabrera and DS Durant sought advice from teachers, professors, and other stakeholders and ultimately agreed to create teacher committees and teacher roundtables. Teacher committees were created for key issues viewed as problematic and frustrating to teachers, such as second language acquisition research and best practices, 50:50 dual program development, scheduling, report cards, biliteracy and materials. Central office administrators, exemplar principals, and a local professor facilitated committees. Committees developed materials and provided schools with guidance. In many instances, teachers from the committees provided trainings to peers and principals. One district administrator commented:

The committees made this our program, not something from the outside... We created teacher committees to have conversations about different teacher needs. Teachers who had experience in dual were very helpful to these committees... They shared ideas and resources and helped to lower the frustration level... It also made the reform feel more authentic, like it wasn't just this top-down thing.

Committee members and facilitators reported how teachers came to meetings upset. A participant in a teacher roundtable said, “There was tension in the roundtables. Teachers felt they weren't ready and they wanted training... they were frustrated because their principals weren't trained and were not letting them do what they needed to do.” Cabrera recognized the value in giving teachers opportunities to vent frustrations, but also share ideas, “They need to share their ideas and frustrations.” Cabrera also realized how some principals, especially in the first weeks of implementation, did not buy-in to the model or support dual language teachers. DS Durant highlighted the importance of hiring and retraining principals as one way to help ease tensions and

address teacher concerns. Teachers sought professional development, attended unpaid trainings outside of work hours, and found ways to collaborate and share resources.

A group of principals were passive resistors who did not publicly challenge dual language, but were slow to support it. Cabrera recognized principals' distrust and spoke about how change required patience. He said:

You know, anything that you try to do that is changing the dynamics of teaching and learning in the classroom is one of the most difficult tasks you'll do...sometimes you don't believe it's real until you hear it from folks five to ten times so we ought to be talking about this, this is not a fad, this is not going away, we are investing in it...it's integrated in everything that we do and everything that we talk about...when we talk about academics, we talk about dual language.

DS Durant also recognized some principals would not fit, "As we are replacing principals [due to retirement, transfer to other district, removal], we are replacing them with new blood that will be supportive...we have a process and by the time we pick the person, we make pretty darn sure that person is supportive of dual language." The recommendation was made that an "exemplar" dual language principal would facilitate monthly dual language professional development sessions with principals. We noted in our observations of these sessions that they were less tense than teacher roundtables. Some principals attributed the lack of tension to a lack of supervision from the district. One principal reflected, "It's nice to be here with just principals and talk things out, see dual language and observe classrooms on our own, and not worry about speaking our minds." The exemplar principal told the group, "Dual is really hard, after years, we still have problems... What you have to understand is that it's always hard. The other thing is, you have to see how amazing it can be for students... It's just a process." While buy-in for dual language was slow, we found that the placement exemplar principal as a professional development resource for principals was a strategic move by Cabrera, as he understood how to use advocates like the exemplar principal to promote reform and mitigate resistance.

## Discussion

This study investigated the role of the EPISD superintendent following the aftermath of a large-scale cheating scandal that disappeared and marginalized Mexican-American emergent bilinguals. The district had a long history of underperformance and segregation, and under a new superintendent's direction, EPISD made efforts to establish an inclusive dual language education model for all emergent bilinguals. Few studies have examined the role of superintendents in implementing dual language education models or how superintendents engage in social justice leadership to address other equity issues. Similar to social justice leadership scholarship on principals, this study highlights the importance of leader consciousness toward equity issues in schools. Superintendent Cabrera was conscious of the way Mexican and Mexican-American emergent bilinguals were marginalized not only from his own experience, but because of the district's cheating scandal. His recognition of these issues were coupled with a deep understanding of the reasons why students were marginalized and how to lead for social justice within this context. We have called this mindfulness and consciousness: *situational awareness*, or an evolving understanding of context, history, power dynamics, politics, and competing priorities. His awareness of past injustices emotionally moved him as evidenced in our findings, prompted him to identify and hire passionate administrators, and propelled him to use his position to promote dual language education despite competing district priorities, such as budget shortfalls and shrinking enrollments.

These findings are in line with descriptions of social justice leadership as a courageous practice that requires risk-taking and a discomfort with complacency in light of injustice (Anderson, 2009).

Like other social justice leaders, Cabrera acted courageously and utilized his understanding of political networks to advocate for dual language education. His capacity to tell the story of the EPISD cheating scandal coupled with his own upbringing as a Mexican-American emergent bilingual was a powerful narrative that allowed him to frame the status quo as unjust and dual language as its remedy. Beyond framing dual language in ways that inspired others, Cabrera utilized his *situational awareness* and understanding of community power dynamics to build consensus around dual language. Prior to his tenure, dual language schools served predominately high-socioeconomic status communities and parents within these communities advocated for the expansion of these schools. Rather than simply acquiesce to their demands, he engaged in *advocacy* to connect this powerful constituency to a larger cause: dual language for all emergent bilinguals in the district. As previously noted, social justice and advocacy-oriented leaders cannot always be on the frontlines of social justice battles, but instead should build coalitions and networks that can broadly support change (DeMatthews, 2016; Ryan, 2016). For example, Cabrera utilized an exemplar principal to work with principals who were resistant to change rather than using his positional authority to challenge these principals head on. Cabrera also acknowledged how vital the dual language task force and grassroots efforts were to the adoption and implementation of dual language, specifically noting that he could not have made such a policy on his own. While one can question if Cabrera's success in establishing dual language has more to do with being in the right place and at the right time, it is clear that he recognized the political opportunity and took full advantage of the social capital available in the community.

Cabrera's *situational awareness* also allowed him to think critically about institutional problems, such as the structure of his central office and the existing human capital problems in EPISD. He identified what he believed was a structural separation in "thought, resources, and objectives" that maintained poor programs for emergent bilinguals. Like other social justice leaders in schools, Cabrera identified how longstanding structures and ways of doing things maintained the status quo (Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). As a consequence of his recognition, Cabrera and Durant restructured the central office in a way that made dual language and the needs of emergent bilinguals a priority for all departments and divisions. Cabrera also recognized the sense of distrust between the district, schools, and communities as a result of the cheating scandal and an active federal investigation into the district. This awareness prompted Cabrera to be patient with principals and teachers, consider ways to build trust with families, and engage in conversations where educators can share their frustrations and ideas. At the same time, Cabrera also sought ways to infuse the district with like-minded central office staff, principals, and assistant principals who would enter the district already believing in and fully supporting dual language education.

EPISD also confronted technical challenges associated with dual language education. Specifically, the state-level bilingual education certification policy threatened the adoption of dual language, because if fully implemented, teachers throughout the district would be moved to different schools, grades, and teaching areas. The policy may have pushed out many of the district's White teachers who were not fluent in Spanish or bilingually certified, but taught classes in English as part of a dual language co-teacher model. Cabrera's *situational awareness* of this issue and his ability to engage in *advocacy* at the state level via a coalition of educators and politicians provided a positive solution. While the literature on superintendent leadership generally underscores the importance of the superintendent as a "democratic-political leader" skilled at engaging in community and state politics (Kowalski, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2010; Kowalski & Björk, 2005), few empirical studies have identified specific instances where superintendent's successfully influenced statewide policy in the

name of a social justice reform. This finding is also important as it relates to scholarship focused on social justice leadership, which often emphasizes the importance of consciousness and recognition of injustices, but overlooks many of the structural and technical challenges to educational leadership that can cripple any equity-oriented reform before it gets off the ground (DeMatthews, 2016; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

Finally, Cabrera recognized the importance of dialogue evidenced by his recognition that change required time and communication through ongoing open forums. Open dialogue allowed incongruent values to surface and be understood. This *advocacy* work was not a function of typical power politics where interest groups and individuals battle for resources, but rather a process of social construction where the superintendent framed key issues to cultivate a collective set of “interests” and “needs” that the district should address (Forgacs, 2000). Despite a press for time and a sincere belief that dual language was the best way forward, Cabrera and his deputy did not utilize authoritarian approaches or mandates in the name of social justice. Instead, they created forums and professional development opportunities where teachers and principals across the district could pose questions, share strategies, and problem-solve the unique challenges. In part, this was because Cabrera was able to think on multiple layers about how change could be slow and frustrating for a family, a classroom teacher, or a principal. Over the course of the study Superintendent Cabrera continued to learn, reflect, and refine his approaches as well as his ongoing awareness that equity-oriented change was a bumpy road. In a sense, he represented Freire’s notion of *conscientização* as he perceived the various oppressive elements confronting emergent bilinguals and took action. The process in which he took action represented a *praxis* that involved ongoing interaction, the acquisition of knowledge, reflection, and transformation. This *praxis* spread across typically defined superintendent roles, such as the teacher/educator, communicator, democratic-political leader, and social scientist (Kowalski, 2001).

## Conclusions

This study raises a number of questions that might ground further inquiry into superintendent leadership and district-wide social justice reform efforts, such as dual language education. What aspects or elements of district and community contexts are more likely to promote significant social justice reforms? What can superintendents do to stimulate grassroots movements for social justice reforms when they do not exist? The EPISD represented a case with significant community engagement in support of dual language and desired systemic change as a result of a high-profile cheating scandal that “disappeared” emergent bilinguals. This study is limited by drawing only from the experience of one superintendent in a unique district context. Future research might explore *situational awareness*, *advocacy*, and *praxis* in different contexts with an eye toward identifying new dimensions and micro-level practices, and determining whether or not these characteristics can be developed and refined in leaders. As noted above, Superintendent Cabrera demonstrated a refined skill set and had a racial, cultural, and linguistic background that supported his *situational awareness* and *advocacy* work. Our study does little to understand or examine how superintendents with different racial and ethnic backgrounds than the majority of their district can lead and address equity issues. Our study raises other questions. How do superintendents without these backgrounds, experiences, and skills navigate social justice issues? Can superintendent preparation programs provide “outsider” superintendents with the prerequisite experiences and skills to lead for social justice? These questions necessitate further investigation.

Future research might also explore the specific role of superintendent *advocacy* in relation to key stakeholders, such as principals, teachers, families, central office staff, political officials, and

community-based organizations. If social justice-oriented superintendents seek to develop systemic equity-oriented reforms, they will surely need to influence, engage, organize, and compel a variety of stakeholders who may already be satisfied with the status-quo, or be risk-averse given the political nature of public education. Additional research can look at superintendent networks, non-education/ district related work activities, non-profit board membership, and other political and quasi-political aspects of the superintendency to explore how, if at all, these networks shape superintendent perspectives or can be used by superintendents to leverage reforms.

This study highlights the important role of the superintendent in supporting dual language education, identifies specific actions and values pertinent to social justice leadership at the district level, and distinguishes some of the central ways personal values, context, and continual learning can positively influence leadership. While EPISD provided a unique case for examining the superintendent's role in implementing dual language education to meet the needs of a majority Mexican and Mexican-American community along the U.S.-Mexico border, the findings of this study highlights a general social justice imperative for other leaders working in similar and dissimilar contexts. Either through personal experience or other means, superintendents should understand the lived experiences of their students and families, listen to their teachers and principals, identify political opportunities as they arise, and seek out social justice-oriented allies and networks within their communities. Superintendent Cabrera was an emergent bilingual and understood through personal experience what it meant to be marginalized, but he recognized that his own desire for social justice was insufficient without community support and educator buy-in. He told a powerful story of injustice in a way that brought people together. Without such understandings and a dedication to listen and learn, superintendents will struggle to take full advantage of their pivotal position as district leaders and remain constrained in efforts to create more equitable schools by the politics, bureaucratic challenges, unequal power dynamics, and weight of the status quo.

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Volume 25 Number 1

January 1, 2017

ISSN 1068-2341

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