

On Becoming a Social Justice Leader: A Fictionalized Narrative Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences and influences that aided, prompted, and informed a principal in the south-western United States to act as a social justice leader with a keen focus on creating equitable conditions and outcomes for marginalized students within his school (Bruner, 2008). By employing a fictionalized narrative approach to findings, the aim of this study was to illuminate the shadows around the formal position to more fully understand what experiences caused an educational leader to act with and focus on social justice in his formal capacity as a high school principal. Findings highlighted that parental upbringing, experiences while in college, a competitive nature reinforced through athletics, and a meaningful relationship with a mentor all had a profound influence on the participant's orientation to and belief in reducing inequities in his school and providing opportunities for all of his students.

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Introduction

Social justice leaders orient their educational philosophy around prioritizing equity within schools and proactively working towards equitable outcomes and experiences for marginalized groups (Bogotch, 2000; Bruner, 2008; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003; Dantley & Tillman, 2006, Theoharis, 2007). The International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN), an international collaboration of educational scholars supported by the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA) and the British Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration Society (BELMAS), broadly defined a social justice leader as a principal who has a “strong educational philosophy that commits to reducing inequality” (ISLDN, 2016). Bogotch (2000) noted that individual perspectives start from the notion that “social justice emerges from the heroic [capital H or small h] efforts of individuals, someone with a vision and a willingness to take risks to see that vision enacted” (p. 6). In the spirit of the ISLDN and Bogotch (2000), this study interrogates the life history and events of a principal to understand how the educational philosophy and vision of a “heroic” individual came to be in the first place.

However, available investigations on leadership for social justice tend to examine the actions of individuals who hold a formal leadership capacity. This focus ascribes importance to the engagement in socially just practices from a formal position, but does not provide much in the way of elucidating the philosophical underpinnings or transformational experiences that informed those actions, predispositions, and/or beliefs. Despite the emphasis placed on the individual and their enactment of these specific practices, there is a scarcity of literature that provides information on what ultimately informed the embrace of, belief in, or adherence to leadership for social justice as the principal’s operational paradigm. The question of “What is social justice leadership?” is fore grounded while the embodied life experiences, beliefs, and learned information that pre-empted the decision to lead in such a way are kept in the dark wings

and out of view. This study attempted to remedy that by carefully and purposely focusing on the individual and specific rather than the general and theoretical. Hopefully, this myopic approach highlights those experiences, beliefs, and learned information so that they are no longer overlooked in favor of answering more grand questions.

Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine the experiences and influences that aided, prompted, and informed a principal in the south-western United States to act as a social justice leader with a keen focus on creating equitable conditions and outcomes for marginalized students within his school (Bruner, 2008). That is, the aim of this study was to illuminate the shadows around the formal position to more fully understand what experiences caused an educational leader to act with and focus on social justice in his formal capacity as a high school principal.

The study was commenced as part of the ISLDN's research specifically focused on understanding social justice across the world. "The defining feature of the group is a network of researchers, guided by the same research questions, adopting a common methodological approach, and undertaking work in a diverse range of international contexts" (ISLDN, 2016a). This work addressed a major component of the ISLDN research agenda and aimed at answering the following question:

- How did a social justice leader learn to become a social justice leader?

By sharing this leadership story, I hope to accomplish three goals. First, I want to release the social justice leader in this article (and all of those in the journal) from his silo where he works so hard on the behalf of the marginalized and largely overlooked students in his school so that his story is animated for others to take in. Secondly, I aim to showcase that social justice leaders, who tend to work with their eyes focused on tasks of urgency and immediacy, are not rare instances of leadership to be viewed as isolated examples of excellence and spoken about in hushed reverence. I hope to inspire



action on the ground level through and because of this real-life exemplar. Lastly, I hope that this story reinvigorates those doing social justice by reading tales of their colleagues from around the globe. There is relief and inspiration in knowing that people from other cultures, countries, and backgrounds are fighting parallel “good fights” right alongside each other

On Social Justice Leadership

Educational leaders must be equipped to meet the needs of marginalized students (Capper & Young, 2014; Marshall & Hernandez, 2013; Riele, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). These students include those from linguistic minorities, students of color, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with varying sexual orientations, students with disabilities, and students across the gender spectrum.

A number of scholars have commented on the difficulties of creating a singular and all-encompassing definition of social justice (Blackmore, 2002; Bogotch, 2002, 2014; Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Harris, 2014, Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Marshall, 2004; Shields, 2004). Definitions of the concept have been described as elusive, ubiquitous, changing, and conflicting (Brown, 2004; Harris, 2014; Zembylas & Iasonos, 2014). Blackmore (2009), in lieu of a definition, commented on the wide range of terms that social justice encompasses including “equity, equality, inequality, equal opportunity, affirmative action, and most recently diversity” (p. 7).

Generally speaking, social justice in educational leadership refers to actions that alleviate inequality, promote fairness, and stop discrimination based upon broad student categorizations (Blackmore, 2009; Bruner, 2008; Dantley & Tillman, 2006). Educational leadership and social justice have been bound together and interwoven with issues of diversity, equity, democracy, and injustice (Bogotch, 2000; Bruner, 2008; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003; Dantley & Tillman, 2006,

Theoharis, 2007). Furthermore, researchers have stressed that social justice leadership must be grounded within the context in which it is enacted to be fully understood (Bettez & Hytten, 2013; Bogotch, 2000; DeMatthews, 2016).

The social justice work of leaders is dynamic, ever evolving, and grounded in reality and is worthy of deliberate and continuous critique (Bogotch, 2000). Research that focuses on how principals in different international settings learn to become social justice leaders will add to the literature by answering the call of Bogotch (2000) and Furman (2012), to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of social justice leadership in general and the story of the individuals that carry out the *doing* of social justice leadership specifically. This research will be placed in the literature as an exploration of how a social justice leader came to occupy and engage in that role. By understanding the formative experiences, moments, and processes that served as a catalyst or precursor for a principal to engage in socially just work, scholars, researchers, and principal preparation professionals may be, at the minimum, aware and, more optimistically, able to adapt trainings and programs to mirror aspects of these social justice leaders formative stories so that *all* students obtaining an administration certificate may benefit from a more robust training and the resultant perspective.

Conceptual Framework

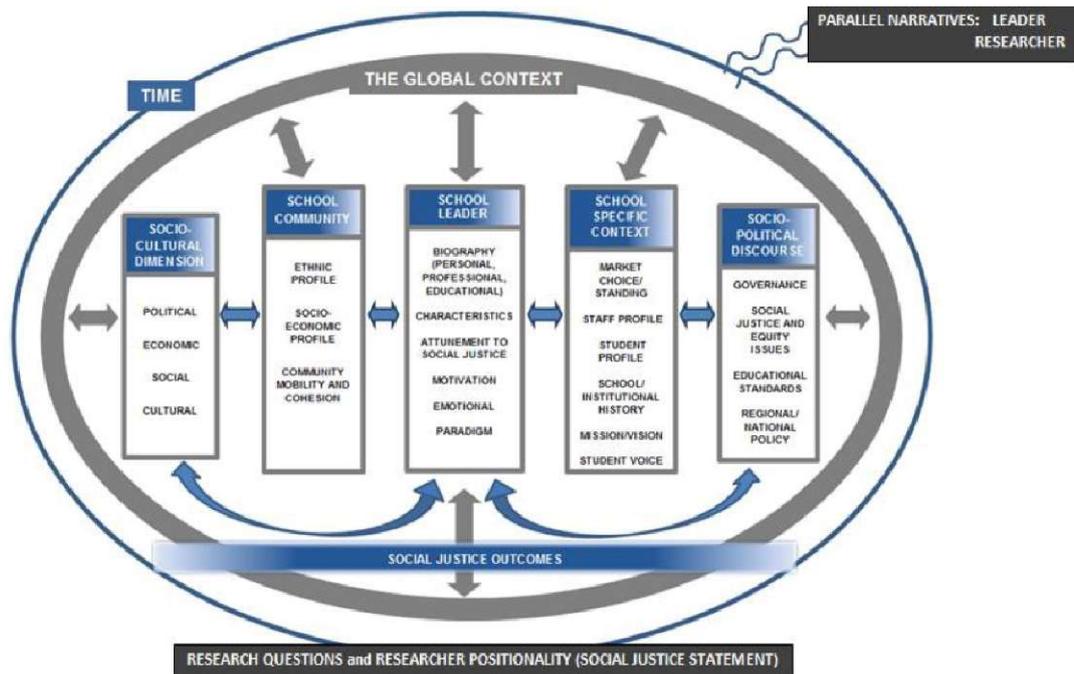
The study utilized the ISLDN conceptual framework to guide analysis and interpretation (see Figure 1). The current framework was constructed iteratively with feedback from international scholars from a diverse range of countries and settings. The ISLDN conceptual framework situates leadership for social justice within a variety of contexts and is useful for comparative analyses across cultures, nationalities, and geographic borders.

Specifically, the framework situates social justice leadership as intersectional, interactional, and influenced by a variety of contexts.

These contexts include factors from meso, macro, and micro levels. Morrison (2017) succinctly and expertly describes the framework:

Moving from the center of the conceptual frame to the outer perimeter micro-level factors are indicated in the 'school leader' box, meso level factors in the 'school community' and 'school specific context' boxes, and macro level factors in the 'sociocultural dimensions' and 'sociopolitical discourse' boxes. The addition of the time dimension recognizes that micro, meso and macro contexts are continually in flux. The situated and temporal nature therefore requires that school leadership for social justice is an ongoing rather than episodic endeavor. (p. 60)

Figure 1
ISLDN Conceptual Framework



Methods

This study utilized an in-depth qualitative interview to gain insight to be able to address the research question (Flick, 2016; Kvale, 1996). The interview protocol that was administered was developed by ISLDN. The interview was transcribed verbatim. The resulting transcript was coded using an open coding approach informed by constant, comparative analysis. Constant comparative analysis ensures that a continuous back and forth between data and codes occurs to arrive at a thorough, robust, and well-informed interpretation of the available data (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The coding process was iterative and involved several rounds of coding. Each round of coding was informed by and built upon the previous round. Following the last iteration, the generated codes were used to inductively construct abstract categories and themes (Charmaz, 2003). Those themes structured the findings and, ultimately, guided the discussion of this manuscript.

Participant

John Kelly (pseudonym) is a principal in a southwestern US state. Mr. Kelly was invited to participate in the research study because of his passion for working with migrant students and English language learners. I knew Mr. Kelly from my previous work as a high school teacher and was able to see firsthand how he engaged with and consciously prioritized his leadership to account for the marginalized student groups within his school. Due to his experience working with and for his students, I identified him as an ideal-typical case who was representative of a social justice leader. LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch (2003) defined ideal-typical case selection as “a procedure in which the researcher develops a profile or model for the best, most efficient, most effective, or most desirable example of some population and then finds a real-world case that most closely matches the profile” (p. 77).



Mr. Kelly, self-deprecatingly, described himself as the “accidental principal”. He started his career in education as an elementary physical education teacher and high school football coach who had no ambition to pursue a career in educational administration. He taught PE for ten years and decided to get his master’s degree to possibly go into administration for the final three years of his career because the state he works in based their retirement benefits on the highest-earning three years of an individual’s career. The move was rooted in strategy rather than passion. However, a year and a half after he obtained the degree, his superintendent encouraged him to apply for the open principal position at the high school within the same district.

Mr. Kelly stated that he absolutely “hated” being a principal for the first four months and he longed to return to the classroom. However, as the months passed, he began to tolerate and then to love being a principal. He placed a strong emphasis on providing the same opportunities to his students that students in more affluent schools receive. His leadership focus prioritized getting students ready for life after high school whether that be in the form of making sure students were ready for postsecondary education or prepared to be competitive in the job markets that await them post- graduation.

His leadership for social justice was evidenced by and through his work with and for English language learner students, migrant students, and students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. These observed actions and his willingness to advocate on the behalf of the marginalized groups within his school served as the basis for his selection in the study.

Site

The high school where Mr. Kelly works was located in a small, rural town in the American southwest. The Los Arboles School District (pseudonym) consists of three schools. The elementary, middle, and high school are all located in the same physical building.

The student population for the entire district fluctuates with the agricultural seasons, but is around 1,050 students. There are 45 full time teachers and 12 paraprofessionals in the district. The high school where Mr. Kelly was principal had 170 students (ages 14-18). Mr. Kelly's student body was comprised of a large number of at-risk students. The student demographic of his school included over 90% of students on free/reduced lunch, 90% Hispanic students, 38% classified as English language learners, and a sizeable migrant/homeless population. In Mr. Kelly's words, his school "is a very impoverished, high Hispanic, high ESL, monolingual school where a lot of our students, faculty, and community members come from Mexico and Guatemala".

For the past six years, the Los Arboles School District had been a high growth, low achievement district as measured by the state's standardized tests. This means that many students demonstrated a year or more of content area growth within one school year on the most recently available standardized test results. However, for the most part, students achievement scores across grades and groups ranked below the 50th percentile. The high school has served as a model for similar high-poverty/high-ELL on how to help students make multiple years of growth in subjects during the course of an academic year. While teachers and administrators celebrate their ability to "grow students", many still problematize the difficulty they face in moving student achievement beyond simple proficiency. Mr. Kelly certainly struggles with simply "hanging his hat on growth", something his school does very well, with all of the difficulties his school has in surpassing state achievement benchmarks. The complexity of his professional situation and the conflicting nature of growth versus achievement provide the backdrop for the findings in the following section.

Findings

Findings will be reported using a fictional narrative approach that expresses the themes found in the data through a first-person, stream



of consciousness recollection of the principal's transformative experiences, events, and influences on his journey to being a social justice leader filtered through his own subjective positioning and understanding. This methodological choice was informed by Krieger (1983) who advocated for the use of *fictionalizing* findings as a way to more fully understand the focus of the inquiry. Krieger (1983) "examines fiction and social science as alternative approaches to representing reality, both in order to identify difficulties that the use of fiction raises for social science and to suggest the nature of the rewards that fiction offers" (p. 173).

The following sections will detail the major findings regarding how Mr. Kelly learned to become a social justice leader. Each section investigates a specific theme while the fictionalized narrative draws upon his own words to detail his accounts in a fictional manner consistent with his own answers and anecdotes. The fictionalized narrative, much like our own thought processes, will be presented as a stream of consciousness and highlight the aspects that informed, influenced, and, ultimately, led Mr. Kelly to be a principal that posited social justice outcomes at the forefront of his leadership. To visually reinforce this technique, Mr. Kelly's fictionalized stream of consciousness will appear in italics.

Upbringing by Parents

My mother was a saint. Whether she was riding my ass to stay in school through high school or college or providing the perfect example of how to treat people, she really has been a guiding force in my life. My father, while he is an educator, helped provide some examples from which to contrast against. You know, some things he does and says really created what I didn't want to be... that became very useful for me to model myself against. It always surprised me that an educator in a primarily Hispanic context he could use some of the words he did to describe our kids. And he has a good heart. I truly believe he does. But when those ways of thinking and viewing the world are so engrained, I'm not sure how you change the person. I don't know if you can. But you can change yourself. However, I learned quickly

that, for me, I couldn't be fully committed to leading these kids if I didn't fully buy into what I was doing. The good ol' boy talk, the racist rhetoric of my grandparents' generation, and this idea that what I did mattered more than what I said and believed behind closed doors had to go. I have to be fully committed and not for the appearance of being the good principal. It's a much more fundamental issue for me. I can't look these kids in the eyes and have them completely trust that I am in it for them if I wasn't. I live this. It's not for a paycheck. It really has become the foundation of who I am and what I stand for.

So, I'm rambling, but I'll just say this. I had to model my mother's example. Deep empathy. Sincere engagement. I don't check how I feel at the school door when I leave for the day. It's woven into the fabric of who I am at this point. I care. I care deeply about these kids. I've found that I'm much shorter with my dad now, too. I can't let him pop off his nonsense unchecked. He gets an earful now. For example, we will be watching a football game and he will say something about a player's race or compare them to a kid in my school in a nonchalant manner. I let him have it. I let him know that these unconscious ideas he holds onto manifest themselves in real life. I don't believe you can provide sanctuary for these ideas only in your mind and not have them affect how you deal with people. So I let him have it, and more often than not, I catch my mom's face out of the corner of my eye nodding with approval and pride that she raised someone that's private message and public charge are one and the same.

Experiences in College

I'm lucky I got out of my hometown for college or else I fear I'd have the same small, narrow, and prejudiced worldview that many of the people I went to high school with did. Experience is crucial. In particular, experiences with people that don't look like me or have parallel life stories. As a white guy growing up in the valley, I was more or less similar to all of the other white guys growing up in the valley. The natural dividing line that existed...I should say, that we accepted or propagated...was whites on this side and Hispanics on the other. If I stayed here, I fear I might have become



comfortable with that reality, but that's really not how life is and going off and playing sports helped me come to that realization.

See, I moved five hours away from home to a larger city to play JUCO [Junior College] baseball before I ended up coming back home to play my last two years of eligibility on the football team. Those two years at JUCO were eye opening. For the first time in my life, I met people from all walks of life. Regardless of our backgrounds we were all able to bond over a common thing, sports. People talk about diversity here in the valley, but I think we are more homogenous within this rural setting than most people would admit. Leaving the valley made me see that, but coming back made me put that belief into practice. I returned more open minded and receptive to the plights of other people. These experiences had a deep and lasting impact on how I engaged and interfaced with others.

Competitive Nature

My background in sports as an athlete and coach has had a profound impact on how I learned to be a social justice leader. Simply put, I'm competitive as hell and I absolutely hate losing! While my time in college and college sports increased my exposure to, receptivity of, and empathy for all people, my identity as an athlete and coach has had a different influence on my leadership for social justice. I will do everything in my ability to accomplish goals and be better than my perceived competition. As a principal, this drive hasn't changed.

Here's some perspective. My school is located in a rural and agrarian area. It's basically in the middle of nowhere, but within a 15-mile radius there are four other high schools. In reality, there probably should be a large county high school for all of these kids, but there is not. These other schools serve primarily middle- and upper-class students from the families that tend to own the farms and land in the area. Then, there is my school. It's overwhelmingly Hispanic where the children of the farm workers attend. It is absolutely crazy to see how different the demographics of a school literally five miles away from mine is, but that is the reality I face. These other schools won't admit students from my school for what they claim as

“academic issues”, but I see it very differently. I see it as institutionalized racism and their “us versus them” mentality comes across clearly. They continue to foster negative attitudes towards and prejudices against the Hispanic populations outside of their white pockets of privilege.

So, naturally, how have I approached this issue? Well, I’ve approached it by wanting to turn their stereotypes upside down. I make sure that my students have comparable academic opportunities to the students in these other schools. I make sure that my teachers come to school ready to teach, engage, and enhance the lives of our students. I treat it like a sporting event and I want to show these other schools that not only are they wrong in how they treat people, but they aren’t unique in their outcomes with students as well.

Moving Mentorship

So, I guess all of this is nice to talk about in a “I had transformational experiences and came out better because of it kind of way”, but you know what?! You know what really harnessed those experiences and made them into these talking points... tidbits of information that positioned me to lead in a socially just way... it was finding a leader and mentor that lived a vision of social justice and, subsequently, ended up getting me to fully commit to it as well.

Seven years ago I was the typical principal that simply managed the school. I thought everything was running smoothly and efficiently in my building. At that time, however, the elementary school in our district was on turn around [Mandated by the state to make annual yearly progress on state assessments in both math and reading or face being taken over and run, reorganized, or closed completely by the state]. That prompted my superintendent to really examine what it was that he was doing and his overall leadership for the entire district. He called a district wide meeting for all of the staff. I’m talking from the cafeteria workers, secretaries, and janitors to the assistant principals and principals where he articulated his vision going forward for ALL children to be successful. And that’s not what really changed me, because we have all heard that kind of



rhetoric before, but then he turned to the staff...every single person involved in the school in some capacity... and told them if they weren't on board, didn't want to do this, or didn't think this was possible, that maybe this school district wasn't the place for you! I mean he drew a line in the sand and encouraged people to leave if they went up for the challenges that lie ahead. It took him ten years as a superintendent to develop this vision. You know, really figure it out, but when he did he was fearless.

And at first, I was like "Whoa, what does this mean for me?" But once I got past the initial shock, I realized that this paradigm shift was necessary and that I was willing to change the way I led and engaged with students to provide the opportunities that these kids deserve. We needed to reorient around our students and realize the demographic we serve is in desperate need of fearless individuals willing to approach poverty, race, class, and other aspects that affect kids in ways that elevate and rejuvenate them rather than further marginalize them. So, that was huge for me! I started thinking in student-centric terms rather than a principal first, top-down mindset. I started opening our doors to engage students before and after school in a variety of initiatives to prepare them for the workforce or college. We immerse them in recreation opportunities and give them the ability to give back to their community through philanthropic events.

And you know what... graduation rates have sky rocketed. Postsecondary enrollment numbers and the amount of scholarship money offered has increased every single year. We have students going to trade schools, colleges, and into the military that would have previously dropped out. My kids are getting the same opportunities as students in the more affluent, white, and privileged communities that surround us! Are we perfect? No, no we aren't, but other schools are asking to come in and see our processes. See the way that we do things. That wouldn't have happened ten years ago. Now we are an example of how schools with challenging demographics can even the playing field and that feels good and is exactly what our kids deserve.

Discussion

The study's findings were analyzed through the lens of the ISLDN framework. The use of the framework was advantageous in many ways. Most prominently, the ISLDN positions the educational leader at the center among a number of interactive constructs that influence social justice leadership. Therefore, the researcher was able to analyze the fluid nature of influence between the practitioner and the constructs. Advantages of this approach include the ability to simultaneously interrogate the reciprocal relationship between school leader and the constructs, but also between the framework and practice *and* practice and the framework. The insight gathered on the various strata of influences that act on, with, between, and for the development of social justice leaders provided an intimate and personal look at the participant's experiences. However, the ISLDN framework provided a way to ground the radically subjective experience of Mr. Kelly to allow for comparisons between other individuals and across geographic and cultural boundaries.

The ways that Mr. Kelly learned how to become a social justice leader were primarily grounded within the micro context of the framework. Mr. Kelly was most directly impacted by relationships and experiences. His relationships with his parents, teammates, and mentor coupled with his experiences while away at college had the most influence of his mother:

I had to model my mother's example. Deep empathy. Sincere engagement. I don't check how I feel at the school door when I leave for the day. It's woven into the fabric of who I am at this point. I care. I care deeply about these kids.

Mr Kelly described his relationship with his mentor in an equally as powerful way:

You know what really harnessed those experiences and made them into these talking points... tidbits of information that positioned me to lead in a socially just way... it was finding a leader and mentor that lived a vision of social justice and, subsequently, ended up getting me to fully commit to it as well.



In short, his disposition to lead for social justice was most immediately grounded in and resonated from the core of his being, rather than from external influences.

Mr. Kelly was very aware and sensitive to racism, but his actions weren't solely focused on the relief or deconstruction of the systemic conditions that enabled and perpetuated its existence. He focused on what he could change for his students including expanding their opportunities to engage with the world in ways they otherwise wouldn't while in school. This idea was at the core of the following statement:

I started thinking in student-centric terms rather than a principal first, top-down mindset. I started opening our doors to engage students before and after school in a variety of initiatives to prepare them for the workforce or college. We immerse them in recreation opportunities and give them the ability to give back to their community through philanthropic events.

Conclusion and Future Research

Mr. Kelly's case suggested that he learned his journey to be a social justice leadership was informed by personally intimate and unique experiences. His orientation was not the result of societal forces or conditions, but a direct result of influential people and moments that he experienced over the course of his life. His path to becoming a social justice leader was also dependent on being placed in an environment that would allow him to harness what he had learned. The environment demanded that he lead in a socially just way to be successful and have longevity in his role. Also, the fact that he was hyper-aware of how the predominantly white and affluent communities that surrounded his district viewed the children in his school evoked his competitive nature. To win, he needed to provide equitable opportunities for his students as compared to those other districts. As cliché as it sounds, his temperament and general predisposition, coupled with the environment that he worked truly created a perfect storm for Mr. Kelly to lean upon his life experiences as he became a social justice leader.

Findings supported Bogotch's (2000) notion of social justice as an emergent phenomenon that becomes realized through specific actions intended to achieve a vision of a more just and equitable schooling experience. This study also reinforced the need to conceptualize context(s) as interwoven and interacting. In particular, the study showcased that context isn't simply the setting that social justice leaders are contrasted against; context is an important and influential factor that must be seriously taken into consideration so social justice leadership can be understood in a more meaningful way (Bettez & Hytten, 2013; Bogotch, 2000; DeMatthews, 2016; Hallinger, 2016).

Additionally, I'd suggest that the ISLDN framework should account for the robust and varied life histories of social justice leaders. When individuals describe how they came to be something or act in a certain way, they tend to describe concrete examples, relay transformational moments, or explain the importance of a relationship rather than trace the roots of their leadership to a complex relationship involving factors at various levels of context. ISLDN might consider adding depth and complexity at the very center of the model, the social justice leader themselves.

Future research in the area should examine the interplay between the micro-context and formal leadership preparation courses. Is social justice leadership something that can be taught within a prescribed curriculum or does it require an individual that innately values and prioritizes social justice on a basic level before they can enact it as a school leader? Furthermore, context needs to be continually interrogated in examinations of educational leadership and, specifically, social justice leadership. To better understand the "big picture" of social justice leadership, it is imperative to continue to examine, poke, prod, disturb, and otherwise snoop around these phenomena of interest in their specific context and, in turn, to properly contextualize them through our academic writing, conversations, discourse, and musings.



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