



# A socio-ecological framework of social justice leadership in education

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Received 6 December 2012

Revised 20 January 2013

19 May 2013

2 August 2013

Accepted 9 August 2013

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present the gap between conceptualizations of social injustices and the desired social transformation that addresses multiple social subsystems and levels on one hand, and social justice leadership that addresses intra-school efforts on the other. The paper aims to expand the conceptualization of social justice leadership and tie it together with concepts of activism and social change.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper adopts a socio-ecological perspective. It reviews works about social justice leadership in education, activism, and social change to present the notion that in light of existing social justice barriers educational leaders should serve as activists in schools and in the community and policy areas.

**Findings** – The paper presents a macro framework, focussing on individual leaders in the field and on the consolidation of intentions, actions, and outcomes in a manner necessary for using social justice as an effective socio-political agenda in a socio-ecological system.

**Originality/value** – The paper presents a conceptual framework which can enable practitioners and researchers to better understand social justice efforts.

**Keywords** Leadership, Social change, Social justice, Educational administration, Activism

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, or economic changes (Martin Luther King, Jr).

In the last decade there has been a growing interest in social justice issues in education (e.g. see Blackmore, 2002; Bogotch, 2002; Furman and Gruenewald, 2004; Goldfarb and Grinberg, 2002; Larson and Murtadha, 2002; Marshall, 2004; Marshall and Oliva, 2006; McMahon, 2007; Normore and Jean-Marie, 2008; Place *et al.*, 2010; Shields, 2004; Shoho, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). It is commonly argued that educational leaders should act as moral agents with regard to social justice issues (Bates, 2006; Furman, 2004; Greenfield, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1992). The moral responsibility of educational leaders is especially important in light of the numerous social problems that marginalized groups and minorities face as a result of oppression (Selsky, 1991). The significance of moral leadership is magnified in a social context where no one takes charge (Bryson and Crosby, 1992).

A large part of the literature suggests that moral responsibility should be instilled in schools. Education, however, is an open system embedded in a complex social context. Educational leaders are continually urged to examine how educational problems are formed in a broad social context (Adams and Copeland, 2005). In some cases, principals must also act in the community to promote an environment that supports social justice (Madsen and Mabokela, 2005) and become involved in the policy arena through advocacy and coalition building (Black and Murtadha, 2007). In their discussion on how to realize social justice in the world, Marshall *et al.* (2010) recognize



that if social justice practices are to endure, norms and policies must be transformed in schools as well as in communities.

I suggest that it may be helpful to consider a socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that regards social life as the result of interactions between multiple subsystems and multiple levels[1]. Although it is commonly agreed that social injustices in education are the result of the operation of multiple systems and levels, which cemented the injustices in the structure of our social arrangements (Clark, 2006), a socio-ecological perspective on the efforts to repair these injustices has not yet been developed. Currently, one may criticize the prevailing social justice discourse in education for being limited in its focus on actions by individuals and schools in an isolated manner, and for not properly recognizing the interdependence between social subsystems and levels. Clark (2006) elaborates on the implications of this notion and contends that “while some school instrumentality interventions may have some effect on reducing social inequalities, they are unlikely to have the large-scale impact their proponents wish for, and in the long run may well not achieve the desired outcome” (p. 285). Thus, individual actions by themselves are unlikely to overcome cemented collective injustices, unless the actions are grounded in a joint effort (Bookchin, 2005).

I argue that adopting a socio-ecological viewpoint on social justice efforts in education broadens the focus on leadership actions in schools and emphasizes the need to synchronize them with complementary leadership actions in a broader social context. This combined operation can promote long-term conjunctive changes at multiple social levels (Vago, 2004): changing students’ lives and school culture, and contributing to socio-cultural evolution of community and society. The present paper focusses on the intra-institutional and extra-institutional activism (i.e. social activism) of social justice leaders and seeks to tie this activism together with a broader discussion of social justice goals and social change.

The paper makes five key contributions to the current literature. First, the paper identifies a significant inconsistency between broad social goals of social justice ideology and mainstream social justice leadership literature that addresses social justice as primarily an intra-school activity. Second, it identifies the sources of difficulties in promoting social justice as strictly an intra-school activity. Third, the paper makes an important distinction between the intra-institutional and extra-institutional activism of social justice leaders. Fourth, it offers solutions to the difficulties inherent in the implementation of social justice activism in schools based on social activism. Fifth, it offers a macro framework for social justice leadership in education, starting from ideology, through activism, to outcomes, and it addresses the relationships between the various elements in the framework.

### **Analytic approach**

The present paper aims to present a socio-ecological conceptual framework of social justice leadership by incorporating theoretical and empirical works on activism and social change into the educational social justice leadership literature. Socio-ecological theory conceptualizes inter-relationships between humans and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The theory suggests that individuals change or develop as a result of two key inter-relations. The first is the interaction between individuals and their immediate surroundings (home, school, neighborhood, community), the broader social surroundings (school, peers, neighborhood, community), and macro social structures (cultural values, customs, and laws). The second refers to the interactions

between the immediate and broader environments and the macro social structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

Despite its broad scope, the paper does not purport to serve as a systematic review of literature but rather as an integrative conceptual review. The data collection process involved two main data sources: edited collections and special issues devoted to social justice leadership in education (Grogan, 2002a,b; Marshall, 2004; Shoho, 2006; Normore, 2007, 2008); and electronic search of the ERIC database and the Google Scholar engine by combining such keywords as “social justice,” “activism,” and “social change” with the terms “principals,” “head teachers,” “administrators,” “educational leadership,” “moral leadership,” “leaders,” “social entrepreneurs,” and “public entrepreneurs.” The search yielded countless results. In the next stage, I reviewed the abstracts of the works found and narrowed the scope of literature by selecting the most relevant works. Works were chosen for inclusion in the review primarily based on their potential contribution to the conceptual framework of the paper and for their relevance to socio-ecological principles: first, works addressing attempts by individuals to promote social transformation through leadership based on social justice values in education or other closely related fields (e.g. public service, NGOs, etc.); second, works that address the interdependence of social subsystems and the embeddedness of social levels.

System thinking, which is closely linked with the socio-ecological perspective (Stokols, 1996), suggests that it is possible to achieve a deeper understanding of a phenomenon by examining its parts in relation to the whole. The present work aspires to illuminate the socio-ecological elements in social justice ideology, the practices, and the desired outcomes, and to integrate the various links in the chain in order to offer a socio-ecological framework that can adequately describe social justice leadership in education. To meet this objective, I begin by providing a broader context from which to understand the origins, assumptions, and goals of the social justice paradigm and of its manifestations in education. Next, I review the literature on social justice leadership in order to define the construct. The concepts of activism (intra-institutional and extra-institutional) and social change, identified as central in social justice efforts, are elaborated based on the educational and sociological literature. The concepts of social justice leadership, activism, and social change are integrated into a coherent framework. The paper concludes with a critical look at social justice leadership and practice today, and with practical recommendations.

### **The social justice paradigm in education**

Many scholars attempted to define social justice (Blackmore, 2002; Bogotch, 2002; Furman and Gruenewald, 2004; Goldfarb and Grinberg, 2002; Larson and Murtagh, 2002; Marshall, 2004; Marshall and Oliva, 2006; Shields, 2004). Nevertheless, there is no broad consensus at present about what the term “social justice” means (Shoho *et al.*, 2005). Broadly defined, social justice is a value-based attitude or a belief people hold about the unequal life opportunities of some social groups compared with others in a given society, and how these opportunities are negatively affected by existing social conditions (Rasinski, 1987). In their case study, Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) conclude that those who ascribe importance to social justice wish to promote what they view as the inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in multiple social arenas. Thus, social justice efforts are aimed at eliminating cultural and social inequities such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, poverty, and disability (Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Rucinski and Bauch, 2006). These efforts are rooted in ideological philosophies.

In the following section the ideological roots, underlying assertions, and the socio-political goals of the social justice paradigm are described as the background for the discussion of the social justice paradigm in education[2].

#### *Ideological roots, assertions, and goals of the social justice paradigm*

The belief in a socially just society is derived from two ideological philosophies: liberal democratic philosophy and critical humanism (Cochran-Smith, 2009; Furman and Gruenewald, 2004). Liberal democratic philosophy maintains that all citizens are equally entitled to autonomy and life prospects (Rawls, 1971). In a complementary manner, the critical humanist philosophy views discriminatory social structures as socially made and value-laden (Furman and Gruenewald, 2004). Furthermore, critical humanist philosophy maintains that disadvantaged groups are marginalized by dominant groups in the social discourse, and the philosophy supports the minorities' rights to uphold their unique way of life (Noonan, 2003). In her study on teacher education for social justice, Cochran-Smith (2009) argues that both philosophies are relevant to social justice issues and suggests that they can be translated into two social justice goals: distribution and recognition.

Distributive injustice is fixed in the socio-economic structure of society, which creates conditions that encourage the exploitation and deprivation of poor classes (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Supporters of distributive social justice aspire to redistribute resources and opportunities in order to promote a fair and more equitable society (Cochran-Smith, 2009). By contrast, recognition injustice originates in a social phenomenon in which minorities and their cultures are intentionally excluded from social institutions and the public sphere by the dominant groups; recognition justice must therefore ensure equal opportunity for participation (Cochran-Smith, 2009). Cochran-Smith (2009) also considers recognition justice to include issues of respect of diversity and participation. Fraser (2005, 2009), the critical political theorist, separates between the two and presents a social justice framework that includes three goals: economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation. According to Fraser, the three themes support each other and are intertwined. The social justice paradigm focusses on promoting these goals, among others, in the political and the economical arena (Jordan, 1998). The present paper focusses on the education arena, as social injustices are often manifest in education systems and require attention.

#### *Social justice challenge and corrective practices in education*

The moral justification for social justice efforts in education is that the promotion of marginalized individuals benefits the school in the short term and society in the long term. Inequality hurts all students because it damages social solidarity in schools, lowers motivation, increases the rate of discipline problems, and thereby reduces the efficiency and effectiveness of schools (Chiu, 2010; Wilkinson, 2004). Blackmore (2006), in her historical analysis of social justice leaders' practices in education, argues that if the purpose of leadership is social justice, "then the question becomes not what is good for each child, but also what constitutes a good society, one in which rights to choose are not privileged over responsibilities to others and/or the community" (p. 197). Adopting these assumptions, Apple (2010) envisions the transformation of the unjust social-economic reality by applying social justice principles in education. With that said, the debate about social justice in education is often conducted at a more operational level and focusses on achievements, inclusion, and a tolerant school climate. These are directly linked to the three social justice challenges facing schools.

The first challenge is promoting the academic and socio-emotional growth of all students (Carlisle *et al.*, 2006). Thus, school leaders have been repeatedly urged to be responsible for improving educational outcomes, well-being, and life prospects for all children (Anyon, 2005; Brown, 2004; Larson and Murtadha, 2002; Pounder *et al.*, 2002; Shields, 2004). Specifically, social justice leaders should be committed first and foremost to the academic and emotional success of marginalized students (Theoharis, 2007).

The second challenge encountered by schools is the segregation and exclusion of disadvantaged and disempowered social groups, which is frequently replicated in schools. Students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and students who do not speak natively the country's dominant language are frequently segregated in the educational system (McKenzie *et al.*, 2008). Given this unjust practice, Karagiannis *et al.* (1996) argue that social justice efforts should be aimed at promoting inclusive schooling for marginalized population groups. An inclusive school environment is expected to empower disadvantaged individuals and groups, increase their ability to participate as equals in society (Theoharis, 2007), and encourage their efforts for political representation.

The third central challenge schools face is developing an educational environment that enables accepting and respecting differences (Giroux, 1992). Harassment of students because of their identity has negative effects on attendance, achievements, and the students' plans to pursue higher education (Capper *et al.*, 2006), harming their ability to integrate in society. Gaudelli (2001) reflects on multicultural education and argued that social justice should focus on diminishing biases and prejudices. Theoharis (2007) links social justice in schools to learning about cultural diversity, understanding it, and respecting it.

Table I sums up the recurring themes in the various definitions of social justice and social justice leadership. The themes include social justice ideological justification, meta-social justice assertions, meta-social justice goals, manifestations of social inequities in education, and social justice practices in education.

As presented above, the social justice paradigm assumes that social injustices are linked with the interdependence of multiple subsystems and the embeddedness of levels, so that injustices are conceptualized as socio-ecological problems. The rise of the social justice paradigm, including its assertions, goals, and practices, within society in general and among professionals in education, as described above, cannot be separated from the broader neo-liberal social-economic context framing national and international policies today. Neo-liberal capitalism frequently suggests that social injustices can be solved only by individual academic mobilization within schools.

#### *Neo-liberalism and social justice in education*

Apple (2010) recognizes neo-liberal capitalism as "the chief structural and ideological governance mechanism" (p. 163) of the current age, producing and perpetuating the dominance of elite groups, among others through the education system. Based on his experiences as an educator, Ayers (2004) argues that under the current social-economical structure education is used in a restrictive and dehumanizing manner. The hold of neo-liberalism in education works as a pincer movement: on one hand, policymakers and leaders focus on managerialism and efficiency, and on the other parents and children perceive schooling mostly as an instrumental product.

With the rise of neo-liberalism, we witness a growth in "social darwinism" as a basis for public policy (Lugg, 1996). The neo-liberal agenda embraces a "minimal state" model (Nozick, 1974), intervening only to ensure the effectiveness of the market (Jessop, 1994). At the same time, there is a rise of "utilitarian individualism,"

Ideological justifications of social justice	Meta social justice assertions	Meta social justice goals	Manifestations of social inequities in education	Social justice practices in education
Liberal democratic philosophy	Equal life opportunities	Economic redistribution	Gaps in student achievement	Supporting schooling aimed at improving achievements
	Autonomy			
Critical humanist philosophy	Equal right of participation	Political representation	Segregation	Prompting inclusive schooling of marginalized groups
	Respect of different identities	Cultural recognition	Intolerance and harassment	Developing critical citizens Prompting school culture; respecting and supporting diversity

**Table I.** Repeating themes in social justice and social justice leadership definitions

with individuals acting exclusively for the purpose of strengthening their personal position (Bellah *et al.*, 1985). In this context, there is a growing neo-liberal focus on education as a consumer product (Ball, 2009), in which those belonging to the power groups enjoy an advantage (Yonah, 2000).

In their historical essay, Karpinski and Lugg (2006) identify social justice as a counter-hegemonic approach to the dominant managerial discourse in education administration. But pressures from multiple stakeholders, as noted above, can affect even the social justice discourse in education and promote pseudo-social justice discourse. For instance, Furman and Gruenewald (2004), reviewing the social justice literature for the purpose of developing a critical socio-environmental pedagogy, identify a strong focus on the achievements and future economic well-being of students from marginalized groups. Social justice has been frequently used to describe a lack of opportunities for children based on gender, economic status, ethnicity, and race,



especially in a context of high-stakes testing (Alsbury and Whitaker, 2007; Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). Nevertheless, the question remains whether state standards can undermine the social structure (Bell *et al.*, 2002; Connell, 1993; Furman and Gruenewald, 2004; Larson and Murtadha, 2002). English (2005) criticizes the focus on achievements and school improvement because its “subordinate social justice and democratic community leave intact larger social inequities in social power” (p. 92).

Thus, social justice efforts focussing exclusively on promoting deprived children’s academic achievements can be viewed as conforming to the existing power structure and perpetuating it. The socio-ecological perspective suggests that commitment to academic achievement should be viewed as one in an array of goals also pursued outside schools boundaries.

### **Defining social justice leadership in education**

Promoting social justice issues in schools is particularly important because social, political, and economic conditions are often replicated in schools (Zembylas, 2010). School leaders, therefore, play a pivotal role in promoting social justice issues. School leaders are expected to propose and experiment with various solutions to social injustices (Dantley and Tillman, 2006), and to attempt to empower their students and transform the effects of social injustices on the students (Capper, 1993).

As noted previously, several definitions of social justice leadership in the educational domain appear in the literature (e.g. see Blackmore, 2002; Dantley, 2002; Larson and Murtadha, 2002; Marshall, 2004; Rapp, 2002; Riester *et al.*, 2002; Shields, 2004). Recently, Theoharis (2007) attempt to distinguish between “good leadership” and “social justice leadership,” and contend that social justice leaders “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions [...] central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 221). Thus, social justice leadership has different goals and priorities, emphasizes different practices, and measures its success differently than what is commonly referred to as successful school leadership. McKenzie *et al.* (2008) conclude that all definitions of social justice, as applied to educational leadership, view leaders as having the following characteristics: focus on equity and activism.

Whereas the equity goals that social justice leaders pursue (i.e. academic achievement, student desegregation, and respecting differences) received ample theoretical and empirical attention in the literature, the proactive aspect of social justice leadership received much less attention (see notable exceptions in Furman, 2012; Goldfarb and Grinberg, 2002; Normore and Jean-Marie, 2008; Rapp, 2002; Shields, 2003; Theoharis, 2007). The activism aspect of social justice leadership targets “unjust teaching practices and policies and promotes inclusion and equity for all students” (Zembylas, 2010, p. 611). “Fairness” and “neutrality” of leaders have been deemed inappropriate characteristics because they serve the privileged and replicate the existing social structure (Karpinski and Lugg, 2006). Bogotch (2002) argue that social justice practice is “a deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power” (p. 140). On the same note, Grogan (2002a, b) states that social justice leaders must “interrupt the continued maintenance of the status quo” (p. 115) and bring about social change. Attempts at social change are based on active efforts to transform conventional social arrangements and their implications (Selsky and Smith, 1994). Such attempts aim at creating a “ripple effect” in society (Gerstein and Ægisdóttir, 2007), where a change in certain elements of the social system is expected to produce associated positive changes, in a domino effect. I suggest, however, that activism is

more central to the definition of social justice leadership presented here, as I explain in greater detail below.

### *Social justice leadership and activism*

In their discussion about building the capacities of social justice leaders, Marshall and Oliva (2006) stress that the ability of social justice leadership to mend educational injustices lies in its power to mobilize people in support of the goal, and thereby accumulate the required social capital and political power to bring about change. Individuals who embrace activist behaviors are extremely important because they articulate goals, and mobilize and coordinate various participants (Stern *et al.*, 1999; Stern, 2000). Thus, promoting social change effectively depends on activists who are highly committed to acting publicly in order to influence public attitudes, behaviors, and government policies (Stern *et al.*, 1999).

Exploring public service advocacy, Freudenberg (2005) argue that organizing people to promote social change can be directed at institutions, policies, and environments. Activism may be expressed within an existing organization, as one member acts to reform institutional policies and procedures and affect the attitudes of other employees to create a more favorable climate for the cause (Dodd *et al.*, 2004). It can also be expressed in the social arena by influencing public attitudes or policies (McFarlane and Boxall, 2003). Based on this categorization, I suggest that social justice leadership activism in education can be differentiated by the area in which it aims to operate: intra-institutional activism (i.e. in the school arena) or social or extra-institutional activism (i.e. in the policy and community arenas). The traditional conception is that educational leaders committed to the promotion of social justice issues must operate as intra-institutional activists, but the socio-ecological perspective suggests that they must serve additionally as social activists operating in other relevant subsystems and at other levels. In the following section, I review the social justice leadership literature to demonstrate the distinction between the two types of activism, in support of the claim that in some cases school (i.e. institutional) activism must be accompanied by social activism in the community and the policy arenas.

*Intra-institutional activism.* At the intra-institutional level, social justice-oriented leaders have an obligation to decrease inequities. The promotion of equity values in the school arena causes social justice leaders to place three goals in the forefront of their efforts (Grant and Sleeter, 2007; Theoharis, 2007): prompting equity in academic achievement, embracing inclusive practices, and developing critical consciousness. Thus, redistribution, recognition, and democratic deliberation practices have been argued to form the deserving foundation for social justice leadership (Bates, 2006; Blackmore, 2006).

To decrease academic inequities, Chiu and Walker (2007), exploring social justice leadership in Hong Kong, recommend that principals “eliminate tracking, create a caring school community, institute a broader system of rewards, articulate clear goals and standards, and make decisions more transparent.” Additional strategies mentioned include changes in the curriculum, selection of appropriate pedagogies, professional development for staff, and deeper community connections. Theoharis (2007) suggests that social justice leadership needs to support a schooling process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy. School leaders are responsible for promoting inclusive and heterogeneous learning environments that can prepare students to live as critical citizens in a diverse society (McKenzie *et al.*, 2008). Some scholars view schools as sites for democratic transformation by promoting safe spaces



and dialogue (McMahon, 2007). Principals are expected to create a comfortable culture in classrooms in order to cultivate student reflection (Young and Laible, 2000), and to promote schooling that is not permeated with racism, classism, sexism, and other prejudices and biases (Marshall, 2004). These intra-institutional efforts to decrease injustice are in some cases not sufficient to alter the implications of social structure on children, because school is an embedded institution (Peshkin, 1995).

*Barriers to intra-institutional activism.* "Education mirrors society," and in most cases "social change generates educational change" (Anderson, 1990, p. 32). But social justice leadership assumes the converse, namely that educational change can generate social change. The common presumption is that with given resources, a school can act as an isolated and independent environment. Therefore, social justice actions should be aimed at changing the school's practices and culture. They should be directed only at changing unjust intra-organizational policies and eliminating staff and student biases. Although such effort is admirable, in some cases leaders must target political and cultural conditions that constrain or endanger their work. Below I describe five barriers to intra-institutional activism in schools:

- (1) ethical commitment to uphold rules;
- (2) hindering policies;
- (3) traditional community values;
- (4) convergence of multiple socio-economic challenges; and
- (5) contradictory social justice goals.

The first barrier relates to the principals' ethical commitment to upholding rules. School leaders are urged to "leave the comforts and confines of professional codes and state mandates for the riskier waters of higher moral callings" (Rapp, 2002, p. 233), and thus embrace the risks and uncertainty associated with the lack of professional protocol and entering the political area (Lugg and Soho, 2006). But in some cases pursuing social justice is not only a matter of comfort and risk avoidance, but also one of ethical conduct, as in certain situations moral judgments may conflict with procedures (Tenbrunsel and Messick, 2004). Acting in opposition to rules and regulations, although motivated by a moral imperative, may be unethical at various levels.

The second barrier concerns hindering policies. Regulatory and financial government policies affect the possible moral choices in schools (Peshkin, 2001). For instance, social justice attempts can be compromised if current policies make it too easy for advantaged or prejudiced groups to leave school. There is evidence that in England prejudiced sections of the local community, which object to principals' commitment to promoting social inclusion in school, used the parental choice policy to avoid multi-ethnic schools (Stevenson, 2007). This practice seriously undermined the principals' social justice efforts. Additionally, governmental distribution policies and a lack of resources allocated to affirmative action efforts harm the abilities of school leaders to act based on necessity (Theoharis, 2007).

The third barrier has to do with community values and norms. According to Chiu and Walker (2007), "in schools, social justice is about working to reduce student disadvantages at the classroom, organization, family, community, and broader societal levels. The interconnections among disadvantages across multiple levels stubbornly obstruct the educational and social progress of individuals and sub-groups." As social justice leaders aim to affect the status quo, resistance becomes

a central issue (Theoharis, 2007). For example, in the patriarchal Arab culture, as oppressed women attempt to promote their incorporation as equals in the education system, leaders and students encounter great community resistance (Shapira *et al.*, 2010). Similar contradiction with traditional culture was found in the Hong Kong education system, where the cultural context legitimized hierarchical relationships (Chiu and Walker, 2007).

The fourth barrier concerns the convergence of multiple socio-economical challenges. When injustices are rampant, there is little chance for change in a school setting to succeed without initiating changes in the broader circles of the political arena and the community discourse. Research supports this claim and shows that principals identified substantial obstacles to the fulfillment of their social justice responsibilities, including scarce political will, a community unsupportive of such a focus, and insufficient resources to address these concerns (Marshall and Ward, 2004). The inspirational story of the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) illustrates this barrier well (Childress *et al.*, 2009). Before taking corrective action, the MCPS conducted a socio-economic and educational mapping of the county. The mapping discovered geographic “red zones” that contained 75-80 percent of all minority students, 75-80 percent of all poverty, 75-80 percent of all students in need of remedial English, and showed extremely low student performance. In such cases, the chances of school principals to promote student success and welfare without initiating supporting changes in communal and municipal conditions are slim.

The fifth barrier consists of contradictory social justice goals that can lead to passivity and idleness. To complicate matters, not in all cases are social justice goals consistent with one another. Leadership for social justice is complex and replete with contradictions (McKenzie *et al.*, 2008). Chiu and Walker (2007) argue that cultural and social structures differ across societies, and so does our understanding of what is inequity. Similarly, Furman and Shields (2003) emphasize the contextual nature of social justice issues, stressing the notion that meanings of social justice are constructed by the perceivers’ “understandings of the historical context, their present circumstances, and the moral purpose of their organizational contexts” (p. 15). This opens the door to troubling dilemmas, as for instance when the will to accommodate community values is opposed to professional judgment (Eyal *et al.*, 2011) about what is the student’s best interest. Alsbury and Whitaker (2007) found that superintendents reported to be opposing local Hispanic community’s desire to eliminate language programs that the community views as endangering its cultural heritage, which at the same time superintendents view as essential for promoting the children’s social and economic inclusion in the general society. This zero-sum perception of the situation may be a result of resource policy or actors’ misconceptions, which may be changed if targeted.

In light of these barriers, social justice leadership acting intra-institutionally is often limited. Thus, the socio-ecological perspective suggests that often leaders must also act as social activists in the community and on policy arenas to promote social justice efforts within schools.

### **Social justice leadership and social activism**

To conceptualize the function of social justice leaders in schools as social activists, I review the social activism literature below. Next, I integrate the social activism knowledge with the education literature in order to conceptualize educational leaders as activists.

The vast body of literature dealing with social activism in civil society describes social activism as: individuals gathering around a common grievance and acting

collectively to solve it, a form of collective action also known as “social movement;” or as individuals’ attempts to solve a social problem in an innovative manner by forming a new non-profit organization. This form of individual action is also known as social entrepreneurship. Below I elaborate on each of these forms of action.

The collective social activism literature focusses on social movements. Turner and Killian (1957) defines a “social movement” as “a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or group of which it is a part” (p. 246). Tarrow (1994) argues that social movements focus on confronting collective socio-political challenges linked with elite groups, government authorities, or cultural norms. Successful social movement organizations are said to “frame” issues in a manner that mobilizes others to support and join the activity (Snow *et al.*, 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988). For a social movement to succeed, its “frame” must include the following elements (Snow and Benford, 1988): diagnosis of the situation as problematic; a proposed solution; and a call to engage in action. Additionally, social movements rely for their success on their ability to attract and utilize socio-political resources (i.e. the public, media, and government) (Gamson, 1990). Social movements usually do so by using collective tactics that include sit-ins and demonstrations, lobbying and litigation, negotiation, petitions, boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience, and even riots (della Porta and Diani, 1999). In the last decades, researchers have identified the rise of what they labeled “new social movements,” emphasizing the “emergence of new or formerly weak dimensions of identity” (Johnston *et al.*, 1994, p. 7). Women’s rights, gay rights, and ethnic movements are examples of identity-centered social movements.

The literature also mentions another form of individual action known as social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs are viewed as highly effective in addressing complex social issues in an innovative manner (Bornstein, 2004). Usually, as time progresses, they do so by founding a non-profit organization dedicated to carrying out their solutions within the framework of existing social reality (Emerson and Twersky, 1996). Drayton (2006) maintained that social entrepreneurs “test and refine an idea (an inherently unpredictable process), learn how to market it and cause many other institutions to change” (p. 16). In their comparative case analysis, Alvord *et al.* (2004) found that successful social entrepreneurs follow mainly three proactive strategies: building local capacities for self-help by altering local norms, roles, and expectations; providing tools and resource “packages” needed to transform individual economic status; and building local movements by alliances and campaigns in order to influence decision makers.

#### *Integrating social justice leadership in education and activism*

Social entrepreneurship and social movement, the two forms of social activism described above, at first glance appear to be irrelevant to school leaders because they operate within a public system. Sachs (2000, 2001, 2003), however, addresses the teachers’ power to act in order to promote their professional obligations by adopting socio-political strategies and thereby overcoming institutional and social barriers. She suggests that teachers’ professional activism is manifested in schools and in the broader circles of community and society. These “activist professionals” use their professional position proactively based on a moral agenda designed to “reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression” (Groundwater-Smith and Sachs, 2002, p. 353). Sachs and colleagues (Sachs, 2000, 2001, 2003; Groundwater-Smith and Sachs, 2002) argue that activism is the appropriate response to the rise of the managerial discourse in society and education. This description of professional

activism seems equally important for principals. Activist professionals identify problems, engage proactively, and develop solutions, are active in searching for social allies, recruit new members, set achievable goals, and use media to communicate about the activities of the group to the public (Sachs, 2001, 2003).

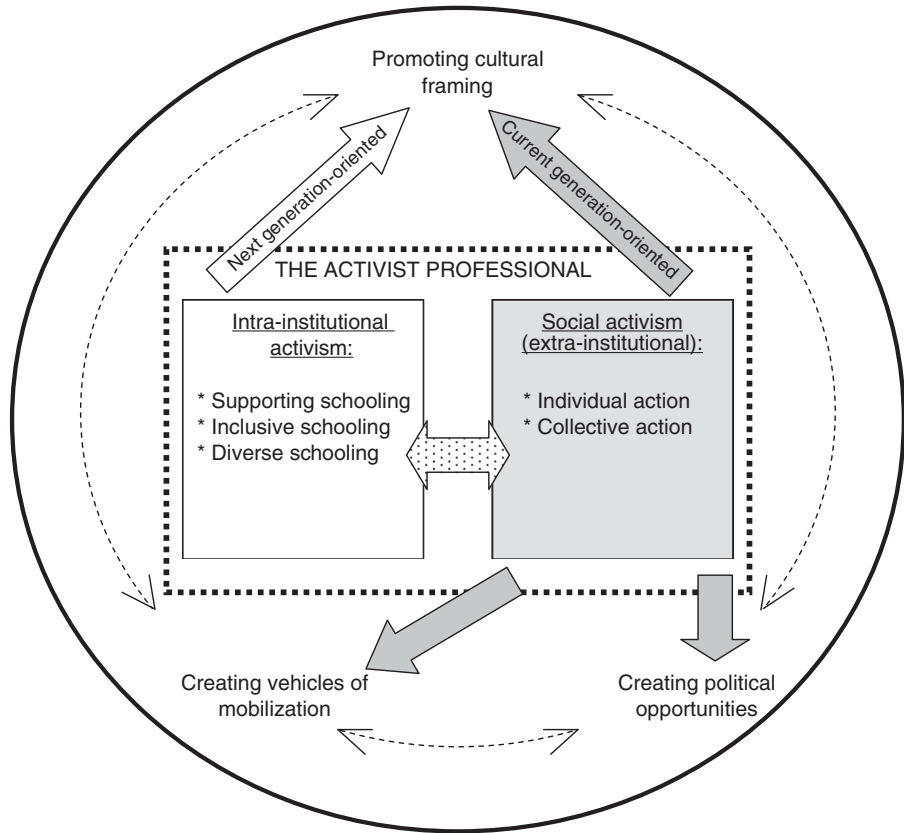
Similar ideas appear in the social justice literature. Although intra-institutional activism in schools is important, some scholars emphasize the equally, if not more important need for engaging in complementary social activism on the part of educational leaders. For example, Theoharis (2007) claims that successful social justice leaders should approach other activist principals to create coalitions and to foster the community support necessary for sustaining the changes initiated in their schools.

Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) recognize the difficulties associated with promoting a social justice agenda for officials in public service, especially given the current dominance of the managerial climate, but they stress that “it is an aspiration that works strongly in the interests of those which the public sector serves” (p. 353). In sum, based on the above review, I suggest that activist professionals in public roles maximize their potential influence for social justice issues by embracing practices of social activism in addition to intra-institutional activism, and by acting collectively in conjunction with other partners and forming an *ad hoc* social movement, or by acting individually to form social justice initiatives in the community (similarly to social entrepreneurs).

The literature suggests that activist efforts are successful when political opportunities, vehicles of mobilization, and framing activities by activists intersect (McAdam *et al.*, 1996). The three components are closely linked as “political opportunity influences the cognitive beliefs of individuals with respect to alternatives,” individuals’ cognitive beliefs form a cultural framing that influences people’s “subjective sense of power [that] triggers action,” whereas “cultural framings trigger perceptions of illegitimacy, and thereby, motivate individual action” (Martorana *et al.*, 2005, p. 287). I suggest that intra-institutional activism in education is focussed mostly on the cultural framing of the next generation (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), and can therefore simulate a microcosm for an alternative society (Udvari-Solner and Thousand, 1996). By contrast, social activism (i.e. extra-institutional activism) is a complimentary path to school activism, focussed on creating a broader cultural framing for the current generation (in communal and social circles), vehicles of mobilization, and political opportunities, which are often necessary for social justice efforts in schools to take place or to endure. Figure 1 illustrates the integration of social justice leadership in education and activism.

#### *Social activism as a solution to social justice barriers in schools*

By using cultural framing for the current generation as a vehicle for mobilization and by creating political opportunities, social activism can assist in handling the difficulties of implementing social justice activism in schools in several ways. For example, educational leaders facing restrictive rules can come together and attempt to reformulate their ethical code by focussing on the “students’ best interest” (Stefkovich, 2006; Stefkovich and Begley, 2007). Professional codes are being used these days to institutionalize professions, and are frequently used as mechanisms of control (Meulenbergs *et al.*, 2004). There is growing understanding of the need to deinstitutionalize ethical codes in order to restore their moral objectives. This process has been termed “ethicization” of ethical codes (Meulenbergs *et al.*, 2004). Educational administrators should therefore promote the ethicization of their ethical code by placing the students’ best interest at the center.



**Figure 1.**  
Educational leaders as  
activist professionals

As political entrepreneurs, educational leaders can also attempt to address hindering policies. Schneider and Teske (1992) argue that political entrepreneurs can affect the political equilibrium by altering the nature of political debates. According to Roberts and King (1991), such entrepreneurs can act in numerous ways, including: campaigning for new ideas; specifying and redefining issues and problems; pointing out policy alternatives; presenting ideas to the various policy actors and elaborate on them; mobilizing public opinion; and influencing agenda-setting. One key method of acting effectively and altering the political debate is to create or be part of an advocacy coalition consisting of individuals from a variety of circles (elected and governmental officials, interest group leaders, journalists, analysts, researchers, etc.) who share a belief system and act in a coordinated way over time (Sabatier, 1988).

Furthermore, educational leaders can use community partnership to target conservative community values that contradict social justice. In traditional communities, social institutions linked to religion and the family are key in mediating and authorizing moral goals (Thompson, 2004). The support of such social institutions can help associate moral goals with traditional codified myths and rituals. Thus, educational leaders can act as community entrepreneurs who stimulate others to operate or who promote a network committed to the social goals (Johannisson, 1990). Leaders should promote a participatory discourse with the community, in which they

serve as active drivers of processes and inform members about educational problems, consult and empower members in leadership roles, and create dialogue and a shared responsibility between school and community members (Cibulka, 1978).

The convergence of numerous social problems can be overwhelming, but educational leaders can overcome these problems by creating broad intra-sector and cross-sector partnerships. Riehl (2000) identifies ineffectiveness and fragmentation in youth social service provision as complex problems that are perceived and handled in an isolated manner, resulting in social institutions that do not communicate with each other, do not pool resources, and do not focus on shared goals. Effective educational leaders must address school challenges by promoting inter-organizational collaborations between government agencies for the good of the children (Riehl, 2000). In addition to partnership between various governmental agencies, cross-sector partnerships can also contribute to meeting complex social needs. Cross-sector partnerships make it possible to combine resources with the aim of creating or taking advantage of social opportunities for the common good (Borch *et al.*, 2008).

Finally, educational leaders can turn to community partnerships to enhance moral certainty. In some issues it is difficult to identify a clear moral path. The solution is to create broad partnerships through dialogue for the purpose of reaching consensus about ideas. For example, a school-parent partnership can be achieved by means of dialogical programs that provide parents the option of voicing their needs, empower them, and increase their involvement (Cooper and Christie, 2005). Normore and Blanco (2008) support the idea that educational leaders should create school-community partnerships on the basis of shared responsibility to assist them in meeting the needs of students from poor and marginalized groups.

The successful application of such measures is expected to have desired social effects, which can be measured by various indicators, including economic-financial indicators (available resources, etc.), social impact indicators (sustainability of resources and services, etc.), and institutional legitimacy indicators (laws, etc.) (Bagnoli and Megali, 2011). It is possible, however, that successful social activism efforts will encounter strong resistance and unwanted externalities. For example, promoting inclusive educational policies may result in violent incidents in the community or increase segregation in secondary education. Constant monitoring is required to address and treat these phenomena.

It is important to remember that little is known empirically about the effects of leaders' social activism on the public organizations they lead. But we can speculate about several implications and problems within a school context. First, as the leaders' focus encompasses broader challenges, external to the core organizational processes, leaders become less involved in organizational dynamics and their leadership becomes more distal. Theory suggests that the followers' dialogue with the leader changes from how questions, focussing on policies and practical feasibilities, to why questions, focussing on values and principles (Shamir, 2012). Thus, before embracing social activism as a central leadership challenge, leaders must promote practices supportive of social justice in their schools and transform the moral culture of the organizations they lead (Rhode, 2006). Close work with moral leaders is known to affect followers' perceptions of moral meaning, competence, and self-determination (Li *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, as leaders invest heavily in developing partnerships between school and stakeholders, focussing on the core values of care, compassion, self-determination, human diversity, and power sharing (Nelson *et al.*, 2001), disagreements may emerge among partners. It is therefore recommended that leaders promote shared structures



and spiritual symbols (Thompson, 2004), which can mobilize partners to resolve conflicts and work together to achieve mutual goals.

### **Macro-level social change as the goal of the social justice paradigm**

The social change paradigm aspires not only to achieve a long-term change in individuals' lives or within organizational cultures, but its foremost aim is to promote socio-cultural transformation (Apple, 2010). Thus, the end goal of social justice efforts is change in multiple subsystems and at many levels, directly linked with the socio-ecological perspective. In the present section, two basic sociological approaches to social structure and social change are discussed: functionalism and conflict theory. I argue that the latter provides the best description of the interoperation of social relations in the social justice paradigm. Next, based on Antonio Gramsci work, the concepts of cultural hegemony and historical bloc are elaborated and connected to the broader context of social change. Finally, a portrayal of the social change process is presented and various changes in social structure are illustrated.

#### *Defining social change*

The concept of social change is important to fully understand the success or failure of activist initiatives. Two main theoretical traditions are relevant to our discussion: functionalism and conflict theory. Functionalism views society as a holistic "organism" with interrelated parts in which structure and power relationships are natural. By contrast, conflict theory views society as artificially constructed and argues that social-economic or political inequality serves groups located at the top (Dillon, 2009). Functionalists suggest that social change emerges autonomously, as a result of demographic growth and of technological advances resulting from modernization processes (Eisenstadt, 1983). Thus, change from a functionalist perspective occurs naturally, smoothly, and has a gradual and accumulative character (Parsons, 1961). Conflict theorists, however, suggest that social change emerges non-autonomously, as a result of conflict between social groups (Marx, 2007). The social justice paradigm is closer to the latter interpretation of social reality and power structure, and thereby change is viewed as a force-driven alteration of society.

The Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci added a social aspect to Marx's conflictual perception of social reality and social change, which focussed mostly on the economic aspect. Gramsci (1971) emphasizes the concept of "hegemony," and suggests that by legitimizing a specific cultural hegemony in the public eyes, elites produce and maintain their political power. Gramsci views inequitable social structure as a result of the union of economic interests with cultural and political practices. He calls this interaction of powers a "historical bloc." Gramsci argues that the creation of a counter-historical bloc could undermine the dominant capitalistic historical bloc and suggests that social change is a gradual alteration of cultural practices in which intellectuals acting as champions play a central role.

Therefore, efforts at social change must be viewed as a continuous complex process that involves multiple actors operating concurrently. A similar view of social change is presented by Murdock (1961), who regards change as an alteration of the array of acquired collective habits (i.e. patterns of collective ideas and practices) in a given culture. Murdock describes a four-stage model by which cultural change takes place. The first stage is that of innovation, in which a new habit is suggested and championed by an individual. The second stage is that of social acceptance, which occurs when as a result of the efforts of the inventor and of its core supporters, the innovation influences

others members' thoughts and behaviors and is integrated into their routine. The third stage is one of selective elimination, in which innovative habits associated with better incentives than their alternatives become rooted in the culture, while the alternatives are eliminated. The fourth and final stage is integration, when the innovative habit becomes integrated with other collective habits in a coherent manner.

Because education is inherently a long-term, continuous process, the progress of educators' views toward social justice is an evolutionary process rather than a revolutionary one, in the sense that not all desired changes are expected to occur simultaneously. Thus, contemporaneous, small-scale changes reinforce and expand past changes, and eventually a new social reality is created (Newson and Richerson, 2009).

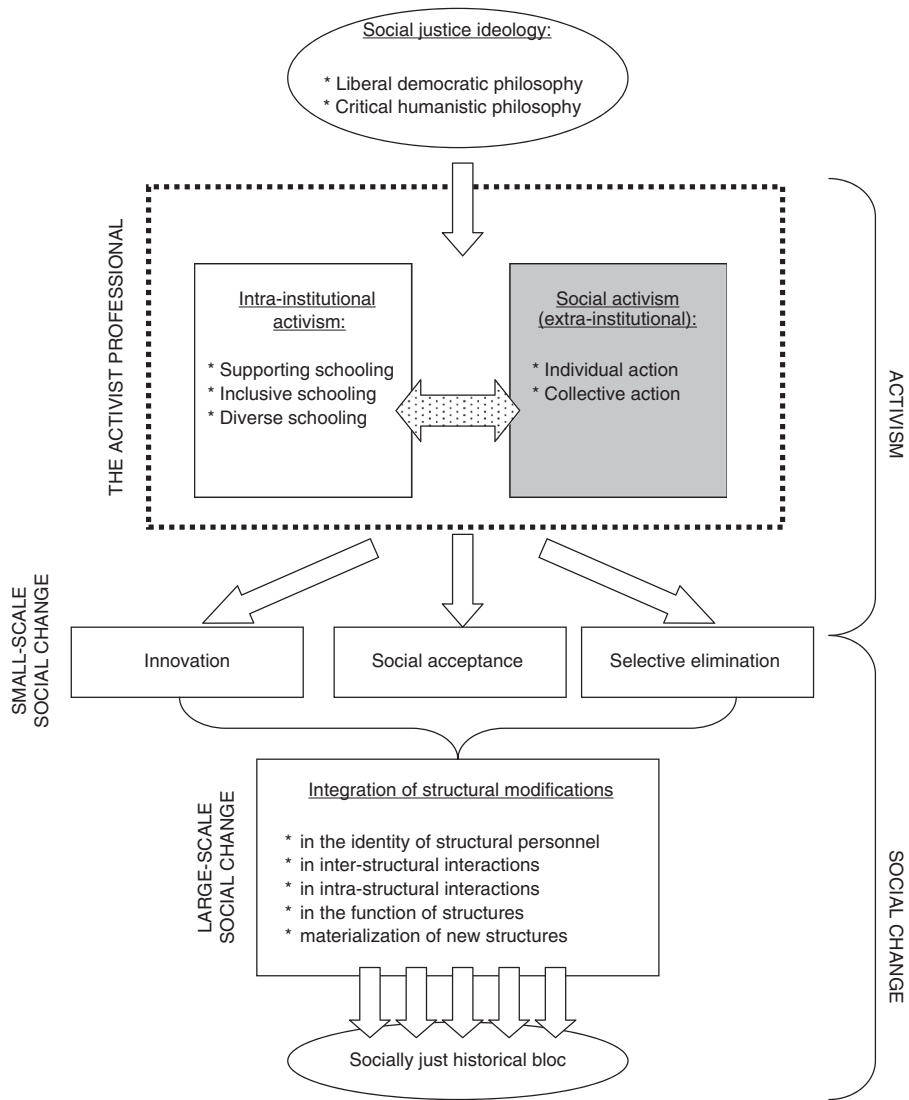
A substantial alteration of the social structure is an indication that a significant social change has taken place (Harper, 1989). Harper (1989) identifies five categories of structural modification: changes in the identity of structural personnel; changes in inter-structural interactions; changes in intra-structural interactions; changes in the function of structures; and the materialization of new structures.

Figure 2 integrates the notions conceptualized in the present paper concerning social justice leadership in education, activism, and social change.

As shown in Figure 2, social justice ideology, drawing on liberal democratic and critical humanistic philosophies, drives professionals to embrace both intra-institutional activism and social activism in order to promote social justice within schools and against social justice barriers. The efforts of activists are targeted at creating cultural framing, vehicles of mobilization, and political opportunities for the current and the next generation. These efforts foster numerous small-scale social changes through cultural innovation, social acceptance, and selective elimination. If successful, the social justice attempts of multiple agents, in education and in society, accumulate with time and generate a structural modification (i.e. large-scale social change) that is integrated into the social operation. Multiple large-scale social changes alter social reality by promoting a more socially just historical bloc that may be able to counter the dominance of the hegemonic, unjust social order.

### Discussion and implications

The disproportions in educational opportunities and outcomes among different student groups attest to an unjust educational system (Apple, 2010). In response to this troubling situation there is a growing scholarly interest in social justice problems and their causes, in social justice leadership and its development, and in social justice efforts and their outcomes. Despite this rising attention, our understating of social justice leadership is scant (Furman, 2012). Studies often suggest a micro-perspective on processes and outcomes. The present theoretical work attempted to lay the foundations for a macro-perspective on social justice leadership in education by adopting a socio-ecological perspective which links these leadership efforts with the concepts of activism and social change. A macro-perspective on the subject of social justice can help extend the effectiveness of reflective practitioners (Sergiovanni, 2005). Cheetham and Chivers (1996, 1998) propose a provisional model of professional competence for reflective practitioners and argue that professionals should reflect not only "in-action," as Schon (1983) recommended, but also "about action." The present paper proposes to enable a macro-perspective "about" social justice leadership. Although the paper offers some concrete ideas, these are merely initial suggestions pointing out future directions and requiring further development.



**Figure 2.**  
A integrative framework  
of social justice leadership  
in education, activism, and  
social change

The commitment of social leaders to social justice aims to promote students' academic achievements, well-being, and future prospects. The present paper links these efforts to the notion of school leaders as professional activists maximizing their influence on the achievement and well-being of all children by acting inside and outside schools. The framework emphasizes the need to re-conceptualize the efforts of social justice leaders from a socio-ecological perspective, increasing its coherence with the conceptualizations of social injustices and with the desired social transformation associated with multiple social subsystems and levels. Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) discuss teachers as professional activists and stress the need for professionals to adopt socio-political strategies as well. They conclude their

discussion as follows: “The teaching profession will require a critical mass of its members to form a community of practice which is willing to mobilize its considerable skills and strengths in the interests of a just, fair and equitable society” (p. 356). From a socio-ecological perspective, their recommendations are equally important to principals. The success of social justice efforts in education depends on creating a critical mass of committed professional activists, learning from each other and operating in coordination. Because school is an embedded institution (Peshkin, 1995), frequently intra-institutional efforts are not sufficient to alter broad social-economical implications on students. The efforts of leaders are limited and undermined by barriers to intra-institutional activism in schools, such as rules, hindering policies, traditions, and the convergence of socio-economic issues with contradictory social justice goals.

In the present paper, the socio-ecological perspective regards intra-institutional and social (i.e. extra-institutional) activism as complementary paths. Often, if not always, both are required to bring about social justice efforts inside schools in order to succeed. Efforts to create an alternative cultural framing of the next generation and to foster a diverse microcosm for students (Udvari-Solner and Thousand, 1996) often fail to endure without accompanying social activism efforts targeting cultural frames within the community and society, and creating vehicles of mobilization and political opportunities. Numerous small-scale social changes can accumulate to large-scale social changes and foster a more socially just historical bloc which can counter the hegemony of the current unjust socio-economic structure. History teaches us that the individual choice of leaders to promote social justice inside and outside schools exacts a professional and personal price (Blount, 2008; Karpinski and Lugg, 2006), but as more pioneering individuals decide to publicly commit to social justice, it will be easier for others to make the same decision.

Moral leadership chooses to use power in an unselfish way because it values collective interests (Farh *et al.*, 2008). Thus, leaders’ political ambition is not motivated by unfulfilled ego needs searching for “recognition,” rather, leaders ask to “make a difference,” for the collective good (Gini, 1997). Hannah *et al.* (2011) propose a comprehensive model to describe elements affecting the moral thoughts and actions of organizational actors. Their framework includes two key capacities: moral maturation, which is “the capacity to elaborate and effectively attend to, store, retrieve, process, and make meaning of morally relevant information;” and moral conation, which is “the capacity to generate responsibility and motivation to take moral action in the face of adversity and persevere through challenges” (p. 667).

Luban (2006) suggests that leaders who face ethical dilemmas often choose not to rise to the challenge despite their awareness of the ethical challenge. Frequently the will to solve the cognitive dissonance results in self-deception. In light of these patterns, Rhode (2006) advocates personal moral accountability and warns against decision making that involves “diffusion of responsibility, socialization to expedient norms, and peer pressure” (p. 27). Margolis and Molinsky (2006) argue that moral leadership is suppressed by high ambivalence regarding moral dilemmas and by undeveloped acquaintance with the self. To avoid the suppression of moral leadership, Luban (2006) suggests that leaders should constantly examine the gap between their beliefs and their actions. Awareness alone, however, is not enough. Messick (2006) contends that leaders’ moral judgment is heavily influenced by the presence or lack of moral courage in light of possible risks and losses. Hannah *et al.* (2005) recognize that the leaders’ internalization of values and self-determination, in conjunction with external demands, affects their morality.

The current framework has several key practical implications for those aspiring to promote the social activism of educational leaders. First, academic institutions and NGOs can form designated training programs targeted to strengthen the social activism of aspiring and acting leaders. These programs require two focusses. On one hand, programs should focus on developing participants' human capital as manifested in the knowledge in recruiting and pooling resources (Jiao, 2011), in interpersonal skills (conflict-resolution skills, etc.) (Nelson *et al.*, 2001), in an inclination for the practice of power sharing, and in value-based dialogue abilities. On the other hand, programs should focus on participants' moral agency, which is linked with their personal agency and reinforced by altruism and virtue (Hannah *et al.*, 2005).

Second, academic institutions and NGOs committed to social justice can create networking forums, such as conferences, to further enable leaders to practice their relational skills and expand their social networks. The interpersonal dialogue in such forums may contribute not only to the leaders' past or future initiatives and enhance their social influence (Jiao, 2011), but may also inspire leaders in a contagious manner, motivating them and strengthening their personal moral agency.

Third, as the moral conduct of public servants is the result of institutionalization procedures that exist in the public sector (Bromell, 2010), it is recommended to pay critical attention to legislation and ethical codes that regulate and guide educational leaders' behavior. For example, national and local government can establish administrative regulations granting greater administrative freedom to leaders, thereby weakening the bureaucratic obstacles to leaders' social action efforts. Additionally, associations of educational administrators must be critical toward their ethical code and become active in reformulating it so as to make it relevant to the social justice challenges arising in educational administration. This ethicization of the ethical code must be guided by a bottom-up approach, driven by participation on the part of field professionals (Meulenbergs *et al.*, 2004).

Finally, at present the role of educational leaders in community development is still insufficiently understood and researched (Riehl, 2000). I discovered the same lacuna with regard to the role of educational leaders in advocacy and social entrepreneurship. Therefore, additional research is required to uncover the best practices linked with successful social justice activism in education and the difficulties encountered in its deployment within schools and outside them. This knowledge is crucial for the spreading of social influence because only prolonged joint action can result in sustainable social change.

In sum, although adopting a socio-ecological perspective to social justice in education emphasizes issues of sustainability and challenges individuals' "bounded rationality" (Simon, 1982) by expanding the unit of analysis, it also stresses the importance of joint synchronized activities and the measurement of their social impact. Thus, a socio-ecological perspective on social justice mandates leaders to promote a "policy web" and be part of it (Clark, 2006). My personal hope is to see more and more professionals embracing activism both intra-institutionally and extra-institutionally, and forming alliances to overcome the barriers that stand before social justice.

#### Notes

1. It should be noted that in other works the term "socio-ecological" is used differently and refers to the relationship between social justice and environmental issues (see Furman and Gruenewald, 2004).
2. The conceptualization of social justice presented in this paper is derived from the dominant global perspective. I acknowledge that the literature offers other alternative conceptualizations

of social justice as well, derived from local cultures. For example, Johansson (2007), who examined conceptualizations of social justice in the South Pacific, found that the Tongan conceptualization of social justice is based on respect.

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