Female secondary school leaders: at the helm of social justice, democratic schooling and equity

Anthony H. Normore

College of Education, California State University-Dominguez Hills, Los Angeles, California, USA, and

Gaetane Jean-Marie

College of Education, University of Oklahoma, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore the leadership experiences of four female secondary principals (two Black, two White) in one south-western state to create significant discourse for understanding school leadership nested in complex social, political and cultural contexts. These women confronted education challenges of social justice, democracy, and equity in their schools.

Design/methodology/approach – The philosophical tradition of phenomenology was chosen as the qualitative methodology for this study "which is understood to be a concern for human meaning and ultimately for interpreting those meanings so that they inform our practice and our science". As a secondary analysis of a specific finding (i.e. female leaders who exemplified a values-orientation around issues of social justice in their leadership practices) from the original study the lived experiences of four female secondary school leaders were further explored.

Findings – All four women engaged in leadership praxis by: transforming school practices to promote equity and access for all students and embracing diversity of their student populations; connecting the world of research and practice; adopting democratic and participative leadership styles that relate to female values developed through socialization processes including building relationships, consensus building, power as influence, and working together for a common purpose.

Practical implications – While the focus is secondary school female leaders and educational leadership in a North American context, the implications have a broader transnational focus, exploring themes and issues that may span national boundaries and cultures.

Originality/value – For purposes of this article, the original data were revisited to conduct secondary analyses of the experiences of four women. Research contends that this approach can be used to generate new knowledge, new hypotheses, or support for existing theories; and that it allows wider use of data from rare or inaccessible respondents.

Keywords United States of America, Principals, Women, Socialization, Leadership, Secondary schools

Paper type Research paper

The impact of major political agendas and policies that emerged since the Brown decision have prompted many school leaders to assume a more active role with respect to the economic, social, and political struggles of marginalized students (Curry, 2000; Irby and Brown, 2004). When the 1954 landmark *Brown* v. *Board of Education* ruling declared that schools should be desegregated "with all deliberate speed" (Valverde, 2003), institutions of learning proceeded to end the systemic marginalization of children of color via school desegregation and reform-oriented public policies. Critical insights into the types of discourse, experiences, processes, and structures that

promote the development and support of contemporary principals committed to social justice and democratic principles provide a knowledge-base for understanding how they respond to the changing political and social landscapes in which they live and work (Lyman *et al.*, 2005).

The article aims to: identify how four female secondary school leaders engage in leadership practices for social justice and democratic schools, and capture their motivations and actions for engaging in core values of social justice, democracy, and equity. Similar to other research (e.g. Grogan, 1996; Marshall and Oliva, 2006; Marshall and Ward, 2004), these women leaders advance social justice in their education organizations, espouse the belief that democracy and equity matter, and exemplify the torchbearers of democratic ideals. Consequently, they have shown an increasing involvement and have developed as leaders. While the focus is on secondary school female leaders and educational leadership in the context of the USA, the implications have a broader trans-national focus, exploring themes and issues that may span national boundaries and cultures. As indicated by Preedy *et al.* (2003, p.1) "It is important for educational leaders to transcend sectoral boundaries in their thinking" for much remains to be learned "from reflecting on one's own professional context in the light of insights drawn from other sectors and cultures".

Building on previous research on women who struggled for social justice (e.g. Curry, 2000; Lyman *et al.*, 2005; Dillard, 2003) and democracy during the Civil Rights era (Hine, 1994), we interconnect the following constructs to frame the article: social justice leadership, socialization and values-orientation of women, and democracy and equity.

Theoretical perspective

Leadership theory and practice are responding to societal changes by shifting focus from what leaders do, and how they do it, to what leadership is for. This shift provides leverage for changes in bureaucratic systems that exist to serve the status quo. In this shift the new emphasis becomes leadership for value ends, including social justice, values-orientation, democratic and equitable schools, in support of learning for all children (Lyman *et al.*, 2005).

Defining social justice leadership

The discourse of social justice and leadership are inextricably linked. According to Marshall and Oliva (2006, p. 5) social justice "has generated a great deal of scholarship over the last decade" which in essence capitalizes on the relevance of such a discourse. Recent commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* and the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act have emphasized how movements for social justice have helped to define American history. These commemorations continue to serve as catalysts to refocus thinking on how school leaders have become social justice advocates and activists. According to Dantley and Tillman (2006, p. 17), discussions about social justice in the field of education have typically framed the concept of social justice around several issues including race, diversity, marginalization, morality, gender, and spirituality. These authors add age, ability and sexual orientation to the discourse).

Some research (e.g. Bogotch, 2005, p. 7) assert that social justice has no one specific meaning. Rather, "its multiple a posterori meanings emerge[d] differently from experiences and contexts". Bogotch (2005, p. 8) zeros in on a key component of social

justice by stating that "social justice, like education, is a deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power" and concludes that it is "both much more than what we currently call democratic schooling and community education, and much less than what we hold out as the ideals of progressing toward a just and democratic society and a new humanity worldwide". Furman and Shields (2005, p. 123) argue the "need for social justice to encompass education that is not only just, democratic, emphatic, and optimistic, but also academically excellent" (as cited in Firestone and Riehl, 2005). The notion of social justice is hard to capture. Tillman (2005, p. 261) asserts:

> It is demanding, fraught with controversy, and highly contextualized. Most people believe it is important but far fewer take the time or energy to actively pursue it. Thinking about social justice from a theoretical or historical perspective is a necessary but insufficient condition for actually achieving social justice.

While a review of the literature on social justice leadership does not present a clear definition of social justice, there is a general framework for delineating it. Lee and McKerrow (2005, p. 1) offer such framework in two dimensions. First, social justice is defined "not only by what it is but also by what it is not, namely injustice. By seeking justice, we anticipate the ideal. By questioning injustice, we approach it. Integrating both, we achieve it." The second dimension focuses on the practice of social justice: Individuals for social justice seek to challenge political, economic and social structures that privilege some and disadvantage others. They challenge unequal power relationships based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, and other systems of oppression. Lee and McKerrow (2005, p. 1) assert there is a renewed interested in social justice and many women in leadership are advancing its causes:

> As women achieve positions of influence and participate in policy decisions, they have opportunities to open up access to knowledge and resources to those with less power. Women from all levels of the social hierarchy, not just those with official status positions... work to alter the undemocratic culture and structure of institutions and society, improving the lives of those who have been marginalized or oppressed.

In considering female leadership styles (Bascia and Young, 2001; Blackmore, 1998; Young and Skrla, 2003) it is important to understand how women are socialized to practice leadership (Lather, 1986) Equally important is the understanding of how women's value systems and shared-knowledge help determine how female leaders work for social justice (Grogan, 1996; Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Skrla *et al.*, 2000).

Socialization of women: values-orientation
Bennis (1985) asserts that socialization involves a complex set of human relationships within an organization that includes all the people in it and their relationships to each other and to the outside world. Because of how the socialization process unfolds, women have developed values and beliefs that translate into specific behaviours arising in their leadership styles. Research has indicated that women are socialized to show their emotions, feelings, compassion, patience, and intuition (Ortiz, 1982); to help and care for others (Greenleaf, 1996; Lambert *et al.*, 1995; Noddings, 1992, 1999; Pounder and Coleman, 2002); to be listeners (Brunner, 1998); to judge outcomes based on their impact on relationships (Klenke, 2003; Oakley, 2000); and to lead complex settings in continuous change

(Caprioli and Boyer, 2001). Furthermore, inspiration and motivation in transformational leadership theory is what drives women to adopt this leadership style as their own (Avolio and Gibbons, 1988; Burns, 1978; Dantley and Tillman, 2006; Grogan, 1994; Irby and Brown, 2004; Shakeshaft, 1993). The female leadership styles in education are more democratic, participative, inclusive and collaborative (Bascia and Young, 2001; Skrla, 2000; Young and Skrla, 2003). In leading schools, female leaders focus on their primary responsibility which is the care of children and their academic success (Noddings, 1999). Women value close relationships with students, staff, colleagues, parents, and community members as key in school leadership (Furman and Starratt, 2002; Greenleaf, 1996; Smylie *et al.*, 2002; Williamson and Hudson, 2001). In schools headed by women, relationships develop constantly (Lyman *et al.*, 2005; Noddings, 1992; Smulyan, 2000).

The key difference in female leadership styles in education lies in the development of a new leadership paradigm that considers educational leaders as change agents with a scope of influence larger than the school premises. As a result, school decisions are based on what is in the best interest of the students and what is right, not necessarily on policies (Williamson and Hudson, 2001) or power (Hall, 1994). Women leaders' value "having influence" more than "having power" (Hall, 1994). This is where the non-traditional view of power meets the gender-role expectations that women are not dominant or in charge (Brunner, 1998; Fennell, 2002). When teaching in classrooms, women have learned to motivate students without the need to use domination. Other researchers (e.g. Bascia and Young, 2001; Fennell, 2002; Jean-Marie *et al.*, 2006; Young and Skrla, 2003) have asserted that women leaders in education incorporate "power with" into the transformational leadership model through empowerment. Staff empowerment occurs by dispersing knowledge throughout the school. Knowledge is shared for the noble intention of extending participation in collaborative decision-making and problem-solving processes. Power also serves to build an environment of mutual trust and respect, and is linked to the principles of social justice, fairness, and responsible behavior towards others (Noguera, 2003).

As women learn to be school leaders they may unconsciously silence a part of themselves. In her study on women principals, Smulyan (2000) indicated that women may find ways to redefine the authority and power inherent in the leadership role so that their own voices can emerge. Grogan (1996) reiterates the importance of focusing on the positive implications of the voices of women in educational leadership rather than the difficulties they experience. In doing so, we emphasize the possibility for resistance and change in a traditionally male-dominated structure and field. Smulyan (2000, p. 3) further asserts that these conflicts and negotiations "are not necessarily negative or disabling; they do, however, complicate the process of an individual's growth and development as a person and an administrator". As women achieve positions of influence and participate in policy decisions, they have opportunities to open up access to knowledge and resources to those with less power. Women from all levels of the social hierarchy, not just those with official status positions, have a role in social justice leadership. As social justice leaders, women work to alter the undemocratic culture and structure of institutions and society, improving the lives of those who have been marginalized or oppressed (Curry, 2000; Jean-Marie *et al.*, 2006; Lee and McKerrow, 2005).

Tenets of democracy and equity

Theory and practice, advocacy and action to counter injustice have emerged from civil rights, feminist, post-modern, critical, multicultural, queer, postcolonial, and other movements. Grounded in these movements, social justice leaders strive for critique rather than conformity, compassion rather than competition, democracy rather than bureaucracy, polyphony rather than silencing, inclusion rather than exclusion, liberation rather than domination, action for change rather than inaction that preserves inequity (Lee and McKerrow, 2005, p. 1-2). Among the common definitions of equity are access, proportional outcomes, equality, political change, social and institutional change. In support of Lambert's (2001) research, Irby and Brown (2004, p.6) assert that whether enacted by male or female leaders equitable practices and behaviors are needed "that transform systems that promote inclusively-oriented educational environments". Lee and McKerrow's framework postulates the necessary acts for which leaders committed to social justice, democracy and equity ought to engage in. As a focus on who and a specific setting in which social justice leadership is practiced, the four women leaders in this study, who are discussed more in depth in the findings section, are actively involved in social justice, democratic and equity issues that impact the education of their individual school and district contexts.

Lum (1993, p. 39) suggests that "human beings are not objectively determined in their existential condition by universal laws of nature, but they are phenomenal 'happenings' as a consequence of a plurality of socio-historical effective forces, mindful purposes, and cultural conditions". Such a claim suggests that for democratic leaders, their being and becoming are socially constructed through the very practices in which they engage thereby encouraging "ethical self-understanding" not gained through merely observing facts but in their value-laden narrative renderings of those facts (Lightfoot and Gourd, 2004; Lum, 1993). Consequently, a transformation of the democratic leader's "self" unfolds through the interaction with the social relations and daily struggles considered necessary for promoting a democratic culture in schools where a social justice values- orientation is exemplified in practice.

Democratic schooling includes issues related to civil, political, and social rights (Giroux, 2002) as well as values associated with concepts such as "deep democracy" (Green, 1999) or "thick democracy" (Strike, 1999). According to Furman and Shields (2005, p. 126) social justice is not possible without deep democracy nor is democracy possible without social justice because each holds within itself the notion of both individual rights and the good of the community. These, and other researchers (e.g. Giroux, 2002; Gross *et al.*, 2003; Starratt, 2004), further assert that educational leaders need to create conditions under which all children can learn well, within a socially just, moral, equitable and democratic system. Such tenets of democracy and equity imply that as consensus builds on the need for adoptive, creative and socially just forms of organizations (Freire, 1972, 1998; Giroux, 2002; Grob, 1984; Gross *et al.*, 2003; Grundy, 1993; Starratt, 2004; Winant, 2004), the forces of social justice leadership and accountability (i.e. high-stakes testing) thrust public schools, their leaders and educational institutions into more bureaucratic, more top-down and more alienating forms of systemic inequity (Gross *et al.*, 2005).

According to Scott (2001, p. 6) a systemic equity is defined as:

> ... transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner – in whatever learning environment that learner is found – has the greatest

opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life.

Furthermore, Skrla *et al.* (2006) assert that there is a likelihood of equity-positive leadership responses within the context of increasingly high-stakes accountability and equity-focused work (i.e. programmatic equity, teacher quality equity, achievement equity).

As possible examples of the promotion of social justice discourse, democratic schooling and equity, the four female leaders in this study shared experiences that exemplify the need to refocus practices and behaviors in a time of increased accountability.

Methodology

We chose the philosophical tradition of phenomenology as the qualitative methodology for this study. Phenomenology attempts to describe and explain lived experience, "which is understood to be a concern for human meaning and ultimately for interpreting those meanings so that they inform our practice and our science" (Munhall and Boyd, 1993, p. 112). Because the phenomenological approach probes only for participants' perceptions of a subject, in this case, how leadership evolved in the professional experiences of school practitioners, it was an appropriate construct to guide the interviews (Creswell, 1998; Mayhew, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 1996; Vaughan and Everett, 1992) for the original study.

The original study, conducted in 2005, examined the professional experiences of eleven female secondary principals in one south-western state. Furthermore, it probed how these principals responded to professional challenges they faced. The purposeful sampling of female principals represented six urban and suburban districts with two or more high schools located in each district. Each district had similar issues but different circumstances (i.e. student demographic shifts, teacher retention and attrition rates, SES, etc.). Aligned with Patton's (1990) work, the participants in the original study were generated from a purposeful sample of 15 women (i.e. secondary school principals), of which 11 chose to participate.

Pseudonyms were used for each principal for purposes of anonymity and confidentiality. Open-ended and semi-structured interviews were used to guide the original research. Similar to Skrla *et al.* (2000) study, all participants were provided with opportunities to reflect on their experiences as female secondary school leaders and a context in which to talk openly about them. Participants were asked 15 questions concerning the following central themes: formal and informal leadership preparation, leadership and management practices, issues of diversity, race and gender; and challenges they faced in order to increase student achievement. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and analyzed according to Giorgi's (Giorgi *et al.*, 1975) phenomenological steps:

(1) Read each transcript to get an overall sense of the whole.

(2) Re-read the transcript and identify transitions in the experience (each transition signifying a separate unit of meaning).

(3) Eliminate redundancies in the units of meaning, and begin to relate the remaining units to one another.

(4) Transform the participants' language into the language of science

(5) Synthesize the insights into a description of the entire experience of leadership practices.

Among the findings from the original study was the philosophy of these women that female leaders can make a change in education through the development of certain leadership styles (i.e. transformative). Embedded in this philosophy was an understanding of diversity, values-orientation, leading for social justice, democracy and equity, and the importance of a spiritual development.

As a secondary analysis (Corti and Thompson, 1998; Thorne, 1990) of this specific finding from the original study (i.e. female leaders who exemplified a values-orientation around issues of social justice in their leadership practices), we further explored the phenomenological approach by examining the lived experiences of four of the eleven female secondary school leaders. As reiterated by Moustakas (1994, p. 13), phenomenology is "the first method of knowledge" because it "involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for reflective structural analyses that portray the essences of the experience".

For purposes of this article, we revisited the original data to conduct secondary analyses (Heaton, 1998) of the experiences of these four women. Various arguments in favor of developing secondary analysis of qualitative studies have been catalogued (Corti and Thompson, 1998; Heaton, 1998; Thorne, 1990). For example, research contends that this approach can be used to generate new knowledge, new hypotheses, or support for existing theories; and that it allows wider use of data from rare or inaccessible respondents (Corti and Thompson, 1998; Heaton, 1998). By revisiting the data to further analyze the professional experiences of these four female secondary principals, gave insights on how their leadership practices embraced social justice, democratic schooling and issues of equity. They created a space for the researchers to further examine their roles as agents of social justice, morality, democracy, and school leaders (Heilburn, 1998; Jean-Marie and Normore, 2006; Loder, 2005).

The four women shared characteristics which warranted further analysis. These four women represented three of the six school districts. In the secondary analysis, these four women were purposefully chosen due the information-rich experiences for study in depth. According to Patton (1990, p. 169), "information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research". Because every text has a context (Casey, 1993), the professional background of the four women is essential to understanding how they perceived their behaviors, practices and actions in support of leadership for democracy, equity and social justice. Of the participants, two were Black and two were White. They ranged from 48 to 59 years of age. Three were married while one was not married. All four had advanced graduate degrees (i.e. doctoral degrees) from two major universities within the state. Their professional administrative experiences ranged from 9 to 23 years.

This study provides the experiences of these female secondary principals to create significant discourse for understanding leadership of schools nested in complex social, political and cultural contexts. It also provides an understanding of how gender (i.e. socialization processes of women) impacts the participants' accession to and work at the secondary level.

Results

In this section, we discuss the interrelated portions of our results that deal with issues of female leadership in the context of social justice, socialization and values-orientation of women, and democracy and equity. Weaving in related sequences of thinking and acting (Kottkamp and Silverberg, 2003), this secondary analysis is approached through the lens of "restorying" (Creswell, 1998) the experiences of four female secondary school leaders.

The findings are presented by first introducing a brief portrait of each principal within the context of her school. This is followed by themes that emerged from the data analysis in conjunction with the tripartite conceptual framework. Then, we present various challenges and frustrations experienced by these women.

Portraitures of participants within school context

Jocelyn Lewis and Annette Waters work in the same urban school district. The district has over 40,000 students in 89 schools from grades PK-12. Jocelyn, an African-American female principal at an alternative education high school has 28 years of experience in public education. She began her first principalship at forty-one years old. Four years later, she became a principal at Gerthart Alternative Education High, a Title I school. Gerthart High's student ethnicity is 40 percent White, 32 percent Black, 18 percent Hispanic, 9 percent American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. A total of 99 percent of Gerthart's students in comparison to 83 percent of the school district's students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch program. Gerthart Alternative is on the "in need of improvement" list according to the no child left behind (NCLB) criterion to meet state "adequate yearly progress" (AYP). Annette, a White female principal at Star High has 26 years of experience in public education. At 32, she began her first principalship at the secondary level. The student ethnicity at Spencer High is 88 percent Black, 7 percent White, 2 percent Hispanic, 2 percent American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. Similar to the school district, 82 percent of Spencer's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program.

Gertrude Johnson, an African-American female principal, has been in public education for 18 years. She began her first principalship position at the age of 44. She has a doctorate in educational administration and has been a principal at Albert High for eight years. Albert High is located in a suburban school district with over 14,000 students in 25 schools from grades PK-12. At Albert High, the student ethnicity is 66 percent White, 17 percent Black, 13 percent American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3 percent Hispanic and 1 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. A total of 22 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-lunch program in comparison to 50 percent of students in the whole district.

Linda Atkinson, a White female principal with 35 years of experience in public education, began her first principalship at the age of 50 at Chester High. Chester High is one of two high schools located in another suburban school district with over 12,000 students in 23 schools from grade PK-12. The student ethnicity at Chester is 77 percent White, 8 percent Black, 7 percent American Indian/Alaskan Native, 5 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. In comparison to the 36 percent of the school district's students, 27 percent of Chester's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program.

Socialization: values-orientation

Based on the regularities evident within the experiences of our research participants, we have developed a deeper understanding of the factors affecting the decisions of these four women to become school leaders. For these women, leadership was the enactment of values-orientation and socialization experiences and opportunities. They each understood their ethical and moral obligations to create schools that promote and deliver social justice. Their socialization experiences in educational leadership programs enabled these women to challenge their own assumptions, clarify and strengthen their own values, and work on aligning their own behaviors and practices with these beliefs, attitudes and philosophies.

Gertrude asserted that she was encouraged and groomed by a former superintendent to enter educational administration:

> I never envisioned myself becoming an administrator. I was perfectly happy in the classroom. I'm a teacher first. I absolutely am and think you have to have that dedication - that calling.

Linda decided to enter administration because she wanted to pursue a doctorate and build her knowledge base in educational administration:

> It was just a challenge that I wanted to take on. Besides the family value placed on having a doctorate, the money was also attractive, and so was the prestige. I didn't know what I was going to do with it.

Gertrude and Linda endeavored to lead and serve in public education to make a difference for all students. For both Jocelyn and Annette, they believed their roles as teachers were equally significant as their leadership role. They became principals due to a commitment to impact the educational system (i.e. what they hope to accomplish and how). For Jocelyn, she expressed concerns about teachers' retention and attrition:

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

Annette explained: "I had a desire to lead teachers into making positive decisions that would help students be successful". These women entered educational administration with the philosophy that they can make a change in education through the manifestations of leadership styles obtained in their professional preparation and experiences as teachers.

Jocelyn articulated:

> You have to have a philosophy of what the purpose of school is. It's looking at what practices that we're putting into place that are going to improve student achievement and help them be successful. We need to encourage and support students in all of the things they need to be successful.

Jocelyn, at the alternative high school, emphasized that the educational experience provided by schools ought to be comparable to an experience that "anyone (i.e. parent, brother, grandparent etc.) would want their child to have". By personalizing the education each person is to receive, schools will have a moral compass to guide their practices. As she summarized:

It has to be personal because that's what guides what we do as leaders to make a difference in the lives of students. A leader will make good decisions and it's making good decisions that paves the way to everything else.

Linda, whose high school student population was 77 percent white, valued opportunities to engage in teaching and learning processes that impacted the minority student population in her school. Briefly recalling her childhood years, Linda in her conversation about diversity and values, talked about how she was raised. She stated:

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

While conducting the interview (second author) with Linda in her office, she shared several books she and her staff were reading at that time (i.e. Alfred Tatum's *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*; Jawanza Kunjufu's *Black Students, Middle Class Teachers*; and Alan Blankstein's *Failure Is not an Option*). As she reflected on her leadership development, she indicated that she had the opportunity to co-teach a staff development course during her graduate studies at the local university. She emphasized:

The opportunity provided me with practical experience... increased my knowledge on best practices on staff development. . . the necessity to address the needs of diverse student populations... I'm reading things all the time and that informs my practice on a daily basis.

Similarly, Gertrude credited her former professor who helped her leadership development and formalized the strategies she has put in place. Reflecting on her administrative experience, she too relied on current research practices to guide her work (i.e. Marzano's work on instructional strategies, educational leadership journals, involvement in national and local school organizations). Recognizing that not all teachers are enthused by her approach about multiculturalism, Gertrude stated that she regularly visited different classrooms to participate with teachers and students in multicultural activities. Her goal was to help her teachers to develop comfort zones and model behavior for students and teachers to engage in discussions around issues of social justice. Furthermore, Gertrude felt the need to motivate her teachers to help transform their instructional practices to serve the needs of the diverse student population in the school. She asserted: "I'll jump in there, do various exercise and motivational techniques. I want to model this for my teachers."

Notions of caring and collaborative working relationships resonated with the principals because they believed that their teachers needed "to take ownership of the school". Building relationships and engaging in supportive interaction with teachers were critical for effective principal leadership practices. The choices these women made on a daily basis in their actions and interactions within their schools shaped their ability to affect change beyond the school into the broader local school community.

Practicing an ethic of care towards those who work for and with them was a critical dimension of these women's transformative leadership style. As leaders, these women demonstrated a self-less desire to both serve and prepare others (i.e. students, staff,

community) and simultaneously created an organizational system that was committed to developing and sharing of relationships that drove goodness. According to Annette:

We still pray in this school and we bring community pastors in to pray. Recently, a teacher committed suicide. It was tragic for the school community. I met with my teachers and invited ministers to come and lead us in prayer. After the prayer, I explained to the children the importance of sharing truths about suicide. We talked about what happened and shared some positive things about the teacher. While it's risky to do that in public schools, I believe if you live in a God-like fashion, then your spiritual connection is solid.

On reflecting on their roles as school leaders, Linda and Jocelyn had this to say:

I believe my spiritual beliefs help and guide my work as a leader in this school. No one ever said it would be easy. The Lord doesn't promise us it's [leadership] going to be an easy path... sometimes I just wish it were easier... I think that you develop a following by being kind to people. I love this challenge even though it's very hard to deal with so many people. I try to guide them on the right path – even if I've helped a few kids I've made a difference (Linda).

I lead through my religious belief system. My relationship with my Lord determines how I interact with everybody. For example, I want my teachers to know that I will do what it takes to make their job easier. If they know that I care, celebrate their joys, cry or even pray with them, then they know they're not alone. I want my teachers to know we can work through the challenges together (Jocelyn).

Towards the conclusion of the interview, Gertrude mentioned, "I didn't talk about my religious belief during our conversation because I didn't think it was appropriate to do so. But, how I lead is influenced by my religious beliefs and practices." Although Gertrude was silenced about how her religion connected to her leadership beliefs and practices, there were clear connections that existed among all four women, their leadership approaches, and spirituality. Educational leaders are sensitive to their own religious beliefs, and sometimes are willing to refrain from engaging in a religious-oriented discourse in their schools. However, situations confronting educational leaders for social justice regarding spirituality, religion and public education can be very complex. At times, public school leaders must violate the neutrality principle (i.e. selective silence) as advocates of social justice.

Social justice
The women in this study described their experiences of social justice issues with vividness and detail. Dominating the experiences of Gertrude and Linda was their commitment to advance the conversations of issues related to diversity, equity, social justice and ethics in school practices. In pursuit of social justice for marginalized students, these two women fostered and enhanced social justice through ongoing professional development in their schools. For Gertrude, her student population is not only diverse in terms of ethnicities but also in terms of class and race. When making reference to the diversity of her suburban high school, she emphasized:

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

Probing deeper into the data, Gertrude mentioned the in-depth annual training she conducted for her teachers and sometimes, for her district on multicultural issues.

Drawing from the work of James Banks, a multicultural-education scholar, Gertrude discussed her staff training that progressed into a two weeks series with teachers and students:

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

Dismantling barriers that hinder the practice of social justice was a common theme among all four women. Linda engaged in issues of social justice through various study groups with her staff. She reiterated the importance of having teachers involved in these study groups "because they are the ones who can make a difference in what goes on in the classrooms. I want my teachers to believe they can make a difference". To make a difference, Linda believed in embracing the diversity of her student population.

For example, in addition to vertical/horizontal teams and curriculum partners throughout the school year, Linda also developed teacher study groups during the summer months that focused on "black student achievement", Hispanic English language learners, and 9th grade intervention. These study groups provided opportunities for teachers to come together and discuss best practices in the literature concerning how to address the needs of all students. According to Linda:

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

In an effort to promote and embrace diversity (i.e. race, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation), Linda spoke of the different student groups that existed in her school (i.e. Black Student Association, Latino Group, Gay, Straight Alliance, etc.). She proudly affirmed, "We want kids to join different groups and integrate into these groups... our students need to have an identity and have outlets where they can personalize how they feel."

Having been in public education for many years and working with urban youths, Annette and Jocelyn understood the daily struggles and challenges their students confronted. Their students often came from low-income circumstances and many had lower educational aspirations than do their more economically advantaged peers in neighboring surburban schools. They understood the ever-present poverty reduced their students opportunity to learn. In the context of students' life circumstances, Jocelyn looked at the diversity of her school and was deeply concerned about the many challenges her students faced. She expanded on other social issues related to diversity by taking into consideration students' life experiences (i.e. relating to teen pregnancy and parenting, juvenile justice, and unstable home environments):

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

Annette contextualized diversity through relationship-building. She reiterated that "racism is alive and well." However, she reasoned that it's more about how individuals interacted (i.e. relationship) with each other. She asserted: "If you're going to live in this world right, you have to really examine, 'how can we live together?'. What we have to understand is that, we must live god-like". She added the importance of spiritual development by emphasizing:

When we are spirituially connected, our job on a daily basis is to treat each other with mutual respect and embrace the differences in people. For me, diversity is our differences in behavior. When I come into my school, I don't think about who is White or who is Black today.

Annette further shared some thoughts about the current state of racism and how important it is that students understand how the torchbearers of the Civil Rights era have contributed to their present day education access. She stated:

I don't like racism. But, it's alive and well. It's coming back, even stronger than it's been. The gains that we've made are disappearing.

She added:

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

Annette further elaborated on diversity from a personal perspective – her relationship with a Black man and his extended family. She asserted:

Diversity is not about the color of a person's skin. I rarely look at people and have to register their race. I sometimes forget that at my family reunions. On one side of my family, I'm the only White person that is in that room!... I've been in the family so long that nobody thinks about my race. So, it's hard for me. But let me be clear, I know racism is alive and well. I don't want to diminish that in anyway. It's just that I've been a part of a Black family that it is hard for me on a regular basis to think about people's race.

Democratic schooling and equity
Fundamentally rooted in the contexts of cultural understandings and democratic ideals, Linda and Gertrude advanced the levels of understanding of their school community by the kind of initiatives they implemented to address and bring awareness about social inequities. In discussing the kind of impact they wanted to have on the academic and professional lives of students and teachers, they expressed a belief in restructuring school programs into new designs to support their students'

learning and professional communities. There was a general emphasis among both principals to provide support programs and/or structures to assist students with their academic goals, educational planning (i.e. individualized student development plans, graduation plans), instructional leadership practices (i.e. study groups, monthly and quarterly progress reports, and extended day tutoring). These elements of instructional supports and opportunities helped improve core teaching, learning processes and outcomes.

For Gertrude, she focused her efforts on the development of educational programs that served to attract and retain students within schools. She provided instructional time and development programs for low-performing students. Programs to help students succeed included "Saturday for Success" – a two hour program scheduled on Saturdays for students who have less than a C average; academic lunchtime for students who needed individualized instruction by the principal and assistant principal, and, afterschool tutoring. Gertrude articulated the importance of fostering high academic achievement for all students by rewarding students (i.e. academic lunch bunch), recognizing higher achievers as an "academic bowl" (i.e. all subject-area preparation for ACTs); and giving a "letter jacket" (i.e. indication of school pride) at school assemblies to motivate students.

Echoing a similar sentiment, Linda emphasized an equity focus for "all" students:

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

Both Annette and Jocelyn shared their perspectives about quality education for every student despite students' past and present life circumstances. In the context of a high school community, Annette discussed a commitment to recruit teachers who are interested in her Black, Latino, Asian students – all students. She commented: "My school is 88% Black." With a cynicism towards culturally insensitive teachers, she asserted:

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

Jocelyn believed the responsibility for educating and caring for all students is attainable through a collective commitment with her staff. Drawing from research-based knowledge (i.e. Marzano's instructional strategies, Pass Key, Skill Banks etc.), she asserted, "We [teachers] are doing book studies on classroom instructions that work and on building background knowledge. We also spoke about professional learning communities really stressing the emphasis on teacher professional development and training." Similarly, Annette challenged her staff to be the "experts" of their content areas, continuously "work in the ideas" and set high

expectations for students. For both Annette and Jocelyn, the critical focus of attention is on the behavior of teachers as they engaged in instructional practices and activities that directly affect the growth of students and improve the students' quality of life.

The dark side: challenges and frustrations

While all four women capitalized on their successes and triumphs as leaders in their schools, each of them faced daily challenges and frustrations as it pertained to the social issues of the school community. Jocelyn and Linda shared the daily struggles they faced with student population (one urban, one suburban):

> Our challenges are with some of my students. They come from dysfunctional homes. They are in homes where they haven't been supervised by any adult. They may be in the juvenile system or they're pregnant for the second or third time. With my staff, I try to help students break some of those cycles, model and encourage them. Being aware of my constituents – students and parents is important in our efforts to work with them (Jocelyn).

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

Amidst federal mandates such as those imposed by NCLB concerning the laudable aim for closing the achievement gap, Jocelyn strived to address issues of diversity in areas of organizational structure, task and reward systems. She explained:

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

Gertrude and Annette embodied culturally responsive leadership – modeling a philosophy of student-centeredness, engaging in practices committed to social justice and having the ability to see issues from multiple perspectives. Gertrude expressed a great deal of frustration about teachers' resistance towards NCLB, and the unreasonable expectations and compliance from the state department of education:

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

Annette reiterated the importance of the local media and community relationships to solicit support and funding for her school population:

> At Spencer, we have to fight the norm. People don't want to give us money. They don't want to help us. They don't give a damn. People don't care what happens out here! They don't come to see us which is fine. But, I thank Jesus for good relationships with the press. So, I started getting stories out to them. I'd call them up. They'll come out and do them. Children are

selling green bands, rubber ban bracelets for Darfar, Sudan. I want to tell the positive stories about what my students are doing (Annette).

Discussion

The female principals in our study identified how they engaged in transformative leadership that supports social justice, democratic and equitable schools. They also described their leadership experiences, motivations, and actions from a values-orientation exemplified in their practices.

Many educational philosophers, practitioners, and researchers have argued for the moral imperative including issues of social justice and principles of democracy in educational leadership (e.g. Furman and Shields, 2005; Gross *et al.*, 2005). Among other potential benefits, a values orientation allowed these women to evaluate current practices and assessed their work amidst a seemingly never-ending onslaught of instructional fads, trends, methodologies and ideologies (Smylie *et al.*, 2002). As a ship must have a compass and rudder to reach its destination on a dark and stormy sea, an educator must likewise be guided by personal, ethical, thoughtful, considered action to attain personal and organizational goals which can directly affect the process of leadership socialization for social justice (Noddings, 1992, 1999; Starratt, 2004). The four female school leaders closely paid attention to the "silenced voice" of marginalized students and brought their struggles to the forefront of school policies and initiatives without negating the needs of more privileged students. Their belief and commitment to a quality education was more than a motto; it was realized in the experiences they provided for every student at their school. For these women, their interest in students' success began with developing an authentic relationship between themselves as school leaders and their students (Bascia and Young, 2001; Furman and Starratt, 2002; Greenleaf, 1996; Jean-Marie *et al.*, 2006). In support of Noguera (2003), recognizing that they were in a position to make a difference, these women were guided by a vision for young people that focused on developing students' talents and gifts to contribute to their community and society.

Motivation to become educational leaders

Among the factors that motivate teachers to consider leadership preparation and training are an intrinsic need and a moral responsibility to make a difference in the lives of students and whether these needs motivate them to push forward. In support of previous research (Bascia and Young, 2001; Hall, 1994), the four women in this study identified various reasons why they entered educational leadership. Based on their socialization experiences, Gertrude reiterated the influence of her superintendent who "saw something in me that I didn't see in myself". Linda emphasized the need for a strong knowledge base and value on having a doctorate degree. Both women were in mid-career when they entered the leadership arena (Ortiz, 1982). Jocelyn was motivated to enter educational leadership due to the increased problem of teacher retention and attrition within her first three years of teaching. She identified a need to curb this trend and felt that leadership would be a good position to influence the cultural dynamics of the school. Annette wanted to be in a position of influence to empower teachers to make positive decisions about teaching and learning. In accordance to previous research (e.g.,Young and Skrla, 2003), these women believed their role as teachers and leaders were of equal importance. They were committed to making an impact on the

educational system by capitalizing on what they hoped to accomplish and how they hoped to fulfill this mission.

A social justice agenda and democratic schooling

The four women in this study promoted discourse through their leadership practices about various aspects of social justice. The discourse had a huge influence toward gaining a better understanding of experiences that best promoted democratic schooling, equity, and social justice. They were opened to critique and engaged in democratic discourse and practices by creating identities informed by principles of equality and social justice (Giroux, 2002; Winant, 2004). In support of Furman and Shields (2005), and Noddings (1999), as democratic role models, these women leaders worked to create a climate, culture and community that exemplified values they espoused. They continued to critique the definition and enactment of democracy in order to develop school initiatives that were inclusive, understanding and supportive of diverse constructs and knowledge of "all" students and parents. Their actions were representative of how they instructed, guided, and led on a daily basis (i.e. Gertrude's hands-on approach on teaching about and modeling diverse learning styles; Linda's study groups on instruction, black achievement and diversity issues; Jocelyn's staff development on Marzano's instructional strategies for improving and encouraging the organizational health of her faculty; Annette's recruitment of culturally sensitive teachers and practice of teaching students about the Civil Rights Movement).

These actions are further supported by a growing number of scholars who have pointed out that in order to address inequities for diverse student populations, educational leaders must have a heightened awareness of social justice issues in a field struggling to meet the needs of all children, particularly given the importance of addressing the needs of traditionally underserved populations (Bogotch, 2005; Furman and Shields, 2005; Green, 1999; Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Smulyan, 2000; Strike, 1999; Winant, 2004). It becomes critical to raise these issues to help educational leaders to further advance their understanding of social justice and equity, and how these issues hold up in the world of practice. The women in this study engaged in authentic, concrete struggles and practices that found expression in social relations, daily life, and memories of resistance and struggles that shaped their leadership praxis (Gross *et al.*, 2005; Trinidad and Normore, 2005). In support of previous research (Smulyan, 2002; Lyman *et al.*, 2005; Young and Skrla, 2003), balancing authority and care was a further extension of their democratic approach to leading their schools.

Leadership praxis

According to a body of research, praxis involves self-reflection, critical thinking, and intentional inquiry (Grundy, 1993; Lather, 1986), relationships between thought and action, theory and practice (Freire, 1972), ethics and morals within democracy (Furman and Shields, 2005; Gross *et al.*, 2005; Starratt, 2004), and social justice and equity as core values (Giroux, 2002; Greenleaf, 1996). The women in this study were concerned with exercising democracy in their leadership practices which ultimately led to their quest for developing equitable and democratic cultures in their schools. Demand on schools to meet high standards have promoted alternative education programs that help raised the expectations for achievement. Gertrude, Linda, Jocelyn and Annette regularly engaged in forms of self reflective, critical and collaborative work

relationships which created conditions that empowered the people (i.e. staff and community members) with whom they worked. To ensure that their schools were led in a democratic and ethical manner, they engaged in practices of distributive leadership among many actors (i.e. teachers, students, parents, and community). In other words, leadership was not the purview solely of administrators, but also exercised by people in many positions (Smylie *et al.*, 2002). In other words, their leadership "multiplied" through many types of interactions.

Furman and Shields (2005) advocate the use of a second leadership lens (i.e. constructivist leadership theory) which purports that leadership aims at the construction of meaning and purpose by members of a community through their communicative relationships, or "the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose about schooling" (Lambert *et al.*, 1995, p. 29). The learning and democratic leading practices of the four women helped them to foster a transformative culture. Additionally, these practices served as catalysts for creating conditions and preparing students, staff and community members to become immersed in knowledge and courage in the struggle to "make despair unconvincing and hope practical" (Giroux, 2002, p. 128). These women leaders' use of courage and hope were extensions of their spiritual and religious beliefs and practices. Spirituality illuminated the core of these women's work for social justice.

Conclusions
In broad terms, there are implications from this study that have to do with school reform. A need to shift the focus from the leadership of the principal alone to a more inclusive form of leadership that recognizes the importance of community and commitment in promoting social justice, democratic and equitable schooling, and positive relationships. In more specific terms, the following implications are revealed as a result of this study.

Women and educational leadership
The socialization experiences of the four women in this study imply that educational institutions may be increasingly integrating leadership development opportunities and experiences in a way never seen before with possible focus on career development issues. Based on the leadership experiences of the four women in this study, there is a clear focus on leadership praxis that includes critical reflection about issues of inclusion, social justice, diversity, and expansion of the opportunities for diverse leadership styles. Efforts to increase the capacity of schools by broadening educators' work beyond conventional notions of teaching and administration would be improved by paying attention to how, in concert, a social justice and democracy agenda shape and influence possibilities and desires for careers in education and educational leadership. As reiterated by Gross *et al.* (2005), these mutually inclusive concepts are indispensable ingredients to improving schools for the benefit of all students and for a democratic society.

Personal and professional formation of women
The dimension that remains constant throughout a school leader's career is personal and professional formation. The women in this study implicitly and explicitly defined

their formation by the efforts that enabled them to become more aware of their own personal values and assumptions regarding the formal role of a female secondary school leader. Although their issues may have been different with similar circumstances, they constantly engaged in critical reflection and thought about ethical stances, spiritual development and connection, and commitment to their profession. Formation was evident in their appreciation of alternative learning and leadership styles, and personal and professional action planning. Within the trans-national arena, aspiring and practicing school leaders worldwide (i.e. both genders) need to understand their personal and professional formation in concert, for they are not to be considered separate and isolated events in a school leader's career. Rather, they are interactive in nature.

Preparing leaders for social justice and democratic schools
Given the demographic shift of the US population which is becoming increasingly more diverse, how do leadership preparation programs continue the legacy of Brown? To commit to Brown's legacy of advancing social justice and democracy, there is a need to look at practices (i.e. the types of discourse, experiences, processes, and structures) that promote the development and support of principals committed to social justice and democratic principles. Leadership preparation programs will need to provide the knowledge-base for aspiring school leaders' understanding about how they ought to respond to the changing political, moral, and social landscapes in which they live and work. Of equal importance is the curricular focus on interrelating social justice, democracy, and equity and values so that aspiring school leaders can identify practices that explicitly and implicitly deter social progress. Furthermore, they ought to be able to develop the knowledge base on how to respond to these injustices in school practices. Too often, school leaders are involved in social justice practices without necessarily being aware that they are. Aspiring leaders' critical engagement in dialogue and reflective practice about social justice and democracy can be well-informed about a greater, more robust and inclusive form of democratic schooling, and a substantively egalitarian education system.

As leadership programs prepare new leaders, the discourse of social justice, democracy, and equity is an important objective in the curriculum of preparation programs. In conjunction with recent and upcoming national and international conferences (i.e. American Educational Research Conference, University Council for Educational Administration, Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management, Ethics, Values and Educational Leadership), it is apparent that leadership programs have an opportunity to share in discourse about how to shape the quality of leaders they produce for the good of society if the Brown legacy is to resume its advance.

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About the authors
Anthony H. Normore is Associate Professor of Educational Administration/Leadership in Graduate Education Division at College of Education, California State University-Dominguez Hills. A former K-12 educator for 20 years (teacher, school administrator, district office Program Director) Dr Normore has conducted keynote addresses at Leadership Academies (e.g., Southeastern Consortium for Minorities in Engineering/Education, Houston) and has presented at various local, state, provincial, national and international conferences in Canada and the USA. He has facilitated in-service training and workshops for school faculties on school improvement, the change process, and organizational planning. His research interests include leadership development with focus on urban education and socialization of school leaders in the context of ethics and social justice. Anthony H. Normore is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: anormore@csudh.edu

Gaetane Jean-Marie is Associate Professor of Educational Leadership in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, College of Education, University of Oklahoma. Dr Jean-Marie's former background is in pre-college programs for disadvantaged students in urban districts and preparation of pre-service teachers of the North Carolina Teaching Fellows. Presently, she teaches graduate courses in leadership and education, and school personnel management; she has presented at local, regional and international conferences. Her research interests include women and educational leadership, urban school reform, and issues of equity and social justice.

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