

Teachers' perceptions of social justice and school leadership in Costa Rica and Mexico

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Abstract

This study is part of the International Study of Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) to examine school leaders who are addressing conditions of social injustice. The purpose is to get a better idea of how they conceived of social justice and what actions they took to put those beliefs into practice. This study will focus on two Spanish-speaking countries in the network, Costa Rica and Mexico, by addressing the following questions:

1. *How do teacher leaders make sense of social justice?*
2. *What do teachers do to promote social justice?*
3. *What factors help and hinder the work of teacher leaders?*
4. *How did teachers learn to become social justice leaders?*

These teacher leaders shared some common intentions and actions: they believed that education functions as a lever of social mobility, which allows students to achieve better living conditions in the future, but also, will allow them to build a more just world. The main actions that they took were to: a) ensure that students had the minimum resources to learn; b) establish a deep connection with students and their parents; c) model ways to resolve conflicts; d) participate in building a socially just environment.

Keywords: *Teacher leadership; social justice; international; Latin America*

Introduction

Differences of wealth and income among countries and within countries have created two classes of people: those who have and those who do not. The latter group can be marginalized, pushed aside, and perceived as “the other” who is less worthy. War, political persecution, migration, and hunger have made the plight of the poor both more disparate and desperate. Educational leaders have the choice to address their plight or manage the status quo.

The International Study of Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) was formed in 2008 to conduct research on leaders who were addressing conditions of social injustice. The purpose was to get a better idea of how they conceived of social justice and what actions they took to put those beliefs into practice (Morrison, McNae & Branson, 2015; Norberg, Arlestig & Angelle, 2014; Richardson & Sauers, 2014; Slater, Potter, Torres & Briceno, 2014; Sperandio & Wilson-Gagoe, 2015; Szeto, 2014; Torrance & Forde, 2015).

ISLDN researchers also examined their own positions by writing statements to describe and analyze their views of social justice (Slater, in press). They took a variety of perspectives that followed major scholars in the field such as Apple (2010); Bourdieu (2010); Cribb and Gewirtz, 2003; Nieto (1992); Theoharis (2010); and Murillo and Hernández (2011). Even though they represented many countries, the researchers conceived of social justice in similar ways. Their studies of school directors also revealed many commonalities.

This study will focus on two Spanish speaking countries (Costa Rica and Mexico) and extend ISLDN's study of school directors to look at teacher leaders of social justice. In a previous study, school directors in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Spain expressed their belief in equal opportunity for students as a fundamental right, and they wanted to see resources distributed fairly to all (Silva et al., 2015). The directors varied in the

level of attention that they gave to Cribb and Gewirtz's (2003) three types of justice: economic, cultural, and associational justice. They defined economic justice as equal opportunity and the fair distribution of resources. Differences in income and wealth are on the rise, and they run counter to this ideal (Picketty, 2014). Cultural justice deals with the fair treatment of people of different race and ethnicity and promotes the ideal of respect for the other. It addresses the challenge that nearly all countries face where some groups are assigned less worth and are viewed as less deserving. Associational justice addresses the issue of inclusion versus exclusion. When viewed as a leadership practice, this dichotomy has a strong moral dimension. The inclusive leader opens the society or group to others while the exclusive leader draws borders around the in-group and the out-group (Gardner, 2011).

Woods (2005) added developmental justice to Cribb and Gewirtz's (2003) framework; it is the advancement of people toward their greatest potential. When teachers express care and go out of their way to help students, they are practicing developmental justice, which is a type of moral education and includes passion as well as reason. Starratt (1991) recognized the importance of personal character but maintained that the larger task is to build an ethical school that encourages moral development for all by developing an ethic of justice, critique, and care. Starratt's ethic of care is similar to the writing of Noddings (2002), in which caring relations are given just as much emphasis as reasoning from moral principles.

Sergiovanni (2000) promoted the ethic of community in what he called the "life world of leadership", which should take precedence over the "systems world" (p. ix). The truly important mission of schooling is not technical and skill driven but strives for relationships in community. Bogotch (2000) maintains that the democratic ethic of community goes beyond traditional conceptions of heroic individual leadership. Fierro and Paradise (2013) use the Spanish term "convivencia", which translates as coexistence but is used more broadly to describe the need for democratic participation, inclusion, and a culture of peace.

To this point ISLDN has investigated the views and actions of school directors toward social justice. The emphasis in the literature on community and democratic participation suggests that while the leader's actions may set the tone in the school, the picture is incomplete without examining the views of teachers. In fact, teachers' perspectives on social justice are likely to have a major influence and carry the culture of the school in the long term.

The role of the principal in controlling and directing teacher instruction is both ill-advised and limited in effectiveness (Blase & Blase, 1994). Rather, principals need to develop more open and trusting relationship with teachers. Bryk, Camburn and Louis (1999) cited the importance of principals' trusting relationship with teachers and parents. Other strands of scholarship have developed conceptual approaches to advocate a greater degree of collaborative leadership with teachers (Hallinger & Heck, 2010), the development of professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), and the study of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2003; Lizotte, 2013).

To examine teachers' views of social justice we asked similar questions to those we addressed to school directors:

1. How do teacher leaders make sense of social justice?
2. What do teachers do to promote social justice?
3. What factors help and hinder the work of teacher leaders?
4. How did teachers learn to become social justice leaders?

Methodology

This is a qualitative study characterized by searching for understanding of social justice from the point of view of the participants through the systematic analysis of their narratives (Slater, 2011). This approach to the study of teachers is similar to the positioned subject approach used by Theoharis (2010) to study six principals in the

United States. The data collection procedures follow an international format that was part of a larger study by the International Study of Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) (Silva et al., 2015).

Purposeful sampling of teachers was based on previous ISLDN studies of school directors. The directors had been identified using Theoharis's criteria: that they had led a public school; believed that social justice was a key reason for their assuming leadership; kept issues of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other marginalizing conditions in focus; and had some evidence to indicate that the school was more just. The directors, in turn, identified the teachers of this study.

Focus groups and interviews of 90 minutes were conducted using a teacher leadership protocol based on the ISLDN Director Protocol on social justice. The interviews were carried out by natives of each country over a period of one year. The teachers' comments were recorded and transcribed so that researchers could then write a narrative description of what they said. One Spanish speaker and one English speaker carried out the translations.

Three female teachers participated from a secondary school in Costa Rica and one male from an elementary school in Mexico. The narrative for the Mexican case was written entirely by the teacher. These narratives were examined for common themes, and comparisons (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The intent of this study is to highlight the perspectives of the teachers and not necessarily render an objective condition of their schools. The comparison of teachers in two countries in Latin America helps to extend the literature on teacher leadership but the sample is too small to allow for generalizations.

The schools

The secondary school in Costa Rica has grown not only in infrastructure but also in its consolidation as an educational institution recognized in the region. Mountains, fresh air, and vegetation surround the school. There are 631 students from mostly middle and lower class households and 20% are in extreme poverty. It is a small school compared to other schools that are located less than three kilometers away. This school belongs to the public education system of Costa Rica and is one of 17 experimental bilingual schools in the country. As a bilingual school, it has a mission to promote proficiency in the English language.

There are 70 teachers but only 10 have permanent contracts, the others have a contract for ten months. Such contracts have generated a lot of mobility in the teaching staff in other schools. But this school is different; staff retention is quite high. For example, the three teachers interviewed had an average of 12 years at the school.

Teachers at the experimental bilingual school must have English as a second language. The idea of bilingual experimental school is not just that more English classes are given, but regular subjects are taught in English. However, teachers are still in most cases teaching classes in Spanish, but are bound by internal regulations to take the exams in English. The school continues to move towards a bilingual academic culture.

The Mexican elementary school is located in a very poor community of Baja California, a state bordering California, USA. It is one of the richest states in Mexico and is a destination for migrants. The school is in a relatively new area in the northwestern part of the country. Indigenous families continue to arrive from Oaxaca in search of work in the field or packaging of vegetables. To get to school, they have to come first by a road to the south, and then the road divides with one route going to the valley and the other to the hills.

The valley is large and represents an attractive source of work for the laborers of the South. There are several other schools nearby. The older schools are located in the most developed area in the center of the community where professionals and landowners live. But there are many immigrants, mostly indigenous, who live far from the center. In every neighborhood there is a school, almost all built gradually with the help of parents and always guided by teachers. Teachers built this school with labor from parents and organized the management.

The population has grown fast; the school holds classes in the afternoon and another school uses the building for classes in the morning. The two schools have the same kind of needs for public services. There is

electricity for light, but no potable water, telephone, or Internet. There is a teacher for each grade level, a director, and two technical advisors.

The teachers

In Costa Rica, Teacher CR-I is a professor of social and civic studies and also functions as an academic coordinator. Teacher CR-E is a physical education teacher and administrative assistant. Teacher CR-M teaches Spanish and has studied educational administration.

In Mexico, Teacher M has been a primary school teacher for 16 years. He has worked in various schools: urban, rural and in multi-grade, taking first, second and third cycle simultaneously and in poor schools, especially those with an indigenous population.

The case of three teachers in Costa Rica

Conceptions of social justice

All of the Costa Rican teachers agreed that social justice levels the playing field and gives students equal treatment to exercise their rights. They concurred that promoting healthy living within the institution generated an atmosphere of social justice, where differences are acknowledged so that all are treated equally according to their particular needs.

Education is a fundamental pillar to bridge the gap of social inequalities. "It is important that they have the same rights and the same opportunities to get ahead", said Teacher CR-I, while Teacher CR-E emphasized, "The right of all to express themselves, express their feelings, ideas and thoughts inside or outside the classroom, who feel that all are equal, all have the same rights. They can participate equally regardless of race, religion or creed."

School context

A college entrance examination is held every year to admit meritorious students with a clear commitment to educational goals. The recognition of accomplishment of gaining admission has become a source of pride. Teacher CR-E said:

Motivated students are more critical and demanding because they know their rights, and they are also in a position to give more. (Teacher CR-E)

Teacher CR-M said:

My students use the latest technology, obviously better than we do. They know what to do with the cell phone and the smart board. They read and bring me a list of books and ask which of these books I have read. They are critical, amazing, and incredible students. (Teacher CR-M)

One of the key points of the success of this school has been the incorporation of English in its educational offerings. Teacher CR-M argued that many of the students from poor families are able to get jobs because they learn English. Those who are especially talented can use English to make contributions on a global level.

The school is highly sought after because English provides more advantages than other subjects. I think that English gives students access to a job immediately after graduating from high school, which does not happen in other schools. (Teacher CR-M)

Fathers and mothers, who want their children to be admitted to high school, are clear that the demand is high in terms of hours spent at school, and a written test evaluates levels of logic and Spanish. The fact that students have to perform well on this test to get into the school gives them a higher social status. Teacher CR-I said, "The

admission test is important because it makes students who are admitted different from others who do not make the effort”.

Teacher CR-E reaffirmed: “I think the entrance examination makes a large difference. No longer can any student come here, but they must pass through a filter. They were more motivated because they were studying for the entrance exam to enter the school”.

The school is characterized by providing individual attention to students. Teacher CR-M related, “The care that is offered in this school is much more individualized than other schools because we are smaller and this allows us to give more individual follow through”. Another exceptionality of the school is the commitment of faculty and staff. Teacher CR-M continued, “Within the organizational culture most teachers are really committed to this idea of achieving social justice and social equity. We always try to support the student to succeed”.

The school has a reputation for social engagement, which in some cases does not occur in other Costa Rican public schools. The contribution made by the school management is substantive.

Social justice practices in the school

The school is in the public education system and thus, many of the programs are part of the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2016). There are programs like Living, Science Fair, Festival of Arts (FEA), Ethics, Aesthetics and Citizenship, among others. These programs are intended to foster both academic and social skills. Students can take pleasure in programs like FEA, which has the goal of recognizing the talent of students in music, dance, poetry, theater, and singing.

Another program, called Living, aims to strengthen the harmonious environment for peaceful coexistence among students. It is one of the most important programs, according to the teachers interviewed. They were quite explicit in making a connection to socially just relationships among students. Teacher CR-E mentioned, “The Living program plan is comprehensive with ideas to improve relationships within schools. The MEP has been concerned about peaceful coexistence in schools, helping students, encouraging solidarity”.

A professor of religion at the school leads this program. One of the strategies that is executed every year in the framework of this program, is a day outside the school, where students share outdoor spaces and games organized by the students themselves. It is a space where the emerging leadership of students is enhanced. Teacher CR-I said, “The religion professor has made groups like brigades, which are involved in these activities. They are intergenerational so that the oldest help the youngest. There is mutual support in both directions”.

A major challenge of schools is to teach values and reinforce socially just practices. The previous examples of mandatory programs operated by the Ministry of Education are intended to benefit all equally. At the school level, solidarity practices from families and spaces for dialogue can be created. Values are an important part in the daily life of the school, and teachers view them as fundamental. Teacher CR-I commented, “I believe that values and respect are very important to teach at all times... And at least on my part and on the part of my colleagues here, we always try to teach them”. She went on to say that values are communicated as part of the culture of the school:

I encourage assertive communication for students so that they know that they can express their opinions and have the right to do so. We are always open for them to tell us that this happens or that happens. We do not try to solve the problem or take action. They know that we stand for honesty and respect as part of everyday life. (Teacher CR-I)

Teachers have also created spaces to listen and get to know students, and help empower them to make decisions or resolve conflicts in the classroom, always with attention to principles of respect. This attention helps to ease the emotional burden of the students. Teacher CR-E concluded, “We empower our students so that they are capable of solving their own problems and respecting the other person as part of assertive communication”.

Social justice practices in the community

Social justice is not only displayed in concrete actions within the school, but in harmony with all stakeholders. The work of the school permeates the community. Collaboration with students extends to the community and families, opening up possibilities for more integrated education that builds bridges between the school and the community.

Teachers also make visits to the homes of their students and often find precarious situations. Teacher CR-M recounted, "We made visits to places where our students live and have found them in a bunker or a truck, and this is the home where they live".

In making these visits teachers have recognized real contexts that warrant immediate action by the school. Teacher CR-M added,

We have cases of extreme poverty. We have had very very very hard cases, a family living in four dumpsters. We went to the houses, and we have seen and experienced firsthand. For example, one house was the basement of another house, where five, six, seven, eight people were living in one room. When it rains, water floods the room and soaks the furniture.

(Teacher CR-M)

These types of experience generate a great sensitivity to the living conditions and these professionals visualize the world from a closer perspective that is more loving, humane and compassionate.

Recent changes

Teachers in the school have been going through a process of reflection in recent years, and at the same time the Ministry of Education has advanced new policies. These changes have positively contributed to the feeling of students, especially in the transformation that has taken place in the process of admission to this school. Teacher CR-I said:

Now students feel good when they come to the school, first because the entrance examination is mostly Spanish and logic rather than all subject areas. (The candidate who is admitted) ... is more analytical, and is a person who has developed some different skills from those who do not gain admission. (Teacher CR-I)

These marked differences in the student admissions process have also generated a higher level of consciousness among parents, no matter what their level of income. Teacher CR-E indicated that the school gets more committed parents, such as a father who insists that his children attend the school because there is an entrance exam, "These are parents who study with their children, give them opportunities at home, and space to speak and develop ... they come and call me to ask for help; they are committed". Teacher CR-E added,

The entrance exam serves as a filter that gives us people who are psychologically committed to this system; they know that they have to study (for the whole school day) from seven in the morning to four in the afternoon; they come prepared, they are motivated. (Teacher CR-E)

She said there was a relationship between student commitment to the formal education process, the work of the teaching and administrative staff, and the prestige of the experimental bilingual school.

The permanence of teacher-administrative staff is one of the concerns of the teachers interviewed, as 90% of the staff have interim appointments, which means they are subject to being moved at any time, and the same is true of the director. For this team of educational professionals, the conditions of their appointment do not diminish the commitment to their students; rather, they continue to work toward changes to improve the living conditions of Costa Rican society through education.

The national level

Costa Rica invests nearly 8% of its GDP (gross domestic product) in education, because it is considered one of the means for closing the social gap. Although the region has one of the highest budgets, it has failed to meet the basic needs of public schools to provide optimal conditions.

There are efforts by some authorities to implement successful programs to improve living conditions, overcome poverty, and increase retention of students. However, some of these initiatives have not been consistently followed, and the efforts have seen no tangible or sustainable results. Teacher CR-I referred to this situation:

The country cannot move forward unless there are educated people who have at least completed secondary school and learned a second language. In some ways the Ministry of Education has done very good things, for example here there are 14 lessons of English per week while other schools provide only three classes per week.

Public policies in Costa Rica are developed within the context of educational needs, however, execution is often interrupted by the change of government every four years. Being a social democratic state has many advantages, but it also brings political leaders who only seek their own state of comfort, forgetting the most vulnerable.

The case in Mexico

The case in Mexico narrates the thinking, feeling and actions of a teacher who works for social justice. Although Baja California, Mexico borders the USA and is one of the richest states in Mexico, Teacher M worked in a very poor community that is characterized by a high number of migrants. He has been a primary school teacher for 16 years in various urban and rural schools, especially those with an indigenous population. He states that he is proud to be a teacher and feels that students and teachers respect him. His father was a teacher too. He used to accompany him to school as a child.

I learned a lot from him. I liked to listen.... he was a great orator, a great leader. He has been inspiring to me. When someone asks me where I got my teaching style, I answer, "from my father." He was my first influence. Although my father had a strong character, his social concerns and energy were very contagious. (Teacher M)

Teacher M also learned from other teachers and a former principal.

I remember as a kid, I had a very loving teacher, and I was always doing my job well because he liked to hold me. Perhaps from that very pleasant memory of my childhood, I constantly show affection to my students. One of my principals was very special too; he listened and gave us confidence to work with students and parents. It is likely that I tend to listen and build trust in others by the confidence that this principal infused in me. (Teacher M)

Like his father, Teacher M was convinced that his teaching affected students who would be future citizens. He felt an enormous responsibility for this task, and he tried to convince students not to miss school and never to give up. He tried to persuade them of the worth of studying so that they would have better employment opportunities and personal fulfillment.

The community

The area around the school is relatively new and has grown fast. Indigenous families continue to arrive from Oaxaca in search of work in the field or packing vegetables. Students walk to school from far distances traversing hills and valleys where laborers work.

There are older schools in the area that are located in the most developed area in the center of the community where professionals and landowners live. The immigrants live far from the center. Teachers and parents built the schools with their own hands.

There are two shifts in the school: one on the morning and Teacher M's school in the afternoon. The two schools have the same needs for public services. They have light, but do not have potable water, telephone, or Internet. There is one teacher for grade, a principal, and two technical advisors who support the school academically. Teacher M described the conditions in the following way:

Here nothing is simple, although we work in the afternoon; some children arrive without breakfast, or have eaten only tortillas with chili and beans. There are poverty and health problems in the community, and we do not know exactly the level of nutrition of our students, nor their visual acuity. We have no medical service that detects skin diseases that are so common in our students. (Teacher M)

Teacher M has 21 students of whom 16 are indigenous Mixtec; none of them has attended preschool. Two did not speak Spanish when they entered first grade. They spoke only Mixtec, their native language, which Teacher M does not speak. He learned some words and has made an effort to stay in tune with children. Their parents work from sunrise to sunset in the field or packing vegetables. Many of them cannot read or write.

The students sell tomatoes, peppers, and summer squash that do not meet quality standards. They go by themselves to sell them in the city, which is 30 km away from their homes. Most of the older children come to school early with their parents when they leave for work. After school the children are left alone at home. If a young sibling gets sick, girls stop going to school to provide care. These girls begin taking on parental responsibilities when they are in first or second grade.

Social justice or injustice

Teacher M sees the inequality of Mexico represented in the school. The father, mother and older children work long hours and children are neglected in many ways. These children are not cared for, protected and nurtured in the way that other children are. They do not have the same opportunities and thus it is difficult for them to move out of poverty. Teacher M said:

If we lived in a just society, the rights to adequate housing, food, and educational quality would be achievable for these children. My students need additional support to compensate for the social, cultural, and economic deficits. Only the state can promote equality. And I think that living in a socially fair environment is important because living in a culture, in a just society, people can fully develop. Because if we want a country, a community where people are fully developed, we need to build schools where there are spaces and strategies that push the bottom up to look to advance towards equality because fundamental rights are the same for all. (Teacher M)

Teacher M was concerned about differences in the treatment of males and females. He said that men make the decisions; they can have an extended family and live with two women so that the children are siblings and cousins at the same time. He sees machismo reflected in school when a sister misses school because she has to take care of a younger sibling, but her brother never fails to attend.

Educational opportunity for all

Teacher M expressed his philosophy in this way:

I see nobility in my students and seek to awaken in them the desire to learn. For me it is essential to convey my belief that education is a tool for life. I want to convince them that education is a

weapon to defend themselves, that if they study they will have better opportunities, and they will take responsibility to learn and know more. I open the doors through education; offer those tools that will enable them to succeed in life. But it is not easy to teach reading and writing to children in a language that is not theirs. (Teacher M)

He has worked hard to reduce discrimination. Girls and boys play together. They talk with him about difficult family situations or problems they have with their peers. Given this trust, they express themselves naturally and he lets them use language that would be inappropriate in more formal settings because they are not trying to offend him, but need these words to express what is happening to them at home. He gives them synonyms to express the same idea correctly, and they learn that there are more appropriate ways to describe certain facts.

When students are in conflict, he intervenes immediately to help them learn to resolve differences.

I teach them to respect and to be respected, to hear and to apologize when necessary. School comes down to two things: to learn and make friends, and they can be friends despite the differences in gender, religion, size, and shape because we are all human beings and we all deserve respect. In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, they learn rules from the resolution of problems that have arisen in the classroom. (Teacher M)

Teacher M works with parents and feels that it is important to talk with mothers primarily so that gender inequalities are not reproduced at home and daughters have the opportunity to attend school. He laments that his efforts are only successful for a while and sooner or later girls are absent again.

A way of being and working

Teacher M believes that good relationships with students are the heart of teaching. He does not act as their friend but does try to establish a loving and trusting relationship. He says, “Students should be happy at school if we do not want to see them fail. I am a very affectionate loving teacher; I play with the kids, sing and dance with them”.

He still sees learning as important but feels that nobody learns when they are hungry or in a hostile environment. The school provides breakfast at low cost, and when children cannot pay they give them food and cover the cost.

Teacher M says that there is a friendly atmosphere at the school:

Teachers interact well together and with the director. Parents respect us, and we construct relationships of trust, listen to their problems, and allow them to vent. I tell them that if they are well, their children will also be well. Do things with their children in mind. (Teacher M)

Teacher M is concerned that these families are not growing and developing despite the efforts of teachers at the school. At the same time, he sees that small steps are being made toward greater social justice.

My accomplishment is that children live in harmony, respect others, and progress in learning the curriculum. I have taught that our differences make us unique. Most of the children have changed their thinking because of my teaching. It may seem insignificant, but respecting others and recognizing differences are valuable. My students see that we fight for them to enjoy the same opportunities as other children. I hope that when these students become adults, they will educate their children and the influence of the school and myself as teacher will be reflected. (Teacher M)

Discussion of research questions

The narratives of Costa Rica and Mexico provide a way to think about social justice in schools. The views of the teacher leaders varied according to the ethic of justice, critique, care, and community (Starratt, 1991; Furman, 2004). The first question was: how do teacher leaders make sense of social justice?

How do teacher leaders make sense of social justice?

The teachers in Costa Rica expressed pride and excitement that they were part of a change in their school that was running parallel to educational developments in their country. The change was not just a new program or new procedures, but it represented a transformative way of thinking. They believed that admitting more qualified students from diverse backgrounds was creating a much stronger school, and its reputation was motivating students, teachers, parents and the administration to work harder and achieve more than they thought they could.

Their spirit is closely connected to Furman's (2004) ethic of community and what Fierro and Paradise (2013) described as *convivencia*, the development of participation of all with a common mission that is more collective than individual in nature. Paradoxically, the teachers began the transformational process by emphasizing the need to focus on individual qualifications through a selective entrance examination. Once they had selected highly dedicated students and parents, they expressed a commitment to provide equally to all and to address financial needs of students. They were developing a genuine care for students attending the school, but left aside those who did not meet the entrance requirements.

What is absent from the conversation of these teachers is an ethic of critique (Starratt, 1991). They are only mildly critical of institutions around them, and they do not refer to a mission to raise the consciousness of their students about broader injustices in society. Shields (2004) conceived of social justice as transformational in a way that these teachers did not. Membership in the school was restricted to those who had the qualifications, whereas Furman (2012) and Fierro and Paradise (2013) conceived of democratic communities as being open to all.

By contrast, the ethic of critique and the ethic of care dominated the Mexican story. Indigenous families do not speak Spanish and live in poverty without adequate food or housing. Teacher M cares deeply about them and is indignant about unequal treatment of his school. The schools with wealthy students get more and better materials. He decries this injustice as well as the injustice of his country that does not adequately provide for these people.

He is also critical of the community where an attitude of machismo is evident in unequal treatment and abuse of women. He is concerned about the girls in his school, and he laments their absence from school when they have to take care of their siblings while their brothers contribute little at home and are allowed to pursue their education without interruption. His work is one teacher's application of United Nations goals to address gender equity (Unterhalter, 2005).

He describes how he deals with prejudice and poor treatment of students within his classroom. He reaches out and provides special treatment to those who are victims of others and models how they should be treated. By extending his power as a teacher, the victims are able to overcome their adversaries. This process of intervening when students are mistreated and modeling a new way of acting is one of the things that social justice leaders do. This kind of moral outrage was what Sergiovanni (2000) advocated for educators to act morally.

What do social justice leaders do?

All of the teachers were concerned about their students and wanted to teach them values of equity and respect in a way that would change their thinking (Noddings, 2002). Teacher M attempted to establish close relations with his students in the context of multiple marginality (race, class, gender); he ensured that students were fed; he coordinated and participated with parents to take care of the building; he used games and music as frequent teaching strategies; and he incorporated in his speech words of the mother tongue of the students in order to establish a strong connection with them.

In cases of discrimination and rejection among children, he intervened immediately. To combat gender discrimination, he arranged for girls to participate on an equal level in learning and recreational activities. He spoke with mothers to persuade them to give their daughters the same treatment as their sons. When faced with discrimination because of physical conditions or attitudes, he modeled full acceptance of the rejected child. For

students at risk of failing, he coordinated with school staff so that they would receive extra attention, and paired these students with others in class. In the long run, he hopes that these actions will affect these children when they become parents and are in a position to teach values to their children.

The Costa Rican teachers were attempting to establish a kind of harmony in the school in which students get along well together. They established programs in cooperation with the Ministry of Education to provide food for young people and to engage them in community activities. The teachers visited homes and came to know extreme poverty and the precariousness of the daily lives of students.

Teachers provided individual attention to meet particular needs of students; they created opportunities for dialogue with the families communicated assertively to make strong connections. They promoted values such as honesty and respect and modeled strategies for conflict resolution to build a harmonious environment for students. They arranged for exchange between students of different ages for them to support each other.

What factors help and hinder the work of teacher leaders?

On the one hand, teachers in both countries sensed a high level of support from their school director, and there was a general sense that the school had a common mission and shared commitment to social justice. These teachers were committed to Sergiovanni's (2000) "life world view". On the other hand, the "systems world" (p. ix) dominated the educational systems outside of their schools and made them highly vulnerable. In Costa Rica, the director and teachers with temporary contracts could be sent to other schools, and the result would probably be a loss of cultural commitment and direction. In Mexico, the families lived from day-to-day and could have to move to find work and survive.

How did teachers learn to become social justice leaders?

For these teachers, motivation came from the family environment and built awareness and social skills to exercise leadership and fight for the most vulnerable (Gardner, 2011). Their parents served as an example and supported them unconditionally. They developed sensitivity to people with fewer opportunities who were struggling for a better life through education.

All of these teacher leaders described loving and supportive families that taught them to value education and care for others. Their desire to teach was strong, and it developed early because of the influence of their parents. They see teaching as a calling to which they had no choice but to respond.

The family seemed to influence them in two ways. First, some families were inspiring models with traits of resilience. The parent was able to persevere in adverse situations and often model leadership in public situations. Second, parents required that the child be an accomplished and responsible person committed to social justice.

Discussion and conclusion

In Costa Rica teachers sought to develop the full potential of students; they were excited to see them progress, and they could envision their place in making a better world. They were enacting Woods' (2005) developmental justice. In Mexico there was a strong emphasis on economic justice and cultural justice (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003). Human dignity, the principle of equal treatment of different people (economic justice) and respect of the other in the context of economic and social deficits (cultural justice) guided Teacher M's actions.

These teacher leaders shared some common intentions and actions: they believe that education functions as a lever of social mobility, which allows students to achieve better living conditions in the future, (single purpose) but also, will allow them to build a more just world (collective order). The main actions that they took were to: a) ensure that students had the minimum resources to learn; b) establish a deep connection

with students and their parents; c) model ways to resolve conflicts; d) participate in building a socially just environment.

These teachers expressed a commitment to social justice that went far beyond seeing teaching as just a job. They were similar to the stories of educators compiled by Cowie (2011). They are those who love their profession, assume leadership and live with passion and responsibility. They are committed to improving the quality of life for their students, given the conditions of marginality from which they come. They are sensitive to social injustice and committed to decreasing it.

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