

## “I love these girls—I was these girls”: Women leading for social justice in a single-sex public school

By: [Katherine Cumings Mansfield](#)

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this article is to share the findings from a 2-year ethnography that examined female practitioners’ experiences in the field. The article describes the intentions, discourses, actions, and repercussions of female administrators and teachers working to accomplish social justice for racial/ethnic minority girls from challenging economic circumstances. The discourse adjoining social justice intentions and actions is shared with descriptions of the specific material, intellectual, and emotional ways that female educators labored for social justice in their particular context. The impact of taking an explicitly activist stance in facilitating transformative learning opportunities is discussed along with implications for practice.

**Keywords:** gender in education | feminism | single-sex public education | social justice | middle and high school

### **Article:**

*One of the best ways to get to know “Centro Urbano” is to drive the inner and outer “loops,” followed by north–south cruises on the major interstates and state highways. Without traversing minor streets into specific neighborhoods, one can observe that Southtown, for the most part, shows signs of typical suburban sprawl as many major American cities: The older and poorer neighborhoods cluster toward the city center, and the newer and larger housing spread like a sea of beige and gray on the outer fringes alongside multiple clones of strip malls.*

*I travel southeast on one of the major interstates and exit west toward the site of Young Women’s Leadership School. It feels good to drive the speed of molasses through the infamous neighborhood lined with Spanish colonials, Tudors, Victorians, Georgians, bungalows, cape cods, craftsmans, and Mediterraneans. Interspersed among various levels of peeling paint, multiplying mold, and downright dilapidation—slapped hastily with signage indicating, sale, rent, or auction—pose treasures meticulously maintained by their original, long-retired owners or inheritors of structures worthy of Architectural Digest. The uniqueness and beauty of these homes built in the heydays, after the Depression and before White flight, never fail to make me thirst for an income great enough to fund the makeovers necessary to make the orphaned domiciles livable.*

*I park under the ancient oak rather than the towering cypress to take advantage of the shady spread that shelters my aging vehicle from the early yet intense Texas sun. As I venture into the lush courtyard of the 1930s art deco structure, I inhale the thick scent of humidity and flowering quince. Upon entering the building, my feet skim the gleaming tiles past walls displaying large framed photographs of students and sprinklings of quotations by notables such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Maya Angelou. Large, felt banners in proud colors parade past my head, whispering the coveted names of Dartmouth, Harvard, and The University of Texas. I softly rap on Principal Santiago's unmarked office door, strategically tucked away in a quiet corner. Her voice melodically invites me into her hideaway . . .*

This 2-year ethnography examined the discourse, intentions, actions, and repercussions of women educators working for social justice for racial/ethnic minority girls from challenging economic circumstances in a single-sex public secondary school. Explored through the experiences of these female practitioners, their on-the-ground insights were elicited with the following research questions in mind: What is their inspiration for working in this all-girls public magnet school? What specific actions are educators taking to facilitate social justice for their students? Are there repercussions associated with taking an explicitly activist stance? If so, what?

Since the United States has traditionally limited single-sex public education, most of what we know is limited to data from overseas or U.S. parochial schools. This project capitalized on an exceptional opportunity to study a major U.S. city's first and only public all-female secondary school, with pilot fieldwork beginning prior to opening day. This study builds significantly on the limited literature by examining why and how women faculty and administration are taking an explicitly activist stance to facilitate social justice on behalf of female students in a secondary magnet school in a major urban center in the United States. This project also contributes to the discourse of gender equity vis-à-vis public education and policy. Findings contribute to the knowledge and understanding of educators, parents, and policymakers. While I do not propose to generalize to other populations or to have developed a standardized study that can be replicated, my findings may prove useful to those seeking to understand the cultural and programmatic influences of school principals and teachers eager to support urban students with otherwise meager educational opportunities.

## **CONTEXT OF STUDY**

Centro Urbano Independent School District (CUISD) is located in a major metropolitan area in Texas. Similar to districts in other major cities, Centro Urbano is experiencing severe racial and economic isolation of urban students while suburban districts grow and diversify. As with other metropolitan areas, other issues include a high incidence of teen pregnancy, a troubling dropout rate, a leaky college pipeline, and curricula that lack rigor. In addition, the district continues to experience significant enrollment decreases as families with financial means transfer to the outer suburbs and exurbs and relatively poorer families struggling to find affordable housing relocate to the older, inner-ring suburbs. Among the families who stay within the district's boundaries, some choose to send their children to one of many private school options, especially during the middle school years. Additionally, lingering fiscal difficulties hamper efforts to improve schools.

In response and as a part of a push to “repurpose” empty school buildings, the CUISD’s long-term plans include the introduction of a variety of magnet schools from which parents of students in the metro’s 16 districts can choose, thus bolstering enrollment and curtailing school closures (Mansfield, 2011).

One example of innovative magnet schools is the Young Women’s Leadership School (YWLS). District officials have partnered with a community nonprofit organization—the Foundation for the Education of Young Women—to partially fund and otherwise support the YWLS. The district aspires to meet long-term objectives for enrollment and building use by developing schools of choice such as the YWLS. Moreover, supporters of the YWLS believe that female student outcomes (e.g., increase in high school graduation rates, decrease in teen pregnancy, increase in college attendance and graduation, increase in interest and success in STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] fields) will significantly improve as a result of the design and implementation of this all-female public school (Mansfield, 2011).

The Grade 6–12 curriculum of the YWLS is a single-track advanced program that focuses on three primary areas: rigorous college preparation, especially coursework in STEM fields; health and wellness guidance that emphasizes preventing drug abuse, pregnancy, and obesity; and training to prepare young women for leadership positions in careers and campus life (Mansfield, 2011). The YWLS opened with 75 sixth graders, 75 seventh graders, 4 core teachers, 4 specialists, and a principal. The following year, 75 new sixth graders were inducted, bringing the total number of students to roughly 225 Grade 6–8 students. Each year since, the YWLS has added an additional class of sixth graders and will do so until the school serves Grades 6 through 12. Additionally, as student enrollment increases, so does the cadre of teachers and administrators. The memorandum of understanding between the CUISD and the Foundation for the Education of Young Women outlines the mission and purposes of the school along with the expectation that there will be a “women’s studies” component to the overall program. According to Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2010), YWLS student demographics are listed as 78% Hispanic, 16% African-American, and 5% White with 81% of all students labeled as “economically disadvantaged.”

## **DESIGN AND METHOD**

Since the goal was to study the “cultural particularism” of a “small-scale, isolated, tribal culture” (Wolcott, 2008, p. 28), ethnography was an ideal research design choice. Moreover, according to Creswell (2003), ethnography for and about women should include issues associated with “realizing social justice for women in specific contexts” (p. 10). In addition, Olesen (2005) broadly conceived that research for and about women should take a more dialectical approach that honors a variety of viewpoints. Specifically, feminist research that aims to realize social justice for women in particular contexts must attend to how race, class, and gender are synchronistically assembled. Olesen warned that researchers who attend to gender without recognizing the intersectionality of race and class breed unwanted distance among people and compromise the feminist project.

## **SITE SELECTION AND ENTRÉE**

I selected the YWLS because it was one of six newly established single-sex public schools in Texas. News articles reporting the schools' major mission as serving mostly Hispanic female students living in poverty immediately caught my attention. The uniqueness of each school and the fact that I could be involved with a new school "from the ground up" piqued my curiosity. I made the final selection after contacting Ms. Santiago,<sup>1</sup> director of the YWLS, who expressed immediate interest in developing a research collaboration. She said, "It would be great if you could focus on the culture we are trying to develop here." She then agreed to introduce me to faculty and staff to conduct observations and interviews and invited me to come back the following week to observe the first faculty meeting of the year.

## PILOT FIELD WORK

During the first year of operations, I was able to conduct what Wolcott (2008) referred to as *ethnographic reconnaissance*. Goals were to get to know the community, build trusting relationships with stakeholders, and volunteer in and be useful to the community in whatever capacity the participants deemed suitable. This first year of pilot fieldwork was useful for gaining an overall awareness of the setting and characters and generating a feeling of breadth to the project. I developed research questions in collaboration with stakeholders such as district and building leaders, parents, students, teachers, support staff, and community members.

During the second year of ethnographic fieldwork, I continued my volunteer work and conducted regular observations. I spoke with teachers, support staff, and parents daily. My questioning became more probing as time went on. Concurrently, participants became more verbose in their sharing. I lost track of the time I spent at the school. I was there so often that I repeatedly forgot to sign in at the visitors' desk and eventually stopped wearing a visitor's badge. I also conducted recorded interviews and focus groups during this period.

## PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND INTERVIEWS

In addition to observations and field notes garnered over a 2-year period, data sources included interviews with administrators, teachers, and parents in the field. Focus groups with students were also conducted. Curricula, newsletters, PowerPoint presentations, and other artifacts supplemented observations, field notes, and interviews. For the purposes of this article, I focus on the voices of six women. These participants were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2002) because of their relative breadth of perspective. The principal and 5 teachers were chosen because they were founding members of the school and provided relatively deep insights that newcomers could not. They were a diverse group of women with between 5 and 20 years experience as educators. One woman identified as White, one as Latina, one as Arab American, one as biracial, and two as multiethnic. One woman was single, three were married, and two were divorced. Three women were parenting or coparenting children.

Interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours and occurred at a variety of sites: the school, participants' homes, and local restaurants. Approximating Weiss (1995), I refrained from using a fixed set of interview questions, as the process was iterative. Throughout the interviews, I worked to recognize that people's personal knowledge and ways of knowing are critical to social

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<sup>1</sup> The pseudonym for the school principal.

interaction and, hence, social analysis (Campbell, 2004). Following the advice of Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1990), I tried to facilitate interviews that reflected an open yet focused structure that elicited the personal experiences of people known to have been involved with a particular situation. Eliciting subjective experiences was a goal—not a problem to be resolved (Merton et al., 1990). Indeed, according to Merton and colleagues (1990), the “focused interview seeks to provide an easygoing and open occasion for the interviewee to express [her] sentiments and perceptions of a situation” (p. 61).

## INSIDER/OUTSIDER VOICE AND MEMBER CHECKING

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (2002), traditionalists uphold that researchers “maintain the stance of disinterested observer,” while revisionists believe that “formalized distance [is] disrespectful and diminishing of research subjects” (p. 137). Rather, they called for research relationships that are more complex and reciprocal because in addition to being more ethical, they are likely to yield deeper, more empirical data. Additionally, they pointed out that feminist research especially argued for establishing authentic relationships that facilitated authentic findings. Olesen (2005) agreed, stating, “Relationships with participants lie at the heart of feminist-ethical concerns” (p. 255). Indeed, the “navigation of boundaries, then, must be seen as counterpoint to the development of intimacy” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002, p. 152).

One way to achieve balance in ethnographic research is to pay careful attention to the continuum that is the insider view and discourse and the outsider perspective and voice. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (2002) proposed that achieving this emic-etic tension was possible by varying the way that an author’s voice was used in the final account. Note that throughout this article, a sampling of insider-outsider voice continuum is shared. For example, my “distant voice as witness” is demonstrated in the excerpt from my field notes at the beginning of this piece. Additionally, my voice as “conceptual preoccupation and interpretation” (p. 93) is shared as “reflections” rather than the traditional “discussion and implication,” to underscore “the ways in which [my] observations and [my] text are shaped by the assumptions [that I bring] to the inquiry, reflecting [my] disciplinary background, [my] theoretical perspectives, [my] intellectual interests, and [my] understanding of the relevant literature” (p. 93). Throughout, the insider voice of participants is included as much as possible from recorded interview transcripts.

According to Jeffrey (2008), ethnographies are “never finished only left” (p. 144). Wolcott (2008) would add that no matter how much time is invested in the field, one can never claim to have the whole picture. To guard against misinterpretation, participants were invited to read the manuscript and give feedback throughout the research process. All participants reported that they felt that I had captured the essence of people, places, ideas, and understandings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the literature (Brooks & Miles, 2008; Brown, 2006; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Marshall, Young, & Moll, 2009; Oliva, Anderson, & Byng, 2009; Theoharis, 2007), the ability of the school leader to cultivate educational equity, access, and achievement in diverse contexts depends heavily on taking an explicitly activist stance while developing the school culture. If the goal of public education is the “full and equal participation of all groups in society, where

resources are distributed equitably, members are physically and psychologically safe, and members interact in a self-determining and interdependent manner” (Walker, 2006, p. 115), then a major effort is needed to transform our school cultures by leaders who are “democratic, participatory, and inclusive” and who help others recognize “issues of inequality, inequity, and oppression.” Rodriguez and Fabionar (2009) maintain that “educational leaders develop a critical analysis of the socioeconomic landscape of their schools and communities” and reflect on how their attitudes and beliefs about poverty are “informed by their social location in a larger system of privilege and oppression” (p. 55). Furthermore, Shields (2004) claimed that if school principals acknowledged students’ various identities while they are developing their leadership practices, the result will be more caring pedagogy: “When children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success” (p. 122).

## DEMONSTRATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERS

Common questions that arise while conducting such research are “How can I know social justice leadership when I see it?” and “What makes any leader a leader for social justice?” The literature forwards specific leadership attributes that are necessary to challenge social inequities in schools (Brooks & Miles, 2008; Brown, 2006; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Theoharis, 2007). According to Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, and Hodgins (2007), social justice leaders strive for critique, compassion, democracy, polyphony, inclusion, liberation, and action for change (p. 400). Dantley and Tillman (2009) forward five particular characteristics that are important to consider regardless of one’s definitions of social justice leadership. First, leaders for social justice show an awareness of the broader sociopolitical–cultural contexts of schooling. In addition, they actively critique marginalizing behaviors and attitudes in their own leadership style and practices, as well as those of the rest of their organization. Furthermore, democratic principles are not only professed but also practiced in these schools. Moreover, these leaders feel a moral obligation (p. 23) to counter negative probabilities and forward hopeful possibilities. Last, school leaders committed to social justice show their commitment by moving from mere conversations about social justice to actually practicing it through an activist stance.

## INSPIRATION

Many leaders for social justice recognize that their service often emanates from personal experiences of marginalization (Merchant & Shoho, 2009). Indeed, “perhaps, as with the minister and the doctor, the servant-leader might also acknowledge that his or her own healing is the motivation . . . the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 50). Undeniably, inspiration for justice workers often comes from a sense of noblesse oblige whence there is a strong feeling to “pay it forward” (Sanders-Lawson, Smith-Campbell, & Benham, 2009).

Some activists’ inspiration springs from a spiritually based passion. DeYoung (2007) identified a number of shared themes, or what he deemed “ways of being” in his research on faith-inspired social justice leaders. First, their religious faith motivated their thoughts and actions. Second, they adopted a worldview that emerged from the margins of society. Third, they recognized

difference while embracing a common humanity. Fourth, they recognized the importance of structural change and were ethically committed to positive transformation. A hallmark of these leaders was the merging of their faith with their intellectual and political pursuits. In addition, they learned to see the world through the eyes of the oppressed as well as the privileged. Seeing both sides enabled access to a variety of people and advanced multiple strategies to facilitate change. DeYoung's findings echoed Greenleaf's (2002) work on servant leadership and Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) by emphasizing that laboring for social justice is a mutual process by which oppressed and former oppressor work together. Freire described this solidarity as an "act of love" requiring the hard work of fighting together side-by-side to transform material reality.

## FINDINGS

Findings are organized into three major sections, as they align with the three research questions. The first section explores the inspiration of women leading and laboring for social justice in their schools. The second segment examines the specific ways that female administrators and teachers enacted social justice for female youth living in challenging economic circumstances. In the third part, I share some of the ramifications particular to these women taking an activist stance in their schools.

### INSPIRATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

The findings in this section speak to the first research question: What is the inspiration for working in this all-girls public magnet school? Interviews revealed the social justice discourse adjoining these women's intentions and actions. Whether emanating from personal marginalizing experiences, one's private faith, or a commitment to professional practitioner values, common among them was a mysterious inner drive to serve others.

#### Testimonies

*Personal history.* During our first interview, the principal, Maria Santiago, stated, "I love these girls. I was these girls." Ms. Santiago had grown up in an infamous part of town well known for its poverty, violence, and substandard housing and schooling. She chose to return to the community after receiving her educator credentials, expressly to "pay it forward." She said,

I related to the girls because I grew up in a very similar circumstance. I grew up in poverty and had very little opportunity in terms of school. . . . I saw so many of my friends end up either pregnant or just didn't get through school. . . . There were so many people that I saw not progress that were close friends of mine, it was saddening to me to see that. . . . And I think that when I looked at the girls, when I saw what their challenges were, and things that they were facing and also the opportunity to make a difference in that. . . . It was something that was very personal to me. I wanted to provide for them a different chance and a different opportunity at life.

Ms. Santiago also emphasized how important it was as a leader to "set the tone" with the teachers on "day one" about what her motivations and expectations were.

I think that communication was a big piece of it from the very beginning. My very first day . . . I shared my personal story. And I was so nervous I thought I was going to cry. . . . But I felt like it was so critical for me to share why I was there and my motivation and why I was going to do whatever it took for the kids to be successful.

One teacher, Ms. Fakhoury, discussed Ms. Santiago's introduction on the first day of faculty–staff development sessions prior to commencement of classes and remembered thinking what an “awesome thing” it was to be working for someone who truly “loves these girls.” Ms. Fakhoury admitted that she could not personally relate to the experiences under which Ms. Santiago grew up, because she came from a “privileged” background. However, she did feel as though she had contributions to make because, as an engineer, she faced marginalizing situations as a woman in a traditionally male field:

I really think [Ms. Santiago's story] makes a huge difference for a lot of us. Because I cannot say I was those girls. I can say I experienced some of the things like those girls. . . . I was in an all-girls school. I've gone to fields where they don't want girls. I can say literally that I have [had] experiences that they will have in the future. . . . I was a privileged girl. . . . But I have lived the position of women. . . . I was in a class of three hundred students where seven were female . . . and I was one of them. . . . It's that feeling of being the female who has a lot of things to give and not being able to be proud of it. I think that's a lesson that needs to be told, understood, shown, demonstrated, felt—anything you can think of—because that's really what's going to make them or break them in the future.

*Private faith.* One teacher, Ms. Mendoza, discussed how important her family's faith was and is to her personal and professional decision making. Ms. Mendoza shared that she is a devout Catholic who believes that her love for God and for all people should be an “all-encompassing thing.” She stated that she and her husband considered sending their children to parochial schools but could not afford them. They also considered homeschooling, but Ms. Mendoza and her family felt that it was important that she and her children be “part of the world” rather than “live in a vacuum.” Ms. Mendoza shared that her religious values demanded that she be inclusive. She also felt that values taught at the YWLS were similar to her spiritual values:

It is very structured just like my religion is. . . . There's discipline . . . and modesty. . . . “You're a kid. You don't have that sense of entitlement just yet. You need to have your boundaries. There's going to be a time when you can go wear make-up and whatever clothing you want.” . . . But, there's a foundation that you need to set first.<sup>2</sup>

*Professional accountability.* Another teacher, Ms. Flores, talked about her deep respect for Principal Santiago and her desire to please her, as one form of inspiration for working hard. Ms.

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<sup>2</sup> I must admit that my heart clenched when Ms. Mendoza mentioned the word *modesty*. My feminist self was poised to pounce on anything she said next! But, fortunately, I never did hear anything that would indicate restricting women's choices or limiting their spheres to home and family. With further prodding, Ms. Mendoza clarified that she thought it was important for youth to have firm boundaries and that, as they developmentally matured, they should be given more personal freedoms to match their commitments to personal responsibility.

Flores also shared the importance of meeting professional standards as far as high-stakes-accountability test scores are concerned:

I hate to say it, but the scores are a big thing. That's a driving force because that's what you're held accountable to at the end of the day. . . . Even though I don't feel that [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] is the whole indicator of student success . . . that's the only thing that on the outside people see for the school. That's the only legit thing that they look at. . . . At the end of the day, that's a nonnegotiable.

Speaking of her relationship with Ms. Santiago, Ms. Flores said that Ms. Santiago was a “very good leader” and that she “felt supported” by her—she especially wanted to make sure, “Whatever I was doing aligned with what she was doing.” Ms. Kelly, another teacher, shared similar sentiments. She expressed how heavily she relied on Ms. Santiago for guidance and support in her teaching. She felt that Ms. Santiago did a great job “setting the tone” for high expectations and positive attitudes toward the students. Ms. Kelly remarked that she was extremely appreciative of her principal's keen focus on the welfare of students as her primary concern: “You can tell when you talk to somebody whether it's all about the kids or not. It comes out very quickly.” Ms. Barnes agreed: “It was never about her [Ms. Santiago]. It was always about the kids. We aren't here for us. We are here for them.”

## Reflections

While reflecting on the inspiration for the women leading and laboring for social justice in this particular public secondary school, I found it evident that some of the participants' experiences echoed those of prior studies. However, there were some surprises. For example, while some expressed that their servant leadership emanated from personal experiences of marginalization or private faith, others expressed that their commitment to facilitating just outcomes for students was directly connected to professional accountability. In addition to serving from the heart, these women take data seriously. They are exceptionally conscientious of their accountability responsibilities and highly aware of the bottom line in terms of test scores. But, they did not seem to lament the current accountability context. They seemed to don a practical attitude, as if they were saying, “This is life, and we must work within the confines of this life. We can and will work within and beyond these confines.”

These findings imply that successfully working toward and achieving just outcomes for underserved students is not necessarily bound by contextual constraints. Rather, educators concerned with social justice for their students must learn to work within the margins of their political realities. Some might judge these educators for the time spent preparing for high-stakes accountability measures, or they might be disappointed that these justice-minded educators did not rebel against standardized tests, which many believe to be rooted in racial and class biases. But I choose not to judge them for how they have chosen to negotiate their political spaces. School districts and state and federal politics are powerful and hierarchical organizations. Teachers are relatively less powerful as policy implementers and may not be in a position of privilege to resist policy as I might be from my “ivory tower.”

## ACTIONS TAKEN TO FACILITATE SOCIAL JUSTICE

The purpose of this section is to answer the second research question: What specific actions are educators taking to facilitate social justice for their students? Interviews with the school principal and teachers indicated three primary areas that would have to be addressed if the school was to achieve socially just outcomes for racial minority girls living in poverty: build deep relationships akin to a family; create a formal, rigorous curriculum to truly prepare students for higher education environments; and establish an informal curriculum to facilitate the identification of, and means to surmount, the obstacles that were part and parcel of growing up female, poor, and, more often than not, a racial or ethnic minority.

## Testimonies

*Building a caring family network.* The faculty and administration offered that one of the most important aspects of leading and laboring for social justice in their school was building a caring family-type network among faculty, staff, and students. Across the board, participants believed that it would be impossible to address educational and social issues if students did not feel well cared for. One day during their planning time, Ms. Barnes and Ms. Mendoza sat with me and explained some of the things that they do to provide a caring environment for students. Ms. Barnes said, “And last time I checked—and [Ms. Mendoza] can vouch for this, you’ve done it too—If a child has need for an article of clothing, we go out and buy it ourselves. I’ve spent hundreds, hundreds of dollars.”

Similar conversations occurred with Ms. Kelly and Ms. Barnes during their shared lunch break. All three of these women were exceedingly cognizant of the material needs of their students. As I observed on several occasions, a student rubbing her abdomen would whisper to her teacher. Then, Ms. Kelly, Ms. Barnes, or Ms. Mendoza would nod silently while teaching or grading papers, and the child would walk quietly to where nutritious snacks were conveniently stored. Ms. Barnes said, “They’re hungry. They’re starving. That’s why I had a fridge. That’s why I had a microwave. And that’s why I always kept two drawers full of food.” Ms. Mendoza said, “Yeah, we do that in here, too.”

During the final week of school, the eighth graders were honored with a beautiful banquet. It was a sight to behold that day during my observations: Tan hosiery replaced white bobby socks, and sparkles replaced their usual plaid. Ms. Kelly found me at the intersection of two main hallways prior to the first morning bell: “Hey, Katherine! Can you do me a big favor? Can you watch my classroom so I can help a couple of girls get dressed?” Ms. Kelly had gone shopping for some of the girls the night before so that they too would have something special to wear to their graduation banquet. These types of scenarios occurred on a regular basis.

*Rigorous formal curriculum.* The YWLS mission states that the school will “nurture the intellectual curiosity and creativity of young women” as well as “address their developmental needs.” In addition, the school will strive to “cultivate dynamic participatory learning, enabling students to experience great academic success at many levels, especially in the fields of math, science and technology.” While the school utilizes and implements existing state and district parameters for curriculum, particular emphases include high expectations for responsible decision making, preparation for high school graduation and college matriculation and

graduation, leadership and wellness skills, and a particular focus on “results” or “achievement and outcomes.”

Ms. Santiago spoke of her commitment to make the formal curriculum “rigorous” and her determination to hire teachers who believed that racial minority girls living in poverty could indeed meet those standards.

Feeling sorry for kids that are in poverty is just to me—that’s a death sentence. You’re just telling them, “I want you to be in that condition your whole life.” You have to have higher expectations. . . . Hiring the right teachers was the most important thing that I did as a leader. Making sure that the people that were in the room with the students understood where they came from, were empathetic to their situation, but not having sympathy on them to the point where they were hindering them. And that was one of the things that I was looking for. Somebody that’s going to challenge them, push them, love them, and provide that environment.

Ms. Fakhoury shared that she spent a lot of time in her formal teaching agenda helping students learn how to organize and present their math work in way that made sense to the engineering community. She admitted that adjusting to her classes was difficult for most students, but she felt strongly about preparing them for the rigors of upper-level courses. Ms. Fakhoury noted, “I came to the country for engineering. . . . I know where the math is going to take them. . . . If I know where they’re heading, why am I going to prepare them for something else?”

During observations and discussions, Ms. Kelly showed a commitment to participatory learning that was so important to the founding of the school. Many times, I observed her utilizing cooperative learning in her teaching, as well as her unique means of tying the formal curriculum to real-life examples. During one of our lunches together, Ms. Kelly and Ms. Barnes had an interesting conversation about the importance of combining traditional skill building with more creative hands-on classroom activities. One told me, “You know what worked at this school was almost a perfect blending of strong, traditional, foundational skills and constructivism as classroom activities.”

*Critical informal curricula.* There was a conscientious effort to incorporate problem-based skill building in informal curricula. Faculty spoke to students about some of the barriers that students might face as a person of color or as a woman (or at the intersection of ethnicity, sex, and socioeconomic status). In addition, students were afforded opportunities to strengthen their personal efficacy—for example, learning how to negotiate professional introductions and taking self-defense workshops. I probed Ms. Santiago’s perceptions by asking her if they were approaching their informal curricula as a way to “fix” children. She shared that rather than viewing students and their families as “broken,” she felt that these activities reflected their commitment to engaging in courageous conversations about race, gender, and class and helping students understand the *isms* that are out there in society. She also emphasized that awareness of *isms* was not enough—that after engaging in open discussion about specific vulnerabilities, they must also provide students with information and skill-building activities that might help to “empower them to become strong women.” Principal Santiago added, “I think that it’s a social

injustice if you don't let people know what they need to be aware of in their lives [and how to combat that].”

In addition to specific skill-building activities, professional women of color were invited to the school to share stories of their educational and work-related struggles and triumphs with a particular emphasis on the importance of building female mentoring networks to help them achieve their college and career aspirations. Ms. Santiago shared,

Women helping women is a big important piece that we wanted to stress to the girls. And that sense of giving back, caring for one another . . . from the very beginning it was very intentional, and we had a lot of our guest speakers that first year talking about . . . women that inspired them and who would help [them], so that the girls could see that it really is about those connections . . . that those women in your life really are what help propel [you] forward.

Ms. Barnes spoke often about her quest to integrate feminist ideals and concepts into the formal curriculum. For example, rather than just have students memorize the definitions and spellings of weekly vocabulary words, Ms. Barnes interrogated the origins of words and how and why they have been used throughout history.

I mean, there's hero—heroine. I asked the girls, “What's a hero? Who's a hero?” They come up with words like “men, strong, brave, adventurous,” and so on. And then I say, “What's a heroine? Who is a heroine?” And they're like “a female who is a hero?” And I say, “Look it up! Find ‘heroine’ in the dictionary! Tell me where that word comes from!” And so they did. And you know what they found? They found out that “heroine” is the diminutive of hero! I mean, what's up with that? Why does the male get to be the great big hero and the female just a little bit of a hero?

Ms. Barnes also challenged the girls to understand literary concepts traditionally taught in English courses. For example, when studying plot and the variety of roles that are assigned to characters, the students found that—even in the most highly regarded texts—female characters were usually given stereotypical roles. However, male characters were usually afforded a plethora of complex characteristics and identities.

So, they find out that they only get to be the virgin or the whore or the sexless matron! But the guys get to play all kinds of roles. But the women: they are relegated to the very few stereotypes that men name for them. That is just wrong and I want them to see it for what it really is!

Ms. Barnes then explains to me how she uses these examples from the curriculum to discuss real-world problems that the girls are facing.

We have had long conversations about how women are expected to fall into those usual literary roles. We're either the whore or the virgin. I've said, “Listen to the way you talk about each other, ladies: ‘so-and-so is a slut, so-and-so is this or that . . .’ We do it, too! We do it to each other!” And we talk about how when they are adults and try to break

into new fields of study that other people will try very hard to place them back into those neat little categories where they think they belong . . . and how they are going to have to fight tooth and nail to not let that happen. . . . But the biggest thing is: we have to stop doing it to ourselves to each other. We are sexist with our own language we use!

Ms. Fakhoury noted that one of her major duties, despite its absence from the formal curriculum, was teaching students how to advocate for themselves as women.

I think that's what makes our campus so unique [is] the fact that we actually realized that, okay, knowing the plan—in my case knowing the math—it's not going to take them anywhere if they cannot face their professor. . . . I was taught how to be a lady [but] never really how to sit down and talk to an authority figure and develop that courage to say, "Hey, [I disagree]. Let's talk about this." And to me, I think that beats any curriculum. . . . If I can teach them how to voice their opinion and how to back up their facts and [insist] to somebody that "no, I am right." And if they're wrong they're more than happy to say, "Oh, you proved me wrong. Thank you. I'll look for another way now." You know, to me that is more crucial than algebra, calculus, statistics.

## Reflections

I appreciate how Ms. Santiago and her teachers are committed to the conscientization of students. They are engaging in brave conversations about sexism, racism, and classism. I am also impressed that they are not leaving students in the lurch by abandoning them at the realization stage: They are also trying to facilitate the empowerment of their students by offering workshops and mentorships. I was especially heartened by Ms. Fakhoury's attempts to "advocate for themselves as women." That is an important step toward addressing some of the asymmetric relations of power in educational organizations.

Other researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding students' realities as well as endeavoring to provide a more caring pedagogy where students feel appreciated and even loved. The women teacher leaders in this study obviously understood their students' lives and worked to provide a caring environment. But, surprising to me, is the intensity of their devotion as well as the specific, practical ways that the teachers and principal attended to the material needs of the young women in their charge. The implications for other justice-minded educators are obvious, if not downright painful to admit: The material needs of students must be on the agenda along with high expectations and personal attention that communicate deep caring. Teaching students to advocate for themselves is one thing—but can society expect our teachers and principals to provide food and clothing for their students?

## CONSEQUENCES OF LEADING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The findings of this section speak to the third research question: Are there repercussions associated with taking an explicitly activist stance? If so, what are they?

## Testimonies

Principal Santiago said that one of the more challenging aspects of her job was constantly “protecting the culture” that she was trying to build at the school so that the social justice goals for the girls might be realized. Interviews with the principal and teachers indicated that sometimes some parents had difficulties accepting the higher expectations for their young teens. Ms. Kelly said, “The first year, they seemed to trust us for the most part. But that second year: that’s when the pushback started.” Ms. Barnes told me, “I’m telling you, every freaking month of this school year, I’ve been dragged in front of a parent and [told], ‘You don’t understand! [Your class] is too difficult for our child!’” Ms. Santiago agreed that the second year was more difficult because some of the eighth-grade parents and students started testing the school’s expectations and boundaries. She stated that her efforts to protect the emerging culture of the school were “exhausting.” Despite the fact that Ms. Santiago “can’t stand confrontation and having to deal with those sorts of conversations,” she felt responsible to meet with parents and “keep them centered on the facts and the kids and the data.” I asked Ms. Santiago what she thought bothered parents the most. I asked, “When they did come in with a problem, what was the complaint usually?” Ms. Santiago explained that it “was the same five to eight parents, to be quite honest. The majority of them were fabulous, supportive, encouraging, positive with the teachers, but those five to eight were just damaging.” She added,

Whether it’s a discipline thing or curriculum thing they were kind of testing the water as far as “Well, we’ve signed up for this, and now that we have it, I’m not so sure we want it to be that hard.” . . . One of the parents actually said to me, “Why do you have such high expectations of our children?”

Ms. Fakhoury also shared that parents had a hard time accepting her high expectations for students’ work. Parents complained that her strict way of doing things was hampering their daughters’ creativity in math classes.

I understand a lot of the parents when they say, “Well, you do not allow my child to be creative.” Especially in my classes, because I tell them, “No. This is how I want your work to be. I want this here. I want that there.” I had a lot of phone calls: “Well, my child, she should be allowed to do it whatever way she likes.” I was like, “I was the engineer. I know what they want and your child—according to her—wants to be an engineer. So shouldn’t I be preparing her for that?” And they kind of stay quiet after a while. They start realizing where I am going with them.

Some teachers expressed that being openly feminist sometimes negatively affected their relationships with parents. For example, some fathers expressed serious concern that sex was so openly discussed during advisory classes. Other parents objected to some of the thought-provoking literature utilized in English classes, as well as the follow-up lessons that required girls to process “heavy” questions, such as negotiating gender identity expectations and sexual harassment. These teachers reported that establishing trusting relationships with parents while staying true to their beliefs was one of the more challenging aspects of their jobs.

Ms. Barnes was especially upset when parents “went to the top” to complain about one of her required projects. As part of the formal curriculum, eighth graders must conduct an in-depth research project. The topic is not of importance but, rather, the processes of learning to find

trustworthy sources, take precise notes, craft appropriate citations, and synthesize information into a coherent whole. Ms. Barnes decided to have students choose from a variety of “women’s issues” portrayed in the media: the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, female genital mutilation in Somalia, and human trafficking in the Western Hemisphere, including the United States and Southtown. Ms. Barnes admitted that the topics were “heavy” but that “our discomfort should not override the importance of helping our girls understand what’s going on in the world.” Some parents, however, did not agree. According to Ms. Barnes and Ms. Santiago, some parents went to extreme lengths to purge the curriculum of such controversial topics. Ms. Barnes and Ms. Santiago tried to appease the offended families by offering an alternative assignment for those students. However, a few parents insisted on taking the issue to the “central office” so that “no one could study such things.”

According to Ms. Barnes, she sometimes felt as if she were being bullied by a few parents: the so-called squeaky wheels. She noted that during the second year, she sometimes felt as though these few parents were sabotaging Ms. Santiago’s leadership as well as her authority in the classroom. Ms. Barnes worried aloud that the negotiations might result in changes that would seriously compromise the mission of the school: “Be careful what you wish for people, because you just might get it. . . . There will be no difference between this school and the other one—other than the population will be female.”

## Reflections

When reflecting on the negative ramifications of women working for social justice in this school, I was struck by the ironies that surfaced concerning the two major sources of pushback: discipline and feminism. At the outset, teachers and school leadership explicitly communicated their high expectations to parents, and parents and students came in droves to sign up, expressing their desires to be in an environment where discipline was high and where they would learn to be strong women intellectually, physically, and socially. However, when assignments began piling up or students were disciplined for a variety of reasons, some parents reacted defensively. Ironically, parents did not want their daughters to attend a school that lacked discipline, but some balked when it came to enforcing individual behaviors to maintain a disciplined school environment overall.

I also see irony in how some families repelled faculty attempts to incorporate women’s studies into the curriculum. The teachers and principal were committed to working outside the margins by interrogating sexism, racism, and classism in the classroom. These educators believed that teaching girls to think critically was essential to bringing up a generation of strong, successful women. However, some parents seemed to feel that their daughters were too fragile or sensitive to learn about particular topics, notwithstanding the fact that such knowledge might ultimately strengthen their abilities to make more mature decisions in the future.

## TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

This study examined the discourse, intentions, actions, and repercussions of female educators working for social justice for racial minority girls living in lower socioeconomic circumstances. Findings indicate that the principal and teachers at the YWLS are leading and laboring for social

justice in specific material, intellectual, and emotional ways. Their inspiration emanated from a variety of sources, but all are committed to making a difference for their students. Although their efforts did meet with some pushback, it is clear that the women studied are committed to making this uncommon school exceptional for more than just being the first and only single-sex public school in a major urban center in Texas. It was Principal Santiago who best distilled the social justice philosophy and efforts of her and faculty and staff:

Every decision was made in the best interest of the students. . . . We are the difference between them living that life of poverty. . . . And I feel like so many other children were lost because the people that were working with them didn't make a difference when they could have. They could have.

It will be interesting to continue following the work of the women in this study. Will Ms. Barnes's fears become a reality? Will this exceptional school morph into something dissimilar from its original mission and purpose? Only time will tell.

While I understand and respect this particular community's decision to implement this new single-sex public option, throughout the study, I continually troubled over the question "What about the others?" The fact that stakeholders viewed this school as a means to assuage a plethora of problems is evidence enough that there exist unmet needs among the community that necessitate acknowledgment and remedy. The striations of poverty and economic separation are still there. The CUISD is still hemorrhaging students. There are still children in Southtown who are attending schools that are "dropout factories." How are we as a society going to address the unmet needs of the multitude of students in our communities? Are schools like the YWLS just a way for us to assuage our collective guilt as a society? A way to say, "Well, at least we are doing something!"

Yes, there are schools out there doing something. But are magnets such as the YWLS enough? Is that what we have decided we are capable of as a society? These thoughts make me uneasy—not because I do not admire what is going on at the school I studied but because it troubles me that so many others are left behind. I fear that, as with other school reform efforts, politicians will view these new single-sex options as a modern, grand solution to a host of historically constituted *isms* that cannot possibly be solved in the present "color-blind" milieu that elevates parental choice while mocking those that call for the redistribution of deteriorating resources.

Is the YWLS doing great things? Yes. Are other magnet schools meeting the unmet needs of local families that are lucky enough to have their names pulled from the lottery? Of course. Is it enough? No. There are thousands, even millions, of children with an accumulation of unmet needs. While some public magnet schools such as the one studied can perform as local sites of resistance that play a liberatory role for those distinctively involved, one cannot surmise that such local efforts—which may be viewed by some as a site of relative privilege—can alone overcome the serious striations that exist in the greater society.

As one participant passionately proclaimed, "when you look at the number of students in that school—compared to the school district—it may be a drop in the bucket, you know? If it's good for one school, why don't we do it for all?" Indeed—and, thus, the troubling: Why don't we "do

it for all”? Should we do it for all? Are we capable of doing it for all? What does “doing it for all” even mean? If the question is, should we provide a quality education for all children? then the answer is an unequivocal *yes*. If the question is, should we provide a quality, same-sex education for all children? then an indisputable answer cannot be given. The complexities and ironies bound up in the issues make confident decision making impossible—especially in terms of the universal application that would be appropriate for all communities.

This discussion begs the question of whether it is possible to create a safe space and fulfill unmet needs without resorting to another kind of segregation. I believe we can. How? By providing all students in our communities what the principal and teachers in this study believed were the three most important tools: a rigorous, nonsegregated formal curriculum; a critical, informal curriculum that empowers students to navigate the dominant culture while honoring and preserving their existing cultural capital; and a purposefully crafted school culture that is akin to caring, familial homeplaces.

But there are additional questions to trouble over: Can these strategies be accomplished in all schools? Yes, I believe they can. But it is difficult work, and it requires an overhaul of entrenched belief systems. I argue that we need to change how we think about how we do school and how we think about poor kids and college-track kids and this whole notion of who needs or deserves access to what we already know are good practices for all students.

I am with Principal Santiago on this one. All schools could be “doing this” with an important caveat: Schools alone cannot be held responsible for dismantling the striations that exist in their sometimes difficult contexts. Unless there is a commitment by us as a larger culture to partner with schools in the dismantling of historically constituted striations such as poverty, racism, sexism, and so on, there is not much hope for change on a greater scale. While I am thankful for the pockets of commitment of public–private partnerships such as the one between the CUISD and the Foundation for the Education of Young Women, I know in my soul that it is still not enough. While we need a concerted effort on the part of school leaders to dismantle striations within schools, we also need a complementary effort by community leaders at the local, state, and federal levels to address societal striations outside schools. There must be a commitment to the public good in providing the resources necessary to fund schools based on their contextual needs. And, frankly, whether this is accomplished or not depends on how we decide as a society to view other people’s children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Dr. Lisa Delpit for popularizing the notion of working for “other people’s children” in her 1996 book of the same title.

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