GROWING FOR JUSTICE

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A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUUM OF LEADERSHIP CAPACITIES AND PRACTICES

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CHAPTER 1

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INTRODUCING A DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL FOR JUSTICE-CENTERING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Social justice: it's on everyone's mind these days. From political pundits to teacher educators, from school principals to parents, and from political scientists to car salespeople, everyone has an opinion on social justice . . . But what exactly is social justice? And . . . what does social justice have to do with education?

—Sonia Nieto (2010, p. ix)

A goal. A process. A commitment. Social justice is everywhere—and in everything—because of the inescapable *in*justice that permeates daily life. Yet, as esteemed author and Professor Emerita Sonia Nieto wrote more than a decade ago—in the epigraph above that feels both prescient and fresh—the ubiquity of social justice in modern discourse does not presume a shared definition of the concept, nor a common understanding of the underlying imperatives. Nor does it offer a clear blueprint for action for educational leaders committed to social justice in their classrooms, schools, districts, organizations, and communities.

As nearly any justice-minded principal, coach, teacher, superintendent, team leader, consultant, or teacher educator could likely attest, supporting aspiring and practicing educators in their social justice work (writ large) means finding ways to support adults along a vast continuum of experiences, understandings, and capacities. Even when educators enter into their work with deep and professed commitments to social justice, they will often orient to—and enact—these commitments in markedly different ways, for many different reasons (e.g., personal positionality, lived experience with privilege and oppression, familiarity with social justice concepts, time spent in their professional roles). Seeing into and honoring this expansive diversity while pushing forward the urgent work at hand can be a real challenge without a roadmap for making sense of it—especially because doing so also requires simultaneous *inner* work and reflection. No matter a leader's readiness and know-how, there is always more to learn, unlearn, and do—within and without. So, how might leaders committed to social justice support the growth and contributions of others while also developing their *own* capacities to engage, appreciate, understand, connect, and lead for change and transformation? This question inspires the heart of our study.

The developmental model we present in this book is based on research with fifty diverse educational leaders in different roles from across the United States, in addition to our combined decades of teaching and leading in schools and university educator preparation programs. It offers, we hope, one promising mapping of overlapping, synergistic, and increasingly expansive justice-centering practices in education, and it connects growth along this continuum to specific developmental capacities leaders need on the inside to enter into and engage most effectively in different domains. As such, we offer our model as an invitation to consider pressing aspects of social justice leadership on multiple but complementary levels.

Toward this end, you may find it helpful to hold the following questions in heart and mind as you read the chapters ahead:

- How might ideas from this book inform your work supporting others as they develop as educational advocates and allies?

- How might the many different stories shared by the leaders who participated in our study resonate with, be different from, and/or reflect your own leadership journey?

- How might the focal ideas, stories, and practices help you recognize and address areas for needed growth—in yourself and/or others—that can limit or even impede impact and contributions?

- How might the trajectory of learning, growth, and action detailed across the chapters that follow help you see into yourself and others in ways that celebrate the gifts, brilliance, passion, dedication, and love educators can bring to this work?

Although there are, of course, many lenses through which to explore social justice leadership in education and in the world, we hope that introducing an adult developmental lens to the discourse adds something new to the conversation and to our collective leadership toolboxes. In honor of and in solidarity with the teachers, administrators, students, parents, researchers, policymakers, activists, and leaders from around the world and across time who have been working to cultivate more equitable, liberatory educational systems from different vantage points, understandings, and roles, we offer this book, humbly, as one new thread in the rich tapestry of scholarship dedicated to fundamental human dignity and potential, and to education as one promising lever for real change and progress.

OUR TEAM: A PURPOSEFUL COMING TOGETHER

We—Deborah, Jessica, and Ellie—have had the gift of knowing and loving each other for more than a decade. We have grown closer and closer over years—caring for and about each other's families and loved ones, accompanying each other through sorrows, joys, celebrations, and life's milestones. We have been learners and teachers together in leadership preparation programs—and in life. We have deep respect for each other and share with compassionate honesty and kind frankness. These and other aspects of our relationship have made this book better.

We are a cross-cultural team who—together—have engaged in much thinking, dreaming, and collaborating in this project and others. We have the deepest respect for each other as human beings, scholars, friends, and givers. We are three cisgender, heterosexual, married women, each in a different decade of life. Deborah self-identifies as Black. Jessica and Ellie self-identify as white. Each of us teaches at a university, and our teaching centers on supporting all adults, especially practicing and aspiring leaders and teachers. Our deep collaboration and friendship continue to inspire us, expand our individual and collective fields of vision, and inform our work together and in the world. Our deep and ongoing conversations about our own identities, stories, experiences, theories, and ideas about justice, race, education, and more enrich our lives and the pages of this book.

LEARNING FROM FIFTY LEADERS

In a similar way, the fifty educational leaders we learned from in our study all shared an underlying commitment to social justice while holding incredible but different capacities and understandings. Although no one person had all the answers or solutions, their experiences—together—helped paint a composite portrait of real-life leaders in education, at this moment in history, making sense of and enacting their commitments. Receiving and paying forward their powerful and deeply personal, front-line sharings has been an honor of the greatest kind, and we extend our most enduring and heartfelt

gratitude to each of them for their generosity, insight, courage, compassion, passion, and expertise. This book is a tribute to them, and we hope that their stories help surface new points of entry into advocacy (for more and more people!), deepen understandings of leadership terrain already traversed, and point us toward horizons of justice yet unexplored—in ourselves, each other, schools, and society. We thank you, sincerely, for thinking, dreaming, and exploring with us, and we welcome you wholeheartedly to this book.

CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION FOR THIS BOOK: WHY A DEVELOPMENTAL LENS? WHY NOW?

Philosophically speaking, this project has been in development all our lives. More formally, though, we began some conceptual writing about the connection between adult development and social justice leadership during the lead up to the 2016 election, with the idea that we could share some of the ways a developmental lens had been helping us and the graduate students in our leadership classes make sense of the phenomena unfolding—especially since it seemed a lens largely missing from wider analyses. Atop these conceptual explorations, we dreamed of doing a more empirical study that asked, "How, if at all, might educational leaders' different developmental capacities influence their leadership on behalf of social justice?"

Over the next few years—backdropped and further fueled by the tumultuous and tragic events across the United States and the world—we learned from leaders up and down the educational system who shared a commitment to social justice as a core value but spoke from a diverse array of roles, positionalities, identities, and geographies. Through in-depth interview conversations, we explored important and pressing questions like the following:

- How were leaders making sense of and approaching pressing social justice challenges?

- What internal capacities helped them lead in the ways that felt most important and urgent to them?

- What did we—and the world—need to learn from them?

We conducted our first interviews as the Trump administration was nearing its midpoint, and we continued learning from leaders through the 2020 election and as COVID-19 first grew from a distant worry to an inescapable, worldwide pandemic. As such, our learning cannot be disentangled from the time in which it took place—a time marked by deep polarization; the traumatic and increasingly public killings of Black men and women at the hands of law enforcement; deadly alt-right rallies and the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol; social and legal battles over fundamental LGBTQIA+ rights and protections; surging transphobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia, antisemitism, and anti-immigration sentiment; hate crimes against the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community; the separation of children and parents at

the border; mounting economic, healthcare, educational, and social inequities further exacerbated by the pandemic; and human rights crises and climate disasters that seemed to come in relentless waves of hurt and sorrow.

As we continued to think about, discuss, and learn from the wisdom leaders shared with us in their interviews, our own analytic processes continued to be informed by the times. We couldn't help, for instance, but feel the fury of the backlash against both the Black Lives Matter movement and the increasingly mainstream (but still too slow) acknowledgment of systemic racism in the politicized campaign against Critical Race Theory as well as the reignited curriculum wars and book bannings. We couldn't help but feel the weight of the war in Ukraine, the terror of the shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde, and the implications of the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*. We had no choice but to carry with us the grief of our own pandemic losses and goodbyes and those of our students and loved ones. There were too, too many. It is into this painful context that we offer this book, not as panacea, but as testament to the potential—and hope—of human growth and development amidst and in spite of the tragedies of the world.

Most specifically, this is a book about the promise and possibilities of development and its relationship to growing as justice-centered leaders. Though distinct from the concept of *conscientization* pioneered by renowned Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire—who wrote and taught powerfully about the importance of developing critical consciousness (i.e., deepening one's awareness of inequities, biases, assumptions, and oppressive systems as a lever for change)—the trajectory of development and practice we describe in this book is likewise aimed at, as Freire (1970/2000) described it, "the pursuit of a fuller humanity" through internal learning, growth, and transformation (p. 47). More specifically, we use constructive-developmental theory (Drago-Severson, 2004a, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2017, 2018; Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009, 2016) as an organizing lens to consider the relationship between leaders' inner meaning making and external action—particularly as it relates to their efforts as advocates for justice in schools and the education sector.

Constructive-Developmental Theory: Previewing an Integrative Lens

An integrative theory of human development that recognizes identity as inherently sociocultural, constructive-developmental theory highlights adulthood as a potentially rich time of growth and change, rather than a static period in which development is "done" or complete. More specifically, the theory posits that adults actively *construct* their experiences at all times— and that the complexities of these constructions can continue to *develop* when we benefit from appropriate supports and challenges. Drawing from decades of research with thousands of adults from around the world (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009, 2016), the theory outlines four distinct

stages of meaning making—the instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self-transforming—which we call *ways of knowing* (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018, 2019; Drago-Severson et al., 2013). Taken together, these ways of knowing describe a cumulative (but not essentializing or normative) directionality to development, while honoring the complexities and socially embedded nature of human identity.

Briefly, what we refer to as a way of knowing is an internal meaning-making system or developmental orientation to the world. In Chapter 2, we will discuss constructive-developmental theory in greater depth. For now, though, we offer what follows as an orienting preview.

In this book we will use the terms *way of knowing, meaning-making system,* and *developmental orientation* interchangeably. Like any system, a way of knowing has both strengths and areas for growth, which we refer to as "growing edges." As mentioned, this theory identifies four ways of knowing in adulthood. As a person grows from one way of knowing to the next, they increase their cognitive, affective or emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities that enable them to better manage the complexities of living, leading, learning, and teaching (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018). Next, we share some of the main characteristics of each way of knowing, which we discuss in more detail in Chapter 2.

Adults with an instrumental way of knowing have concrete, right/wrong orientations to leadership and the world. They view things through the prism of their inherited worldviews and personal needs. When we say *inherited* worldviews, we are referring to ideas consciously or unconsciously passed down from others—including families, teachers, curricula, and the media—that can go unquestioned without conscious examination. We want to emphasize that we all have these kinds of constructions to varying degrees at different points in our lives. Part of growth, as we're defining it here, involves coming to more consciously understand and take a perspective on these imprinted influences—carrying forward the things that still serve us well and strengthen who we want to be and renegotiating those that may no longer fit our needs, values, or aspirations. It is also important to know that, although adults with an instrumental way of knowing can be kind and intelligent, they have not yet developed the internal capacity to more fully take others' perspectives or to see beyond the bounds of the constructions and worldviews they see as "right" or even universal.

Adults with a socializing way of knowing *have* developed this capacity, and accordingly orient strongly to valued others'—and society's—opinions and assessments of them. This capacity allows them, generally speaking, to tune in effectively to emotional states. Reality for socializing knowers is co-constructed—and having the approval of authorities, supervisors, and valued others is essential to adults with this way of knowing. They need it to

feel whole and in balance. Because socializing knowers remain largely "run" by their relationships in the psychological sense (i.e., their relationships feel so close up, embedded, and immediate that socializing knowers cannot yet stand outside of them or take a greater perspective on their influence), it tends to be a developmental stretch to engage in conflict and/or take a strong stand for what they believe in when they sense others may disagree.

Growing into a self-authoring way of knowing involves building even more internal capacity to take a reflective perspective on external expectations, others' judgments, and important relationships. Self-authoring knowers also have a corresponding capacity to author—and advocate for—their own values, internal standards, and beliefs. Like adults with any way of knowing, self-authoring knowers still have growing edges and can benefit from internal growth. One important growing edge for them is developing the capacity to critique their own ideologies and to recognize the bounds of their personal value systems (i.e., seeing how they are still necessarily partial, incomplete, and influenced in unconscious ways).

Like self-authoring adults, self-transforming knowers have personally generated philosophies and value systems, yet they are no longer "run" by them in the ways just described. Instead, self-transforming knowers have the internal capacity to recognize that they have multiple self-systems—and some of them are more fully developed than others. In light of this, they are constantly seeking to grow parts of themselves through intimate connection—in the psychological sense—with others. In fact, from their perspective, mutuality and interconnection are ongoing prerequisites for reflection, renegotiation, self-growth, and the evolution of communities. We will dive more deeply into these ways of knowing in Chapter 2 and will highlight their connections to justice-centering educational leadership throughout the book.

Although individuals are, of course, infinitely complex and multi-dimensional—and bring *all* of their intersecting identities, experiences, abilities, and rich fullness to their work—we hope that foregrounding the connection between leaders' internal, developmental capacities and the different strengths and foci they can bring to practice as justice-centering leaders helps give shape and form to at least some of the space between the world as it is and the world as it could be. For instance,

- What might educators need to be able to know and do—internally and externally—to more effectively teach and lead for justice?

- Where might different people find new ways into justice-centering education—and opportunities to grow their impact?

What Does it Take—Internally—to Engage in Social Justice Work?

As Bobbie Harro (2013) wrote when describing the cycle of liberation in her widely cited piece in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*,

moving toward emancipatory action—and breaking free from inherited and oppressive norms—is a *process*, often a cyclical one, that requires ongoing investment, learning, time, and persistence. As Harro recognized, "many people who want to overcome oppression do not start in the critical transforming stage, but as they proceed in their efforts, it becomes necessary for them to move to that level for success" (p. 619). Indeed, although Harro's cycle illuminates some of what the most successful advocates, organizers, and leaders do to precipitate greater change and liberation (e.g., influencing policy, sharing power, supporting healing), less is known about what it takes—internally—for leaders to actually be able to engage most effectively in such practices or how they grow toward and into these ways of working over time. What specific internal capacities might help serve as entry points—or stepping stones—for leaders as they build their practice as justice-centering leaders? This, we feel, is where constructive-developmental theory—and the stories from the leaders in this book—may be of particular, practical value.

By offering a granular portrait of what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like to care deeply about justice from different developmental points along the continuum—as well as a deep dive into the iterative and often painful experience of developmental *stretching* that can accompany the exhilaration and responsibility of growing as justice-centering educational leaders—our book adds something new to both the social justice literatures and our understanding of developmental theory and its applications. We offer it with deep love and respect for each of the leaders who shared such important parts of their hearts, lives, sense making, and selves with us. Their stories are acts of loving care. We also offer this book with deep admiration and respect for you—and for the hard work of the heart you give every day in pursuit of a future big enough to hold everyone with dignity, equity, and tenderness.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY JUSTICE-CENTERING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

Throughout history, the idea of justice has been pursued from many diverse epistemological, cultural, and intersectional standpoints (Reisch, 2014; Sen, 2009)—and informed by varied philosophical, political, religious, empirical, and theoretical strands of thought. Today, along distinct but interrelated axes of *in*justice (Fraser, 2019)—including racial, economic, carceral, medical, environmental, reproductive, social, and educational—people around the world continue to fight for systems and societies that foreground dignity and liberation.

Yet, there remains no universal approach to justice, nor consensus even around its definition (Adams, 2014). In fact some, like the American philosopher Richard Rorty (1998), propose thinking of the concept in the plural (i.e., as *justices*).

Thinking About (In)Justice in Education

The same holds true, it seems, about the role of justice in education. As Maurianne Adams (2014), an early advocate for social justice as an academic discipline in the education field, explained, the robust literatures about social justice in schools are "rooted in and nourished by multiple historical and interdisciplinary traditions" (p. 257). Much justice-centering teaching and leading today, for instance, draw from and build upon pathfinding ideas about multiculturalism, ethnic studies, progressivism, anti-racism, culturally responsive/sustaining practices, inclusion, critical studies, restorative approaches, and more. Though diverse in focus and application, social justice efforts in education generally share a common commitment to recognizing and addressing systemic inequities in schools and society and to foregrounding education as one promising lever for critical learning, resistance, agency, and change (e.g., Adams, Blumenfeld, Castañeda, Hackman, Peters, & Zúñiga, 2013; Apple, 2018; Au, 2018; Ayers, 2008; DeMatthews, 2018; Dover, 2013; Giroux, 2016; Grant, 2012; Irby, 2021; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009; Keenan, 2017; Khalifa, 2018; Kumashiro, 2015; Love, 2019; Muhammad, Dunmeyer, Starks, & Sealy-Ruiz, 2020; Nieto, 2010; Welton & Diem, 2022; Young, O'Doherty, & Cunningham, 2022).

Today, as more and more schools are folding social justice into their strategic visions—or, alternatively, crafting "anti-woke" policies to deliberately limit or even prevent vital discussions of race, racism, gender identity, sexual orientation, history, and current events—it seems more clear than ever that people's understandings of justice are deeply influenced by the positions they inhabit on earth (i.e., geographic, temporal, cultural, racial, economic, developmental, intersectional). The stakes also remain incredibly high. The highest, really, as they concern children's lives.

So what does it mean to center justice as an educational leader amid all of this urgency and complexity? By "justice-centering educational leadership," we mean leadership that holds justice (along multiple dimensions) as central to—and inseparable from—the work of caring for, joining, championing, and guiding any group, team, faculty, school, district, or organization. It is not, in other words, an add-on or side project distinct from or running in parallel to academic learning and professional supervision. Also, though we recognize that leaders will orient to and understand justice in different ways—and can bring different foci, passions, capacities, sensitivities, and expertise to their work—we focus in this book on a diverse group of educators who have already expressed a commitment to addressing the roots and manifestations of harm and oppression as they surface in schools and society. In other words, this is a book about the different ways educators who *want* to lead on behalf of social justice are trying to do so—and the different developmental supports and challenges that have helped them grow in and expand their practice. It is not, in other words, a book about how to *convince* someone that justice matters in education. That said, a developmental

lens may hold promise for understanding why people come to think the way they do, as every belief system is ultimately a construction and a product of a universe of influences.

Here and throughout this book, we are using *justice-centering leadership* as an umbrella term (along with *social justice leadership* and *leadership on behalf of social justice*) to cover but not conflate the many different areas of focus the leaders in our study prioritized—such as anti-racism, support for emergent multilingual learners and students with physical and learning disabilities/variations, authentic collaboration with parents and families, greater support and care for LGBTQIA+ students, more equitable resources and learning opportunities, scaffolding for economic mobility, the importance of representation in school staffing and administration, culturally responsive and inclusive curricula and pedagogies, DEI coaching and training, and holistic support for children *and* adults. We use the term also as a way of emphasizing the collectivity required to move the needle toward greater justice. With so many roots and branches of justice (and injustice) to address—and so many imperatives connected to race; culture; gender; sexual orientation; religion; immigration status; socioeconomic status (SES); linguistic, physical, and neurological diversity; and the intersections of these and all dimensions of identity—*everyone* is needed.

As we will say more about next, in the preview of our developmental model, we share our mapping not with the intention that everyone should be able—today—to engage full speed ahead in every way in each of the four domains we describe. Rather, we hope that our model helps bring new clarity to potential points of entry (for self and others), as well as areas of strength and needed growth. As you will see, when we talk about "entry points" into justice-centering educational leadership, we are referring to the different—and each very important—layers of justice-centering practice that adults can most readily engage with, depending on their ways of knowing and internal capacities. Although leaders can, of course, continue to grow and enrich their practices in the different domains once they've "entered" them, effectively engaging in each subsequent layer requires new internal capacities. Because so much of development can happen under the surface, we hope that bringing the connections between leaders' internal capacities and their justice-centering practices into more conscious awareness creates a roadmap of sorts for meeting people where they are *and* stretching forward. As one of the leaders in our study put it, it's about "owning the things we need to grow in, but also owning our gifts."

Before journeying forward, and as a way of framing what follows, we invite you to consider the following reflective questions.

A REFLECTIVE INVITATION

1. What ways of centering justice are currently at the fore and in the core for *you?*

2. What is top of heart for you right now? What is top of mind for you at this time?

3. What questions are you holding?

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