

## Women Becoming Social Justice Leaders with an Inclusive View in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Spain

**Charles L. Slater**

*California State University, California, USA*

**Gema Lopez Gorosave**

*Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, La Paz, Mexico*

**Patricia Silva**

*University of Lleida, Lleida, Spain*

**Nancy Torres, Adriana Romero**

*Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, Heredia, Costa Rica*

**Serafín Antúnez**

*University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain*

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**Abstract**

*This study looks at three female school directors in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Spain who worked under challenging conditions to establish social justice. We were particularly interested in how they learned to become social justice leaders. Qualitative interviews were used to hear directly from the school directors about their experiences. Transcripts were analyzed for common themes. The commitment of these directors to social justice came from early family experiences that gave them strength and core values. They met adversity in young adulthood which reinforced their commitment to inclusive leadership.*

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## Introduction

There is increasing attention to social justice in education around the world (Apple, 2010; Belavi & Murillo, 2016; Bogotch & Shields, 2014). On the one hand, schools can exist to perpetuate the status quo or on the other, they can be an instrument to overcome inequities and change society (Dewey, 1916). Distributive justice suggests that resources should be spread equally or if there is a difference, it should be employed to overcome a disadvantage (Rawls, 1971).

Social justice is concerned with resources and also with recognition, access to power, and inclusion. Cribb and Gewirtz (2003) summarized three types of social justice: economic justice, cultural justice, and associational justice. Economic justice assures equal opportunity as well as a minimum standard of living; cultural justice includes recognition of a person individually and as a member of an ethnic group; associational justice refers to encouraging the participation of all.

Furman (2012) argued that you cannot have social justice without democratic participation (associational justice). Democratic participation in community is the center of moral responsibility where communal skills such as listening, understanding others, communicating, arranging teamwork and promoting dialogue are learned.

The role of social justice leadership then becomes one of advocacy to challenge the status quo and transform society (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Shields, 2004). Starratt (1991) and later, Marshall (2004) issued a challenge to the educational administration profession to examine how school conditions can be oppressive. Anderson (2009) responded and wrote passionately about the need for leaders to advocate for students of color and low income students. It is not enough to manage the school well and provide technical solutions to problems within the school; the role of leadership includes a broader look at

societal conditions that contribute to poverty, oppression, and injustice. However, it is difficult to make generalizations about how principals should confront these injustices without looking at each context.

Samier (2017) has outlined the researcher's role as using biographical studies to highlight what school directors believe and how they advocate for those who are marginalized. She warns that stories of school leaders may focus too much on a neoliberal technical view that ignores oppression in a postcolonial world. The combination of advocacy for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (CLD) and critical race theory come together in what Santamaria (2015) has called applied critical leadership (ACL). This approach includes characteristics common to other leadership theories and adds a critical perspective.

DeMatthews, Edwards, and Rincones' (2016) biographical case study can be considered an example of ACL. A school director working in a demanding area with few resources and extreme poverty along the U.S. Mexican border was able to challenge dominant beliefs and power dynamics to address deficit thinking. Her most forceful contribution was to involve parents and give them a sense of ownership of the school.

Gardner (2011) best expresses the primary criterion for a leader who will advocate for social justice in a way that is straightforward and easy to observe. The just leader is inclusive while the unjust leader is exclusive. The inclusive leader invites people to join social initiatives no matter what their background and defines the audience broadly whereas the exclusive leader does not allow others to enter who are different from the core group. He studied major 20<sup>th</sup> Century inclusive leaders from business, government, and education and reported certain commonalities about their upbringing. They had gifts for speaking and understanding others. They took time to reflect. They were willing to confront authority and their solutions to problems grew out of their life circumstances. Often they lost a father



when young and perhaps had to speak for themselves. They were concerned about moral issues, identified with leaders, and developed their own story.

Gardner's contribution helps to explain how socially just leaders grew up and came to possess their dispositions and beliefs. Stories and case studies of the development of socially just educators are becoming more common, (Cowie, 2011), and most recently more attention has focused on women who lead schools (Galloway, 2006; Rodriguez, 2014).

These socially just leaders are able to use ideal practices to establish justice. Kouzes and Posner's (2012) *Leadership Challenged* described five ideal leadership practices; challenge the process, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, model the way, and encourage the heart. Challenging the process means trying things in new ways and not accepting the established patterns. It is exemplified in the cultural work undertaken in New Zealand where the usual patterns of people living in separate cultures are not accepted. People of European and Maori origin are not only striving to respect each other's culture, but they are adopting each other's practices in a new biculturalism (Sibley & Liu, 2007). Schools contribute to this approach through an emphasis on social goals such as Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) that teach students to cooperate and to become independent (Ministry of Education, 2017). The role of school leaders is then to challenge the usual way of doing things and work with teachers to inspire a shared vision of enabling students to become independent learners who will respect other cultures.

The concept of challenging the process as described above can also be seen in the commitment of Costa Rica to rural education. It is well exemplified by an award winning school director and teacher, Humberto Gonzalez (Soto, 2016). He followed a constructivist philosophy to create classrooms where students would be free to create and explore. His students come from rural mono-cultural

backgrounds with little academic experience. Normally, these students would not have gone on to higher education, but he expanded the horizons of these rural children to aspire to university education.

The examples from New Zealand and Costa Rica challenge the process. They are both characterized by inclusion that breaks out of mono-cultural dominance to cross cultural borders and create a more just society. Slater, et al, (2005) outlined a sequence of four leadership stages beginning with mono-cultural in which the leader is sealed within one environment with little understanding of other cultures. One-way cross-cultural leadership acknowledges the existence of another culture but it may be viewed as inferior or less relevant. Two-way cross-cultural leadership provides for exchange of ideas on an equal basis. Finally, meta-cultural leadership creates a mix of cultures that result in new possibilities. Cecilia Fierro has worked with teachers in isolated rural areas of Mexico. The teachers often struggle with how to work with parents and children who live in a mono-cultural world. She has helped teachers to overcome the intolerance of one-way cross-cultural leadership to respect differences, and proceed along new paths (Fierro, 2008).

Fierro's advocacy for teachers in rural areas is significant for this paper because she represents a case of women in leadership, particularly in Mexico. This study will examine women's social justice leadership in Mexico, Costa Rica and Spain. For many years in the Ibero-American countries management has traditionally been assumed by men (Cuadrado, Navas & Molero, 2004, Onorato & Musob, 2015).

Although women have proven to be successful leaders, there are still barriers to their incorporation into managerial positions. As a result, the number of women in leadership positions is well below the statistics. For example, in the case of Mexico, according to the TALIS report (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación Educativa México, 2013), the number of female primary school principals is 43%. In the



case of Costa Rica, according to Valitutti, Salas, Castro, Rojas and Vargas (2015), 28% of the boards of government are occupied by women. In the Spanish case, Catalonia has 71% of principals in primary schools, but in the Community of Melilla only 28% (Institute of Women, 2012). These results do not differ from studies conducted in North America by Teague (2015), which indicates that 59% of students in the university are women and only 26% hold management positions. Colorado Women's College, (2013) identified that only 18% of women held leadership positions in 10 sectors such as medicine, architecture, among others

The leadership of women may offer promise for a more just future. They are currently under-represented in leadership roles and have untapped talent to address continuing social, economic, and educational issues. Women may have a tendency to be more inclusive and to challenge the process from the perspective of those who have been excluded.

In this paper, we are particularly interested in how women school directors become social justice leaders. Their experiences growing up, going to school, entering the profession of teaching, and taking on leadership roles can be highly informative.

### **Methods**

While we may recognize inclusive leaders by what they say and do, less is known about how they developed their dispositions and beliefs. This study will seek to explore the question of how female school directors come to believe in social justice. The research question is *how did female school directors learn to become social justice leaders?* We were interested in their formative experiences, what they identified as helping them to develop their leadership and their values.

This study is part of an on-going project to examine social justice leadership of school directors in countries around the world. The International Study of Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) is

made up of researchers from 20 different countries. This study included three Spanish-speaking countries: Costa Rica, Mexico, and Spain.

Spanish speaking countries are not often included in studies published in English language journals. This study adds to the literature by including three of the many Spanish-speaking countries. Within each country, there is a diversity of ethnicity, race, and culture. For example, even though Costa Rica is a small country, its people vary from Pacific, mountain and Caribbean regions. Mexico officially recognizes 68 different indigenous languages; and Spain is experiencing a new influx of immigration from countries around the world. , Our work only extends to one school in each of the three countries being studied. Nonetheless, the results are important to begin to probe the origins of women social justice leaders.

Purposeful sampling of directors used criteria similar to those of Theoharis (2010) criteria to identify public school directors who 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 following their leadership. The researchers in consultation with regional educational authorities identified schools that they were aware of that confronted inequality of income, conditions of ethnic and cultural diversity, exclusion from the larger society, and poverty. The schools were also selected because the principals were women who were recognized by regional educational authorities as addressing social justice issues.

During 2016, data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in each school. The protocols were based on those used in other ISLDN studies (Norberg, Arlestig, & Angelle, 2014; Richardson & Sauers, 2014; Slater, Potter, Towers, & Briceño, 2014; Sperandio & Wilson-Tagoe, 2015; Szeto, 2014; Torrance & Forde, 2015). The protocols are intended to bring out the narrative of each school director. Other studies in Spanish speaking areas have used



this narrative approach, such as, Coral Aguirre, Caso, and Rodriguez's (2016) work with college students.

The length of each interview was approximately 90 minutes. It was digitally recorded and transcribed. During October of 2016, authors who were native Spanish speakers and residents of the country wrote a narrative for each school director based on the transcript. The narratives were reviewed by team members and translated into English. This study is an attempt to understand the experiences of participants through the systematic analysis of their narratives (DeMatthews, Edwards, & Rincones, 2016; Samier, 2017; Slater, 2011). The transcripts and narratives were examined for common themes, and comparisons were made between the experiences of schools directors in each country (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The names of the directors have been changed in the following accounts.

## Results

### Costa Rica: Ashamed of Injustice

Five years ago, Liliana assumed the challenge of running a school in Costa Rica, located north of Heredia. Her choice to study rural education at the University was not accidental, since she grew up in a rural area and had a strong connection to the countryside. She was raised in a large family with eight siblings; she is one of the oldest. "Being born and growing up in an extended family taught me to share and to understand the value of the concept of equity; I have always tried to advocate for justice; I am ashamed of injustice."

Liliana emphasized that the training she received in her university studies helped her to keep clear her commitment to rural children. She studied in the only university in all of Central America that offered studies in the problems of rural education. In her university education, she consolidated her sensitivity and commitment to problems in rural areas.



She developed a philosophy of social justice, establishing small goals and achieved them. She wanted to build consensus around her proposals and collaborate with leaders of the community. Her goal was to provide better educational opportunities for children in rural areas, since she knew their needs well having been raised and educated in a rural area with her family.

Her rural education faculty focused its pedagogical activity on the training of teachers who live and work in rural areas, indigenous territories and remote areas of the country. The university professors moved from place to place to teach classes in rural. She remembered some university professors who were models to her because they dedicated more attention and effort to attend not only to academics but also to economic, emotional, and family issues that students faced.

She also recalled courses such as Human Rights for children and adolescents, attention to diversity in rural areas, and seminars on the realities of rural life, which helped her to consolidate her understanding the responsibility as a rural teacher. She wanted to be in a position to change and improve the life and quality of education received by children in rural areas.

Her work experience as a teacher was marked by job instability, typical of a new graduate working for the Ministry of Education in recent times. She is divorced and a mother of two daughters. She has persisted in continuing to study despite the difficulties of work; she lives twelve kilometers from the school where she works. She has now become a teacher and principal at Sacramento School, which has sixteen students enrolled and is classified as a one-room school.

Liliana is a young teacher and director, thin, athletic, vivacious, very feminine, and friendly-looking, who travels by motorcycle daily on narrow, steep, little traveled, roads, for forty-five minutes from home to school. Building links and trust with the community was not easy,



The school is located in a rural community at the foot of a volcano. The cold and cloudy climate is conducive to the cultivation of flowers, strawberries, and dairy cattle, and there are small factories that process dairy products. The main source of work is day labor, and the children come from farm families. Parents support the school and volunteer to donate time to paint, weed, and clean.

Despite her eagerness to take the job, Liliana felt some lack of confidence at first. Her friends and family perceived her as weak because she was young and a woman. She said that the people of the area did not love her; they thought she was young and inexperienced. Nevertheless, she knocked on the doors of big companies to get resources and when they did not respond she went to every farm asking for help.

She persisted in the school and community and gained the confidence of people through real accomplishments.

*When I arrived, I went to the town to get to know the community. I worked as a volunteer in local organizations, helping to formulate local government projects, and I attended meetings of the Municipality (Mayor's Office) where matters of importance to the community were decided. After a year, I was able to demonstrate to the community that I could manage the school. When they began to see academic results, the improvements that I made to the school building, and the games I put in the playground, the fathers and mothers began to approach me and to have more confidence in my work as a director.*

Her identity as a woman required that she fight for recognition as being strong and later, her identity served to help gain the support of other women and the following quote shows how it gave her a perspective on the importance of advocating for early childhood education:

*Women are the ones who support me most with their work and presence. I am clear that my goal in this school is to get all the boys and girls to feel good, learn joyfully, eat well and feel happy...As a woman and a mother, I understand the importance of children having opportunities to go to school and to early childhood education, which prompted me to seek equal opportunities for rural areas, because there are huge differences (in resources) in comparison to the urban area. Through my efforts, the Ministry of Education opened a kindergarten at school and provided a program that gives computers to each child. Entering this program requires a great deal of administrative management, now the school has opened a computer center to the whole community, and high school*

*students and parents can use the Internet and the printer when needed. The fact that every boy and girl can take a computer home has been a triumph and a breakthrough for the whole family.*

Liliana understands social justice as a responsibility of every educator, translated into making each student and family find a backing, an ally, a place where they seek and find help.

*I understand social justice as equality, equity and respect for rights. My role is to make sure that everyone has the same conditions in respect, validation and promotion of their rights. To achieve this, I understood from the beginning the need to incorporate families and the community. I understood that community organizations can become my allies because they are local political actors. I think that education is an axis of society. If school triumphs, the community triumphs, society triumphs, and boys and girls are happier.*

Liliana described the budget allocated by the State as limited. It is allocated according to the children enrolled and only covers the cost of paying for water and electricity. The allocation for food is insufficient and is not enough to feed the children unless she obtained aid and donations. In the following quote, she offered her perspective as a woman

*You have to leave aside the comforts and think about what the community needs. It is not easy to be a woman and move in a world designed by men and for men. I have asked for help from the central authorities and they do not answer me, but I do not pay attention to that kind of behavior.*

### **Commentary on Costa Rican Director**

Liliana is a young teacher and director who is clear about her role as a woman and an educator and is a living promise of equity and social justice. She said that she does not want to move to a central school or get a job in a larger school. She feels happy and privileged to be able to contribute to the life of children. She thinks the children are kinder and more pleasant because they learn in a healthy environment that is filled with respect and affection.

She continues to work to maintain the trust built with parents and organizations in the community. The school offers better opportunities for children who are enrolled. They plan to extend services for their families and, in general, for young people. Her goal



is for the school to be the cultural, social, and educational center of the small community.

### **Mexico: A Sense of Dedication Out of the Experience of Injustice**

Cecilia is the director of a small rural primary school located in northern Mexico. She has been director since October 2005. The school has six groups and 150 children. In spite of the deafness that is not overcome by the hearing aid that she carries, she talks passionately about her work and her life. She says that most of the students are indigenous and that the parents have little education. Almost everyone "is illiterate and has difficulty helping their children ... they go to work at 5:00 am and they come back late ... the children are alone when they are not in class." This situation worries her because, "there is vagrancy, drug addiction ... and violence in the neighborhood." She argues that for children to learn "they must be well fed." For this reason, nutritional needs are part of school management. She frequently speaks using terms such as fight, demand, respect and equity. She has negotiation skills, knows how to be energetic and is a persevering manager. She knows how to comply but also knows how to demand without ceasing to be respectful. She is practical, avoids complications and constantly seeks opportunities for students to have a right to a dignified life. For all this, she believes that communication is basic.

Her sensitivity to the victims of injustice seems to be associated with her personal history. She ended her marriage when she felt that the youngest of her children who has Down syndrome was at risk.

*I was very affected by my marriage ... I lived a lot of violence and I do not want my students or mothers of families to go through that, I opened my eyes and decided to get a divorce ... I lived for 25 years with alcoholism ... My son with Down's syndrome benefited from the separation ... I think I'm very sensitive about what I've been through with my son, so I want all the children to have the same opportunities...*

Cecilia also experienced her son's rejection from a regular school.

*"Inclusive education is a big lie, not all children are accepted in schools. That's what I experienced. I wanted to integrate my son into my school and I was not allowed ... because*

*it could cause problems with the parents ... I was not allowed and I needed to have my son close ... they made me cry so much, so much ... until I learned how to defend.*

Most likely, adversity and maternal instinct influenced her leadership, and today she is a defender of children and mothers in disadvantaged situations

While experiences as a wife and mother started Cecilia's current mission, responsibility and probably resilience are traits that she learned in her parents' home. "My dad was a hard worker, not a lot of words. He's a street vendor but he gave us all that we needed ...he never demanded anything; his example of work and responsibility formed us. All women work, we are housewives and also hardworking, and my brothers-in-law do not work ... we women have a career and my brothers only studied."

She distinguished between women and men in the family. The mother spoke little. Why did the daughters not study a career like the sons? And why do her sisters and she work and care for the home unlike her brothers-in law? We do not know but we assume that it is related to the culture that imposes feminine and masculine roles altered by other circumstances.

Cecilia's sensitive, proactive, firm and determined style of leadership also came from models she was exposed to as a student and later as a teacher. She was born and studied in an agricultural village located 200km south of Ensenada. She admired her hardworking teachers, who treated everyone humanely and defended students.

*My sixth grade teacher was never quiet, he wanted us to have better classes and better opportunities ... one of my high school teachers was an extraordinary human being, hardworking, very human ...in Normal School I liked how we were treated by a teacher who was very active, he always defended us, nobody could touch us, he insisted that we all had to be treated equally, that we all had the same rights, and we learned to defend ourselves and defend others. In college, I had a wonderful tutor, he was very hard but he was an excellent teacher.*

She learned to strive for equality from her own teachers and, that we must strive to achieve the best for all students, that we must



defend students, that we must know how to make demands when it is necessary, and that we can be energetic while remaining respectful.

After finishing her professional studies, she moved to a town near the city. As a teacher, she worked for several directors whom she admired.

*My first director would see me from afar, and he would ask me, "What is happening to you today? It was as if he knew what we were thinking, he gave us guidance; he always helped us. I also learned a lot from another director who was always looking for alternatives ... he was always looking for ways to make the school better ... I think I'm just like him.*

### **Commentary on Mexican Director**

The stories about the father, the teachers and directors, whom Cecilia admired, have in common the procuring of the well-being of those who are under their tutelage. They give an account of the inspiring force of example in leadership and orientation, but they do not explain in themselves the way she thinks and acts. The stories about her father, the teachers and directors, whom Cecilia admired, have in common the procuring of the well-being of those who are under their tutelage. They give an account of the inspiring force of example in leadership, but she also has very particular experiences - not professional but personal, as a mother and a wife - , that oriented her towards social justice. Her experiences as an abused wife, as the mother of a child with disabilities and her own auditory deficit, mark her perception of the difficulties experienced by a disadvantaged person for different reasons and about the fundamental role that some people had in moving forward in their lives. Her particular style of leadership, resilience, and her work focused on helping economically or socially disadvantaged children and abused mothers. They are closely related to cultural patterns associated with machismo and the traditional role of women in Mexico, accentuated by features in rural areas of the country such as those in which Cecilia was born, trained and currently serves as director.

She draws attention to the fact that, despite the emphasis on the female roles observed in her stories, all of her leadership models are masculine: her father, some teachers and some school principals. Elementary education in Mexico is an organization where most teachers are female and most directors are male. In her professional life, she learned from and admired male directors. Her leadership models may be masculine because the school director is more likely to be masculine.

Cecilia comes from a traditional home where marriage is for life. Unlike other girls, she had the opportunity to study a profession. She reproaches her brothers for not having studied a career, and their wives for dedicating themselves exclusively to the home. Cecilia talks about her ability to support her family after breaking away from years of family violence.

### **Spain: Maximum Complexity**

Araceli is the director of a school in Catalonia, Spain. It provides preschool and elementary education services, has nine groups, one for each grade (P3 to 6th grade). The school serves 245 students from the surrounding neighborhood with a staff of 20 teachers. She has twenty years of teaching experience, of which 12 have been as director. Previously she worked as head of studies of the school and agreed to take charge at the request of the former director who became ill and changed schools.

The urban and social context in which students live is very diverse and complex. Very few were born in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia; 90% are foreigners. Their nationalities are diverse. There are children of Moroccan origin, as well as Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Ecuadorians, and Bolivians, and there are also children from Honduras, the Dominican Republic and Nigeria, among others. Because the school serves poor families, many of whom do not speak Catalan, the school is classified as being "of maximum complexity".



Araceli had already worked in the school as a teacher when the situation and the social dynamics of the neighborhood were changing. The neighborhood has always received migrant populations. However, the migration to which she and her companions were accustomed had come from other cities in Spain until then there had been... immigrants, but from the rest of Spain... who had been here for a few years, who were already quite adapted, working people, people from the outskirts of Barcelona. But a large foreign population was beginning to arrive, in great quantities; of course nothing like what is now, but a large foreign population.

These changes, with these new students, generated uncertainty and confusion in the school. Each person, according to Araceli, took it in a different way. When she took over as director, she observed that the teachers instead of adapting were becoming overwhelmed:

*We teachers were a little frightened; we did not know what to do. My colleagues complained. And that's when I thought, "No, we do not have to complain, we have to see what is happening to us, and we will remedy it, and we will see if we have to change something."*

In her case, she observed that the resistance of the teachers was natural, but they needed a project, objectives, and a series of actions to deal with the situation.

*There were a series of faculty meetings to write a letter, a rather desperate letter, with much information, which we sent to the head of the schools in Catalonia and in that letter, they expressed their concern. And then I remember that the director of educational services called us and I thought: "All right, fantastic! Let's work together."*

*And from here, we had already made a diagnosis in that letter. We made a pretty good diagnosis of the situation, we talked about it, he told us that, indeed, we needed help and he said he would come and see us. He came to see us at school and observed, really on the spot, that everything we had said was absolutely true.*

The visit from the director of educational services recognized that teachers faced difficult conditions and vindicated their concerns. However, it seemed unlikely that they would be able to get the authorities to recognize their concerns. They did not expect to be taken seriously. When the authority actually agreed with them, it



served as a turning point when teachers began to have hope that their efforts would make a difference.

Araceli's concern for issues related to social justice was not only due to the new reality of the center. It was grounded in her personality ... "for years I have taken part of my vacations to travel to third world countries to help and participate in solidarity projects for people in need ... I have always had that interest."

Her interest was further awakened when she observed the needs of the school and when she took over the management.

*I think I've always had sensitivity for others. In this school, what drives you is the need. You are in a neighborhood of people who have many social needs. The vast majority of students, as you know, are in a precarious social context. They are not native-born families. They come from many countries, especially from North Africa, Latin America and, above all, China. The largest Chinese community in Catalonia is in this neighborhood.*

Day by day observing the needs of children and their families generated a greater understanding of the importance of focusing part of their efforts in addressing other issues outside the academic field.

*You are with children who have so many deficiencies in their homes and families. Their situation forces you to mobilize, to think of new ideas, to look for resources everywhere: the Generalitat (the government of Catalonia), the Town Hall, social services, so that they are well cared for.*

Araceli saw the needs of her students clearly, and she also understood herself to be a competent and caring person. The observation of need connected with her own sense of confidence spurred her into action. She became an advocate in search of resources from around the community and was emerging as a social justice leader.

*Given this scenario, when you are in the position of director, you must be the one who takes the initiative. It may sound a bit weird but it's you who leads others. I did not aspire to be a leader but I was clear that I should be the one to encourage others to move forward.*

Besides the commitment that Araceli has had with the school and its families, another aspect has had significant influence. It was her commitment as a social leader. Her political affiliation also



determined her way of being and acting in favor of social justice. Living in the same area where she works allowed her to observe closely all the changes and needs of the community:

*Something that has influenced me a lot, are my political ideas as a leftist and my links to social projects in the city. I have mixed in the political party that governs my city, and I have been chosen by the citizens to exercise the position of councilor. Now I am looking at social issues from a more complete point of view, and I realize the complexity of trying to achieve social justice that we talked about not only at school but in our local community.*

One more element that Araceli highlights in her experience is the importance that families have. The director and teachers observed the difficult living conditions of these families and determined that they should focus on strengthening their relationship the school and parents:

*And in terms of social cohesion we realized that we had a very important job to do with families, and we got the families involved more with all the artistic activities because we knew that if families were involved with the school, they were getting involved with society, they left their family and social environments and integrated in a much more mixed, and varied way, which was the environment offered by the school.*

### **Commentary on Spanish Director**

Araceli's experience showed how she learned to be a leader for social justice. A first element was that the construction of her identity was marked by her personal and professional history. She has been a person who has always been concerned with the community. Part of her free time occupies her in participating in solidarity projects in different countries that need it and that to act in the same way in the center has been something natural.

A second key element is priorities. The well-being of children has become the focus of school activity. Social cohesion and family ties have also been important to her. Finally, she has a strong social commitment to meet the needs of staff, families, members of the educational community and the population in general. Her political affiliation and her relationship with the population influenced daily activities in school. Her performance not only focused on the school, but was also related to global issues. Her leadership went beyond

preserving her status as a director but committed her to macro problems beyond the school and community.

Araceli is a leader who strives to improve her school and strengthen democratic participation and advancement of the potential of the entire community. Constant reflection and innovation are part of a continuous cycle of improvement. For her, social justice will not be achieved by itself, but requires a continued effort of all people.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The three school directors in this study had many of the characteristics of inclusive leaders as described by Gardner (2011). They were willing to confront injustices based on what they had experienced in their own lives. Liliana, an attractive young leader, grew up in a Costa Rican family in which injustice was viewed as a personalembarrassment. She went to work in a rural school in an area similar to where she grew up. She became active politically and earned the trust of parents. Cecilia's experience in Mexico was more dramatic. She persevered through domestic abuse and raised a child with Down syndrome; often having to confront school authorities to address his needs. Meanwhile Araceli had developed empathy for immigrants outside of Spain and travelled to see other cultures. The maximum complexity of diversity in her school was a motivation for her to rally on behalf of immigrants.

These three women found their voice to speak on behalf of others. They focused on the community and put parent involvement at the center of their work. Inclusion was at the center of their stories of social justice. Their leadership is consistent with what DeMatthews, Edwards, and Rincones (2016) found in their study of Mrs. Donna, a school director along the Mexico Texas border. Her leadership was oriented toward the lived experiences of marginalized communities, and she saw how their lives connected to achievement in school. She was committed to a view of schooling that included more than



academic achievement and gave priority to interaction with the community. She challenged dominant ideologies and had the strength to admit that she did not have all of the answers and had to enter into partnership with parents to educate their children. She had

*a commitment to promoting socially just family engagement through school-community partnerships that draws upon cultural community wealth and prioritizes the needs of students, families, and communities. (p. 784).*

The research question of this study was *how did school directors learn to become social justice leaders?* The answer for these women seems to come from early family experiences that gave them strength and core values. Two of the three met adversity in young adulthood, which only reinforced their commitment to inclusive leadership. They may have admired other leaders, but we did not ask about mentoring experiences, and they did not mention formal learning experiences in their development. Rather, these leaders reflected and sought out their own learning.

Liliana in Costa Rica, Cecilia in Mexico, and Araceli in Spain assumed their positions of responsibility with the fresh hopes of a newly arrived person. Their behavior was consistent with the observations of Sánchez and López-Yáñez (2008) who said that women in managerial positions are deeply involved in tasks, both in terms of the time they spend and the intensity they put into the job. The intensity appeared to be related to the values that they brought to their work. They had a keen sense of economic, cultural, and social justice (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003).

In sharing the stories of these three women leaders from Spanish speaking countries, we hope to add what is known about how school directors become social justice leaders. Future research should include additional narratives from around the world to identify experiences that prepare leaders to create inclusive communities. Creating an educational community and a sense of belonging characterize the accomplishments of these women.

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**Charles L. Slater** is Professor of Educational Leadership at California State University Long Beach, U.S.A. Dr. Slater previously served as superintendent of schools and received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He teaches and conducts research in educational leadership and recently served as visiting professor at the University of Barcelona. He has collaborated with colleagues to publish studies about leadership in Costa Rica, Mexico, Korea, Spain, and the U.S. E-mail: [Charles.Slater@csulb.edu](mailto:Charles.Slater@csulb.edu)

**Gema López-Gorosave** teaches pedagogy and administration at Centro de Enseñanza Técnica y Superior at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, in México. Dr. Gema López-Gorosave



served as director of an institution dedicated to train teachers of elementary education. She conducts research in educational leadership and teacher evaluation. She is a member of national and international committees for evaluation and accreditation of teaching programs. E-mail: [gemagorosave@gmail.com](mailto:gemagorosave@gmail.com)

**Patricia Silva** is Lecturer at the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Social Work of the University of Lleida. Dr. Silva is a member of the consolidated research group EDO-UdL and she is an author of scientific papers related to school organization and management and online teaching. She is an instructor in subjects related to management and teacher training. She was honored with the *Jaume Vicens Vives 2012* award in recognition of Improvement in University Teacher Quality. She was the coordinator of the Master in Management and Management of Educational Centers at University of Barcelona from 2008 to 2014.

E-mail: [patriciasilva@ub.edu](mailto:patriciasilva@ub.edu)

**Nancy Torres** is a historian and sociologist with a Masters in Planning Curriculum and a doctorate in Pedagogical Mediation. Dr. Torres is a teacher and dissertation advisor in la División de Educación Rural de la Universidad Nacional en Costa Rica. She has completed research in the area of rural Education in Central America, human rights, informal education, community participation, social justice and leadership among other topics. She is currently the coordinator of the Master's program in Rural Education in Central America. E-mail: [ntorres65@gmail.com](mailto:ntorres65@gmail.com)

**Serafín Antúnezis** a Lecturer at the Faculty of Education of the University of Barcelona (UB). Dr. Antúnezis director of the Master in Management and Management of Educational Centers of this university. He has worked as a teacher, school director, professor and director of the University School of Teachers and Deputy Director of the Institute of Educational Sciences of the UB. He has written several

books and articles on organization and management of educational institutions, management training and teaching staff. He participates in research national and international training projects for teachers, school administrators, supervisors and people responsible for initial and ongoing teacher training in Europe and Latin America.

E-mail: [santunez@ub.edu](mailto:santunez@ub.edu)

**Adriana Romero Hernandez** is a sociologist and counselor with a Master's degree in Educational Management with an emphasis in Leadership, with experience in primary counseling and designer at the Universidad Nacional in Heredia, Costa Rica. Ms. Romero Hernandez is also a professor of career counseling. E-mail: [adrianarom@hotmail.com](mailto:adrianarom@hotmail.com)