Forging Vertical Linkages in the Public Sphere:
School-Church Engagement for Social Justice

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Introduction

Within the broad discussion of social justice in education, multiple conceptualizations of the term have been posited. Although there is no uniform notion of social justice here, most would concur that, "Social justice, broadly defined, refers to a condition whereby all people are afforded fair opportunities to enjoy the benefits of society" (Miller, 2008, p. 821). Scholars and practitioners commonly write about and seek social justice as it relates to issues of race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. These discussions are manifested in school-based areas of curriculum, student achievement, funding, pedagogy, and leadership—among many others.

In this article, we posit that for conditions of social justice to be expanded (in the aforementioned contexts as well as others) several fundamental connections must be made in the broader society where schooling is situated.

Framed within democracy theory's description of the public sphere[1] (Habermas, 1996; Kemmis & McTaggert, 2001; Wood, 1994; 1997; 2002), we examine the "bringing about of social justice" through two broad propositions. We assert that: (1) The structural linkage of the public sphere maximizes opportunities for social justice; and (2) The structural linkage of the public sphere occurs best through institutional means. To concretize our discussion, we comprehensively interrogate the viability of churches as institutional partners for public school-based social justice movements.

Social Justice in the Public Sphere

Democracy theory's conceptualization of the public sphere offers meaningful insights into our discussion of social justice. Wood (2002) describes the public sphere as being "made up of all those arenas of social life in which members of a community reflect upon, argue about, and make decisions regarding the problems they face and the rules under which they live" (p. 126).[2] Each of these arenas is typically affiliated with one of three broad areas of the public sphere: the state, political society, or civil society. The *state*, according to Wood (1994; 2002) includes government agencies, offices, and settings where elected representatives make rules by which the wider society abides. Notably in our context, the state includes official public school bodies that consider and implement policies that directly affect students and families. *Political society*, the next level of the public sphere, is composed of arenas that are outside of government but loosely linked to it and influential upon it (Wood & Warren, 2002). These include political parties, lobbyist groups, unions, think tanks, and topical interest groups. In education, examples of the political society include school choice groups/lobbyists and teacher unions. The third level of the public sphere, *civil society*, is composed of "all those organizational settings that are not part of political society or government and in which members of a society reflect upon and form values and attitudes regarding their life together, social problems, and the future of society" (Wood, 2002, p. 127). Civil society is situated, conversed, and created in myriad places, including civic groups, ethnic societies, and—particularly in poor urban neighborhoods—churches.

Wood (2003) summarizes this conceptualization of the public sphere as a bedrock of American democracy—but one that is currently broken down:

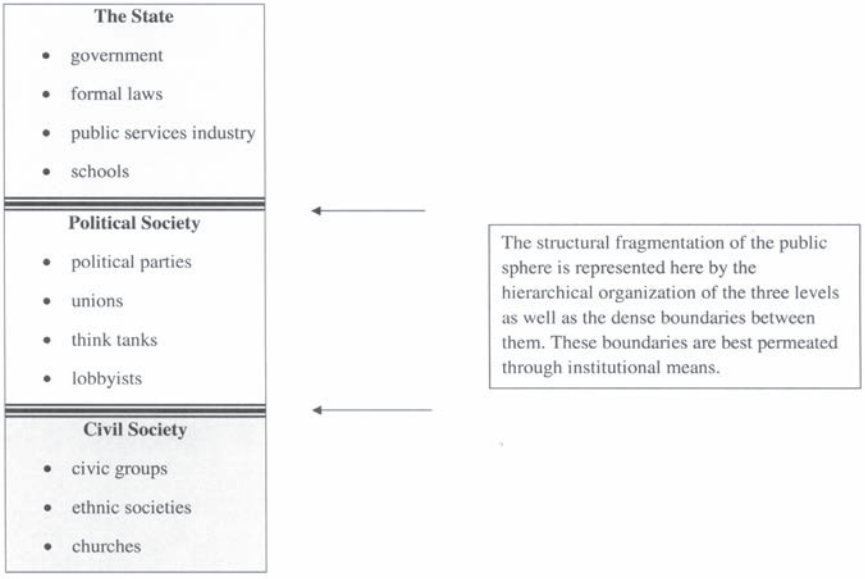
> So the public realm can be understood analytically as constituted at three levels of societal life: the state, political society, and civil society. The linking of these three levels and their reciprocal influence on each other are central to a thriving democratic direction to society and legitimacy to government. The anemia of American democracy can be seen in the breakdown of this ideal …Thus, the process of democratic deliberation through the three levels of the public realm has broken down. As a result, political decision-making has become less democratically controlled, with the unsurprising result that elites have harnessed the political process to serve their own interests rather than serving democratic ends. (pp. 73-74)

Wood describes the "structural fragmentation" of the public sphere—when official

action at the state and political society levels is not reflective of or in service of subaltern groups at the civil society level—as a fundamental flaw of societies that purport to be democratic (refer to figure 1). The upper levels of the public sphere are permeated rarely and with great difficulty by those who operate only within civil society. This is a troubling characteristic for a society that purports to be democratic and socially just. Realistically, then, the public sphere is positioned not as a goal that is actualized upon adoption of populist governing doctrines, rather as a "*potential space* lying across these three societal levels, a space which must constantly be reconstituted by people and groups actually engaging in public deliberation…Public life must be regularly re-enacted; otherwise it withers" (Wood & Warren, 2002, p. 11).

So, our first proposition—that the structural linkage of the public sphere maximizes possibilities for social justice in schools and the broader society—has *procedural* connotations. We must actively work toward the creation of stronger linkages between the state, political society, and civil society in order to bring about greater social justice (widely construed). With such linkages, the state (including politicians, schools, and school boards) and political society (including lobbyists and foundations) become accountable and responsive to civil society. This is a macro-level proposition rooted in the assumption that social justice cannot be mandated from above. We assume that social justice policies and movements are fundamentally grassroots in nature. Only what is "of the people" can be "for the people" (Freire, 1970). Dictates from systems and officials who are detached

Figure 1:
The Structural Fragmentation of the Public Sphere



from everyday neighborhood and family realities cannot engender authentic community advancement. Community voices must be legitimized at political tables of influence. The public sphere, then, must be mended if the American democracy is to flourish for all. The state, political society, and civil society must function as mutually responsive elements of a united and dynamic system rather than as siloed, self-serving chambers of a static one.

The Need for Institutional Linkages

Our second proposition is that the structural linkage of the public sphere occurs best through institutional means. Although individuals "reflect upon, argue about, and make decisions regarding the problems they face and the rules under which they live" (Wood, 2002, p. 126) in countless extra-institutional settings (homes, barbershops, basketball courts, etc.), their voices can be most efficiently understood and, ultimately, impactful when joined with neighbors, peers, and colleagues in organization. We propose here that conditions of social justice are inhibited not because people are unable to form and voice strong opinions, but because these voices are not given vehicle to arenas of social and political influence. Wood and Warren (2002) explain:

> A specific counterpublic's contribution to democratic life will depend partly upon the extent to which it is located within institutions that bridge the gap between levels of the public sphere and thus bridge the divide between subaltern groups and the hegemonic elites, whether opponents or potential allies. (p. 12)

Under the auspices of organization (like churches, neighborhood associations, and ethnic organizations), those who reside outside the confines of the state and political society can indeed bridge institutional divides and be heard together. They become collectively equipped to act in the public sphere when their churches, associations, and organizations reach (and are reached by) school leaders and politicians. Powerful social justice possibilities result from the creation of such *institutional linkages* (Wood & Warren, 2002) because the public sphere transforms from "a realm of mere procedural justice in which substantive visions of society cannot be heard" (Williams, 2003) to a more democratic, community-responsive system.

We assert, then, that when considering how to bring about social justice in and through schools, we must step back and interrogate the (intended) fundamental structures of our democracy. In that schools occupy central positions *at the state level* of our public sphere, questions about how they are to become more accessible, equitable, efficient, and effective are ultimately ones about the actualization of our democratic process. Informed by Wood (1994; 2002; 2003), Warren (2002; 2005), Habermas (1969), and others, our propositions are that this actualization of democracy (and, in turn, social justice) are facilitated through the structural linkage of the public sphere and that these linkages are best accomplished through institutional means. We next proceed to a detailed examination of one particular way that this structural linkage might occur: through the development of purposeful

school-church engagement. We examine why churches can be effective partners for schools, what considerations must be made in the development of such partnerships, and how these engagements might look in practice.

Churches as Organizations of Influence

It is evident that faith identities play influential roles in the moral and civic formation of many urban residents, for, "millions of Americans, regardless of socioeconomic background, are members of religious congregations" (Cnaan, et al., 20003, pp. 20-21). It is projected that there are approximately 350,000 local religious congregations ranging from small store-front churches to mega-churches in the United States (Cnaan, 2003). Putnam (1995) pointed out that, "by many measures, America continues to be an astonishingly 'churched' society...the United States has more houses of worship per capita than any other nation on Earth" (p. 67). Not surprisingly, then, surveys about which community institutions hold the most sway in individuals' lives indicate that churches are at the top of the list (McAdams, 2006; Putnam, 1995). Indeed, despite research indicating that civic organizations and groups that once composed the social fabric of American life (such as rotary clubs and political associations) have been on the radical decline (Putnam, 1995), many churches continue to thrive.

Clearly, then, those who look to employ funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1999) and/or culturally relevant forms of education (Ladson-Billings, 1995) regularly discover that their students and families are deeply invested in their local churches. Based on the sheer numbers of families who describe church affiliations as important in their lives, educators are called to examine potential links with neighborhood churches (Miller, 2007). The rationale for such connections lies not in the fact that churches are *spiritual* or *religious* organizations, but that they are *highly populated* and *influential* organizations. Just as a principal (a state level actor in the public sphere) would be missing major family connection opportunities by dismissing potential linkages with busy Boys and Girls Clubs or public libraries, so would she be missing such opportunities by dismissing chances to work productively with local churches of influence (institutions of civil society). The underlying principle here is that teachers and administrators need to go where "the people"[3] are (Freire, 1970). Among the central rationales schools have for working with churches are: (1) such efforts can help maximize the number of residents who are meaningfully engaged in critical schooling matters; (2) community residents' stores of social capital are often tied to churches; and (3) church institutions often exert powerful social justice influences.

Engaging Community Voices in School Matters

In attempting to help lead urban neighborhoods toward civic change, Saul Alinsky, the famous community organizer and founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), called for the active engagement of church bodies. Alinsky's motivations for

such action were pragmatic rather than spiritual; that is, he wanted to engage churches not because he ascribed to the religious or spiritual beliefs of particular congregations, but because churches were heavily attended and had the most consistent and enduring presences in their communities. Rather than relying solely upon "door-to-door" efforts to enlist individual community residents in social movements, it was seen as more practical to organize existing bodies of people *en masse*. Alinsky was highly successful employing such methods in labor contexts and, in fact, the IAF and similar church-based organizing federations have, in recent years, demonstrated success in the education arena, orchestrating movements that led to smaller public schools, smaller class sizes, and increased teacher salaries[4] (Wood, 2002). Thus, although present day "school action" occurs in environments that are different from the labor contexts in which Alinsky worked, his premise that communities can be efficiently engaged by interfacing with their institutions and organizations of note continues to be relevant in many urban neighborhoods in the United States.

Along with their *mass organizing capacities*, churches (and/or the leaders who guide them) appear to serve as potentially effective partners for schools to engage community voices for several other reasons, including their *sustainable presences* and their *diverse memberships*. As recognized by Alinsky, churches have been shown to be perhaps the most enduring of social institutions in the United States (in comparison with other social organizations such as civic clubs and political action groups)—a positive indicator for educators who seek collaboration and engagement that is sustainable for the long-term (Putnam, 1995). Cnaan, et al. (2003) claim that this church sustainability takes on heightened relevance in neighborhoods that are going through hard times—like so many urban school districts in the United States. They explain that even while other institutions and services tend to flee inner-cities for the suburbs or shut down altogether, religious congregations usually stay put. Churches are framed here as historically informed, rich repositories of community wealth that remain steadfast through generations (Smidt, 2003). They are reliable institutions of civil society that house congregants who are "in it for the long haul." They are dependable presences in their communities' movements toward equity, growth, and improvement. Consequently, for school leaders and teachers who are seeking to work with constituents who can "withstand the cold times"[5] (West, 1993), churches are attractive options.

In addition to being reliable and sustainable community institutions, churches' diverse memberships also help equip them as resourceful bases for schools to engage residents. Specifically, Wood (1994; 2002) claims that women and people of color are often more active in leadership capacities in churches than they are in most other organizations of note—a condition that allows those whose voices are commonly relegated to the periphery in important school matters to take center stage. Such participation from women and people of color has been clearly evident in the work of the IAF, where lay church-based leaders—most of whom are Latinas—have taken on critical roles in transformative school action in south Texas. Here, women of color are engaged as legitimate partners in school leadership action in ways

that they had not previously been engaged. In fact, Cnaan, et al. (2003) found that by elevating diverse parishioners to positions of relevant action, churches are, for many urban residents, the key developers of activist-oriented civic skills such as letter-writing, participating in decision-making meetings, planning and chairing meetings, and giving presentations or speeches in public forums. They claim that the development of such skills in church-action settings is especially noteworthy for the liberatory possibility it brings:

> While people can acquire these skills in other places (e.g., the workplace and nonpolitical organizations), these nonreligious contexts tend to attract and favor white middle/upper class members of society and, as such, perpetuate the power imbalance in society. Thus, it is in religious organizations that women, people of color, and the poor are provided opportunities to enhance their human capital and acquire skills of political participation. (p. 23)

Further, Coleman (2003) points out that the diverse crowds that churches breed for social action include not just women and people of color, but also "blue-collar" workers who, outside of church, are often not presented with such opportunities:

> A blue-collar worker in America is more apt to gain opportunities to develop and practice civic skills in church than in a union. This is not because American unions are particularly deficient as skill builders but because so few American blue-collar workers are union members and so many are church members. Thus, a working-class deacon in a black church receives organizing and communication skills beyond what his job would provide. (p.36)

School-Church partnering in such contexts, then, invites skilled new actors to educational reform in ways that school boards and PTAs (both of which are more often composed of more "traditional" power brokers) have struggled.

Tapping into Institutionally-Rooted Social Capital Stores

Churches can also be viewed as attractive institutional partners for schools because they are especially important "connection points" for inner-city residents.[6] Churches, more so than most institutions in civil society, are places where "face-to-face interactions predominate and 'thick' trust is more likely to be evident—a trust that is produced through intensive, highly regular, and relatively frequent contact between and among people" (Smidt, 2003, p. 5). These frequent face-to-face meetings and their resulting thick trust are foundational to the *social capital* (Coleman, 1988) that congregants accrue and from which they derive benefits. Church-based social capital can provide residents with valuable insights about the norms and expectations for socially just action, information about how to navigate the public sphere (especially schools systems), and emotional, moral, social, and professional support to help them complete various tasks (Coleman, 1988). This social capital is not on the periphery church members' lives—it is central to their very ethos. Church networks, especially for many inner-city dwellers and people of color, are "trusted local pillars and spaces where the community can feel at home"

(Cnaan, et al., 2003). Importantly, these social networks are *institutionally-rooted*, for although most residents build social capital from a host of relationships with family members, friends, and neighbors, social capital that is present "within and across institutions" (Wuthnow, 2003, p. 197) can most effectively and efficiently accomplish tasks that require institutional and/or social change.

So, not only are churches appealing grounds for school engagement because many people belong to them, they are also appealing because the people who are there tend to have especially tight and influential bonds within these settings. Churches can be engaged, then, not as large, disjointed assortments of individuals, but as unified, bands of socially-conscious actors who can be mobilized for action. Smidt (2003) explains:

> Participation in religious life is likely to have disproportionate benefits with regard to social capital formation. First, participation in religious life tends to promote certain beliefs, values, and norms that could contribute to the formation of social capital. Generally speaking, a variety of religious norms call upon religious adherents to exhibit honesty, truthfulness, compassion, and mercy... Moreover, religious values and involvement with religious institutions have been found to promote civic behavior in other arenas. (pp. 11-12)

Smidt's assertions lead us to a third major factor that positions churches as potential institutional linkages in the public sphere: their common philosophies of social action.

Facilitating Social Justice Action

The mere fact that church institutions provide schools ongoing entrée to diverse community voices suggests that school-church engagement paves the way for significant social justice action, for equitable schooling opportunities are fundamentally generated from such widespread community empowerment. As alluded to by Smidt (2003) however, it should be emphasized that churches are also viewed as especially important institutional facilitators of community engagement because of their proclivities for working toward social justice (regardless of their specific religious traditions or dogma). They are often "justice-driven" organizations. In fact, in many instances churches can serve as leading forces in the interrogation of public policies and norms, and they can expand public conceptualizations of basic social rights and responsibilities. Silecchia (2006) explains:

> The first role, and the most important function that religious groups may play in shaping law and public policy, is the critically important task of articulating those minimal standards against which society should set its laws. Religious communities are uniquely suited to articulating a vision as to those things which are moral absolutes, and toward which societies should consistently move. As an example, over forty years ago, in *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXII articulated a basic set of human rights, applicable for all places and at all times. His list was [f]ar more extensive than the [secular] American Bill of Rights, [because] this listing embodied the negative freedoms *from* harm common in civil lists of rights . . . [but] it also .

> . . [included] affirmative rights *to* the tangible and intangible goods of the world. Predictably, it denounced threats to life, bodily integrity, free speech, free press and free exercise of religion. However, it also went further and listed affirmative rights. These affirmative rights included the right to such things as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and a good name. Further, it articulated rights to respect, culture, education, monetary support during involuntary unemployment, private ownership of property, freedom of movement, a just wage, and the right to emigrate. (p. 72)

Cnaan, et al. (2003) support Silecchia's ideas and emphasize that such social justice orientations are not unique to particular traditions, but found across the spectrum of world faith traditions:

> Teachings of all major religions emphasize mutual responsibility, the need to assist strangers in need, and most importantly, the legitimate claim of the weak and needy upon the community…The major religions have advocated for social care and compassion for the needy regardless of location and economic conditions. (p. 29)

Considering the high rates of church participation in the United States and these social justice teachings that permeate houses of worship, it is not surprising, then, that research indicates that "two-thirds of those active in social movements in America claim that they draw on religious motivation for their involvement" (Coleman, 2003, p. 33).

Rates of church-inspired social action are especially high in urban African American churches (commonly referred to as "the Black Church" (Cone, 1993; Hopkins, 1999)) which, according to Schutz (2006), Warren (2003), West (1993; 2005), and many others, have long traditions of engagement with social and political issues. Such social action was witnessed in the highly influential role played by the Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement and continues to be evident in the work of socially-conscious churches in urban areas around the United States. For example, the widely-known organizing work of Pittsburgh-based Pastor Tim Smith and his Keystone Church has been influential in triggering school reform in urban neighborhoods there. Pastor Smith's view that "Our work is to be carried out on the streets" is reflective of the social justice-directed faith disposition of his church (and many other urban churches). Churches, then, present rich ground for engaging "the people," not just because they are stable organizations that have diverse assemblies and strong social networks, but because they are often "called" to participate in street-level work that serves the common good—such as the transformation and/or renewal of urban schools.

Critical Considerations for School-Church Engagement

As with other efforts to create meaningful institutional links between the levels of the public sphere, attempts create school-church partnerships face a number of obstacles. These include an assortment of obstacles directly related to religion (notably church-state separation and churches' particular faith dispositions) and others that are particular to school contexts (including community distrust and

high-stakes testing influences). The historical, social, and religious foundations of these issues heed further examination.

Separation of Church and State

Many schools are reticent to engage churches due to the common belief that public schools are to be kept away from contact with religious institutions. Contrary to popular belief, however, the phrase "wall of separation between church and state" does not appear in the United States Constitution (Thomas Jefferson used it in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802). The First Amendment, which proclaims that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech," is commonly broken into the "Establishment Clause" that limits the government's (and, in turn, the school's) legal right to set policies favoring or inhibiting religion, and the "Free Exercise Clause" that is interpreted to allow the practice of one's religion in the United States as well as freedom of speech. The meaning and relationship of these two clauses have been vigorously debated regarding school-church connections. Many specific issues have been disputed here, including those relating to scripture reading in school contexts, the teaching of creationism, moral/character education programs, and holiday demonstrations/observances (Engel, 2007).

After much legal wrangling throughout the early and mid-1900s, the three-part "Lemon Test" eventually evolved to evaluate whether particular instances of school-church connections violate the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the Constitution. McKenzie (2003) explained that the Lemon Test: (1) determines what the intended or primary effect of the school-church connection is, (2) judges whether the connection advances or inhibits religion (it must do neither), and (3) decides whether the connection excessively entangles church and state. While Lemon Test decisions have ebbed and flowed over the years, McKenzie (2003) suggests recent interpretations of the First Amendment are more "accommodating" to school-church connections than earlier cases. For example, the 1990 Supreme Court ruling in *Board of Education of Westside Community Schools v. Mergens* upheld the 1984 Equal Access Act that required high schools to have a "limited public forum" where organizations with "religious, political, philosophical, or other content" can meet similar to any other extracurricular student group, though schools and their employees may not "promote, lead, or participate" in the meetings.

In addition, in 1995 President Clinton issued the document "Memorandum on Religious Expression in Public Schools" communicating that the First Amendment allowed for more religious expression in schools than many had previously interpreted. Again, within this "religion-friendlier school environment," it was clearly delineated that school officials were to establish religion-neutral environments that neither endorsed nor inhibited religion. This culture of openness clearly established a significant degree of opportunity for schools to engage churches as resourceful institutional allies in the linking of the public sphere. The "separation of church and state," then, appears to be more of a psychic barrier to many school-church engage-

ments than a legal one. Schools are, by law, allowed to tap into the organizational capacities and social networks of churches, but many are reticent to do so because of the litigious history of religion-related activity in the public sphere.

Churches' Faith Dispositions

While our discussion previously identified churches as institutions that are inclined to promote social justice, it should be noted this is not universally true. Denominational and congregational faith dispositions can take on significant relevance here. Specifically, churches with identities that are "this-worldly" (as opposed to "other-worldly" (Wood, 1994)) and "prophetic" (as opposed to "Constantinean" (Dantley, 2005a; West, 2005), are depicted as being best positioned to actively support transformative action in schools. In terms of worldly orientations, Wood (1994; 1997) asserts that religion can either enable or constrain institutional engagement. He describes faith orientations that are this-worldly as those that view God's Kingdom as being made manifest both on heaven *and* on earth, whereas those that are other-worldly focus predominantly on the after-life. Wood posits that when religious spirituality and "goodness" are framed as comprehensively entailing prayer, service, and community action in "this world," religion encourages civic practice (such as school partnerships). However, when distinctions are made between the "saved" and the "unsaved" and religion is interpreted as a rigid, pre-ordained framework under which congregants solely strive toward the after-life (which is largely framed as distinct from earthly matters), religion constrains social action. Wood explains that, "Churches that dichotomize between the 'saved' and 'unsaved' discourage civic practice… (and) disjunction between religion and politics can encourage congregations to abandon the public sphere" (p. 412). Wood observes that other-worldly orientations such as this can often be found in fundamentalist churches.

On a related note, what Cornel West (2005) describes as churches' "Prophetic" or "Constantinean" identities also influence the ways and the extents to which churches engage in social action. Constantinean religious institutions,[7] according to West, are those that use institutional power to perpetuate entrenched social discrepancies. He describes them as those that prioritize proselytizing and are commonly aligned with extreme right-wing interests. These churches are unlikely partners in transformative, social justice driven movements and, in fact, they actually "deepen social cleavages" (Smidt, 2003) in many instances. Prophetic faith traditions, however, are those that are critical, subversive, and hopeful (Miller, 2007; 2008). They actively identify injustices and, through social and political means, work toward equity, justice, and opportunity for all. Prophetic faith dispositions can be found in wide-ranging religious traditions and, although many of them are fundamentally different in their beliefs, traditions, and institutional infrastructures, they find common ground in their transformative advocacy for the poor and dispossessed. Noteworthy examples of prophetic faith in action were witnessed in the Black Church's mobilizing role in the Civil Rights movement (Dantley, 2005, 2006; West, 2005) and Liberation Theologians' front-line work in Latin American

poverty contexts (Freire, 1970; Gutierrez; 1973). Closer to the field of education, the previously described Industrial Areas Foundation has organized vast communities of poor Latinos in school and labor contexts by tapping into the prophetic natures of local Catholic parishes (Shirley, 1999; Warren, 2002). Seen in common here is the activist orientation of the prophetic—an orientation that naturally positions such churches as powerful partners for administrators, teachers, and other school actors who want to work toward greater equity and justice in the public sphere.

The underlying point in addressing churches' faith dispositions here is to clarify that not all churches are fitting partners for progressive education. Unlike those that are this-worldly and/or prophetic in nature, churches that are other-worldly and/or Constantinean, are unlikely to join school-led efforts to engage issues of social justice.

Along with the limiting influence of the separation of church and state and certain churches' faith dispositions, school-church connections have been critiqued as being limited in that sometimes they reach/include only those residents who are actively affiliated with particular churches and, in instances where churches are increasingly attended by commuters (those who have moved to other neighborhoods but still attend the church), congregants are not fully invested in social justice measures in the local neighborhood. Several scholars acknowledge the validity of these critiques while still indicating that the potential benefits of school-church alliances make their pursuit worthwhile (Smidt, 2003; Warren, 2003 Wood, 2002).

School-Community Distrust

On the school end, engagement can also mitigated by what Warren (2005), Noguera (2001), and others have described as conditions of wariness and distrust between schools and institutions of influence in their communities. Many schools—even those that are failing by most all measures and in apparent need of help—are less than eager to develop formal or informal relationships with churches and other organizations in their neighborhoods. Whereas some of these "uneasy" school-community relationships result from complex historical conflicts or particular incidents of note, others are tied to territorialism, insular professionalism, and closely guarded school foci. Warren (2005) explains:

> They may fear having community activists interfere in 'their' domain because they see them as uninformed or, worse yet, as potential disruptors pursuing a wrong-headed agenda. Alternatively, school reformers may see time and resources spent engaging parents, connecting with community organizations, and addressing the broader needs of children as distractions. (p. 29)

Noguera (2001) indicates that such school perspectives can in fact have deleterious effects on family and community capacity to enact positive transformation. Isolationist mentalities that depict school and community interests as existing in natural opposition can, in fact actively undermine the social capital that is so promisingly cultivated in urban churches. Noguera (2001) writes:

> A key factor determining which form of social capital will be produced is the

> nature of the relationship between the school—and the individuals who work there—and the community, including parents of the children enrolled. Where connections between school and community are weak or characterized by fear and distrust, it is more likely that the school will serve as a source of negative social capital. (p. 193).

This paralyzing wariness of schools to take on meaningful partnerships with institutions of civil society (like churches) must be contextualized within the current high-stakes testing era that colors the daily work of educators across the United States.

High-Stakes Testing Influences

Complementing James Coleman's (1988) work on social capital as a creator of human capital, there is a plethora of research that describes strong family-school-community connections as critical under-girders of school achievement (ex., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll & Gonzalez, 1999; Noguera, 2001). This work claims that students can learn best and reach their full cognitive and social potentials only when they are supported by diverse webs of supportive relationships. These relationships include both those between individuals (such as parents, teachers, and pastors) and those among, within, and between organizations (such as schools and churches). Nonetheless, schools that feel the extreme pressures of making the No Child Left Behind Act's indicators of adequate yearly progress are less apt to devote time and resources to the development of these relationships with churches than they are to spend them on test drilling and preparation. Here, the current accountability era can be seen as a common deterrent of school-church partnering for change, as "strategies for organizing and involving parents are typically not incorporated into most school reform plans since the advent of high-stakes testing" (Noguera, 2001, p.189). Simply stated, many schools are pressured to prioritize test-taking over all other intra- and extra-school initiatives. While this tends to mitigate schools taking the lead in establishing links with churches, it certainly does not preclude churches from targeting change in the education arena.

Making the Links

So, considering both the promising possibilities and the potential obstacles to churches serving as civil society's institutional vehicles to state-level tables of influence, how might some of these linkages actually come about? In addition to the factors we previously described as facilitators of socially just engagement (active/diverse congregations, prophetic/this-worldly faith dispositions, etc.), socially conscious leadership from key school and/or church actors is needed, as is sufficient organizational capacity (time, resources, space, etc.) for engaging in such action. With these baseline conditions met, two broad types of engagement immediately surface as logical steps toward social justice: instances where schools go to the churches and instances where churches go to the schools. "Going to each other" takes on multiple connotations here, including physically going to each others' spaces, verbally engaging

in dialogue or constructive confrontation (as witnessed in Alinsky-inspired organizing tactics (Alinsky, 1969)), and psychologically opening up to and valuing others' outlooks and experiences. These initial interfaces can set the stages for longer-term partnerships and arrangements that can facilitate social justice transformations.

Consider the following among the broad array of possibilities for school-church linkages that can be made:

- Regular principal and teacher visits to well-attended neighborhood churches to learn about residents' needs, describe what is going on in the school, and solicit resident involvement in school activities. These visits might occur at regular church services and/or at special church functions (festivals, celebrations, etc.).

- Invitations from schools to local church leaders to visit the schools to speak with staff and students about elements of community history such as the influential past residents of the neighborhood, the formative events that occurred in the area, and the traditions that have helped forge the community's identity.

- Utilization of church facilities for school-related functions such as sports events, fundraisers, celebrations, and other social events.

- Church-based policy groups that gather to learn about specific school issues, plan action strategies to advocate for local youth and families, and then dialogue with (and sometimes confront) school officials about them in order to bring about more equitable treatment of students.

These examples are relatively simple in design and purpose, but can serve as relationship-builders and vital modes of information mining (learning community wants/needs) and disseminating (spreading the word about the school's happenings). Schools' identities as transparent, self-disclosing institutions and their outward recognition of individual and community-level church-based assets could facilitate increased trust among and between diverse residents and school actors. Such trust, contextualized in inner-city school and church settings, is foundational to collaborative social justice action.

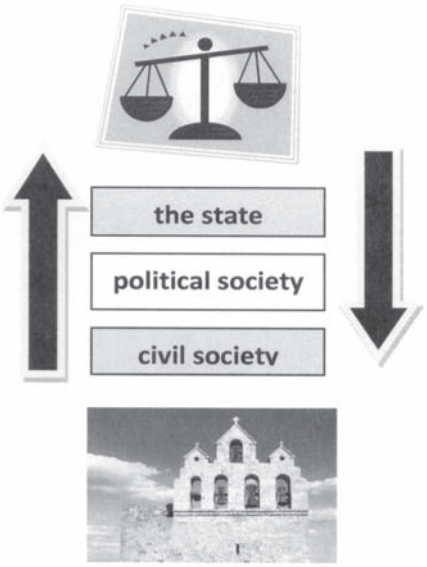
We should emphasize again that church-school connections are important because they are *vertical* ones. They serve the vital bridging function of mobilizing the institutionally-rooted social capital of civil society for action at the state level. Without such vertical connections in the public sphere, many poor and/or inner-city residents' strongest bonds—those that reside in their churches—remain mostly horizontal and result in mostly day-to-day "getting by" benefits (support with daily tasks, etc.). The public sphere remains structurally fragmented. Dynamic transformational potential, however, results when strong church-rooted bonds advance to schools and other state entities. Democracy works through these links and social justice—"the condition whereby all people are afforded fair opportunities to enjoy the benefits of society" (Miller, 2008, p. 821)—becomes a possibility.

It is critical that these are both *upward* vertical linkages, or efforts generated by churches that seek influence at the state level (schools), and *downward* vertical linkages, or efforts started by schools that seek increased responsiveness to civil society (here, people in the church—refer to figure 2). Whereas downward linkages tend to be *dialogical* and aimed predominantly at relationship building and information sharing, upward linkages can occasionally unfold *confrontationally* calling for change in targeted areas of community-identified injustice. Both dialogue and confrontation are often needed in efforts to bring about social justice. Dialogue is needed to facilitate greater depth and breadth of understanding between diverse people and institutions; Confrontation[8]—which is likely to emerge when specific policies are targeted for reform by church groups—is needed to hold those in power accountable for the creation of systems that are equitable.

Conclusion

We have attempted to make the case that the structural linkage of the public sphere is a prerequisite for the advancement of social justice in schools and society at large. Drawing from democracy theory and the work of Wood (1994; 2002), Warren (1998; 2003; 2005), and others, we assert that those who are typically rel-

Figure 2:
Upward and Downward Institutional Linkages in the Public Sphere



Upward Linkages originate from institutions of civil society (like churches) and influence/confront institutions of the state (like schools). Downward linkages originate from institutions of the state and facilitate relationship development and responsiveness within the public sphere. Both upward and downward linkages are needed.

egated to the fringes of society—including the poor and many inner-city residents of color—must be active *participants in* (not just *benefactors of*) movements toward justice. Unfortunately, their voices are largely muted by the structural fragmentation of the public sphere. That is, the decision making and policy shaping that take place in government buildings and schools are often neither reflective of discussions taking place in civil society nor responsive to the needs of people who occupy those spaces. We claim that the structural linkage of the public sphere and, in turn, elevation of the people's voices, is most efficaciously engaged through institutional means. As an example of structural linkage through institutional means, we provided a look into school-church connections.

In that churches are the most vibrant of civil society's institutions, residents' stores of social capital are commonly tied to these faith communities, and churches are often justice-directed organizations, churches are well-positioned to act as institutional bridges from civil society to the highest levels of the public realm (Portney & Berry, 2001). We noted several examples of (large and small scale) church-based organizing movements throughout the United States and provided several other examples of how school-church connections might look in practice. The key element of these connections—regardless of their exact form or scale—is that they are vertical. They link those who are usually "at the bottom" of the larger public sphere with institutions "at the top." In such instances, the state is responsive to the people and the people exert genuine influence upon public deliberations at all levels. These matters are fundamental to matters of democracy and social justice, for, if structural fragmentation persists, "doubt may arise as to whether a sphere is in fact a 'public' sphere" (Kemmis & McTaggert, 2007, p. 587).

Notes

[1] Also commonly referred to as the public square and the public realm.

[2] Numerous descriptions of the public sphere have been put forth and they find much in common. For the sake of analytic clarity, we focus predominantly on Wood's (1994; 2002; 2003) work in this area.

[3] Freire refers to "the people" as the common residents of a society—often those who are poor and/or suffer the brunt of inequitable systems and structures.

[4] Explaining the widespread reach of these federations, Wood (2002) writes: "With 133 local or metropolitan-area federations linking some 3,500 congregations plus some 500 public schools, labor union locals, and other institutions, faith-based organizing can plausibly claim to touch the lives of some two million members of these institutions in all the major urban areas and many secondary cities around the United States" (p. 6).

[5] West refers to the "cold times" as periods of difficulty and strife that cause many individuals, institutions, and organizations to break down.

[6] We reiterate here that churches are but one example of institutions through which structural linkages might be made in the public square. Also, as mentioned throughout the paper, the particular belief traditions of a church are not the key factor to consider here. Rather churches' proclivities for advancing the plight of disenfranchised groups are most relevant. All churches that have such interests should be able to join the struggle toward social justice.

[7] For a full description of Constantinean religion, refer to West's (2005) *Democracy Matters.*

[8] For full description of the role of confrontation in church-based organizing efforts, refer to Warren (2001) and Wood (2002).

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