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### Leadership for Social Justice: Authentic Participation in the Case of a Community Center in Caracas, Venezuela

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## **Leadership for Social Justice: Authentic Participation in the Case of a Community Center in Caracas, Venezuela**

**ABSTRACT:** This is a case study of a leader who fosters authentic participation for advancing social justice in an urban community center in Caracas, Venezuela, located in the midst of poverty, marginality, and social and economic alienation. This educational space enables the local community to control the destiny of their own institution. Learning from this case, we argue that urban educational transformation might succeed in terms of practicing social justice, if leadership facilitates and creates urban sanctuaries by working with the communities and not on the communities; fosters an organizational structure that is flexible and democratic; and creates a safe (trusting) environment where the local community is engaged in authentic participation.

Busy streets, old noisy buses, corner stores, loud music, rushing people, and a continual feeling of being in overcrowded spaces are the daily reality of Bolívar<sup>1</sup> streets. About three blocks from the subway station that connects Bolívar with the rest of the city stands a three-story building with a small playground, a basketball court, and a separated small gym. You climb the long stairs to find a nice clean place, newly painted walls,

*Author note:* The authors are listed in alphabetical order; they contributed equally to the article. We would like to thank Tom Poetter for his comments on an earlier draft and the blind reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

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<sup>1</sup>The names of individuals and places in this article have been changed to protect anonymity.

smiling faces, and very busy people who greet and welcome you to their place. They introduce themselves as part of the center, no titles attached. They are parents, children, staff, and neighbors. Over the entrance there is a sign that reads: Bolívar Community Center: Always an Open Door.

In this article we present the case study (Stake, 1994) of a leader who fosters authentic participation for advancing social justice in an urban community center in Caracas, Venezuela, located in the midst of poverty, marginality, and social and economic alienation.<sup>2</sup> We initially collected data about this particular setting because it represented an interesting situation that offers a popular education component in an urban institution. Our data show that this example of leadership that fosters authentic participation provides relevant implications for educational institutions in urban settings. The center has been developed in a way that enables the local community to control the destiny of their own institution via a leadership approach of working “with” them, not “on” them.

In this article we first provide background on the community center. Second, we briefly explain the method and discuss the theoretical framework of this study. We define several concepts, including social justice, leadership for social justice, and the notion of authentic participation. Third, we describe how a leader with a commitment to social justice fosters authentic participation and how this looks in practice. Fourth, we discuss the role of ownership and suggest connections between this case and schools in the American context. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the characteristics of leadership for social justice and of the role of authentic participation.

## BACKGROUND

Bolívar Community Center (BCC) in Caracas, Venezuela, was established in 1958. BCC’s main goal as a “neighborhood center” was to help with the

<sup>2</sup>Overall, less than 10% of the population possesses more than 90% of the wealth of the country. The *New York Times* (August 21, 1999) reported that “Venezuela is the world’s largest oil exporter outside the Middle East, yet 80 percent of its people live in poverty” (p. 12). The minimum wage in 1997 was about \$95 per month and the per capita GDP is unevenly distributed. Interestingly, recent studies point out a parallel huge inequality in distribution of wealth occurring in the United States: “The wealthiest 2.7 million have as much to spend as the poorest 100 million” (*New York Times*, September 5, 1999, p. 14) If this tendency continues, U.S. internal distribution of wealth may soon mirror that of Latin American countries such as Venezuela.

process of settling and integrating immigrants to the Venezuelan context.<sup>3</sup> International Social Services helped establish community centers in neighborhoods identified as in need of services because of immigration and poverty. School buildings were not suited for these services because often the buildings were busy with two or even three shifts of schooling due to limited space. Some community centers established preschool programs and other educational services as described later in this article. However, the community centers operate independently from the school system, which has been directed and centralized by the national Ministry of Education, with input from state and municipal levels of government.

In the past 20 years, Bolívar's neighborhood population has increased and the needs and living conditions of the people served by BCC have changed.<sup>4</sup> This community center is located in the most overcrowded neighborhood of Caracas. It is estimated that of more than 4 million people living in Caracas, 1 million or more live in Bolívar. The majority of the population are from low-income families. The prevalent family structure in the neighborhood is one of single mothers with more than two children living in conditions of extreme material poverty. Criminality and vandalism are a major challenge to local community leaders and organizations.

In this community, there are many undocumented immigrants from neighboring countries, overcrowded small school buildings with substandard conditions, and a large number of elementary school-age children who do not attend school at all. In short, this community fits what

<sup>3</sup>The BCC is similar to the settlement houses created at the beginning of the 20th century in large American cities. One of the most well-known settlements was Hull House in Chicago, whose leader, Jane Adams, was a social reformer, a political activist, and educational pioneer. One of the settlement movement's main purposes was to improve living conditions in city neighborhoods for the significant number of immigrants and people living in poverty, by engaging in educational, cultural, and political action (Hall & Carpenter, 1976).

<sup>4</sup>Census data regarding population are not complete because of the great number of undocumented immigrants from Colombia, Ecuador, and many of the Caribbean Islands living in shanty-town areas of marginalized neighborhoods such as Bolívar, as well as temporary seasonal migration from rural areas. According to data presented by the United Nations, only about 3 million people inhabit Caracas. However, with neighboring towns such as Los Teques included, the number is well over 4 million. In Venezuela, 86% of the population lives in urban settings (Indicators of Human Settlements, 1995, UNESCO). Of a total of about 23 million people, 35% of them are under the age of 15 and about 7% are over the age of 60 (Indicators on Youth and Elderly Populations, 1999, UNESCO). The UNESCO's World Education Report (UNESCO, 2000) reports an expected 10.5 years of formal schooling for Venezuelans under the age of 15. In another report from 1990, the rate of illiteracy in Venezuela was about 9%, although it was only 5% for the age range 15–24. These data, combined with an estimated official number of about 10.3% unemployment for males and 12.8% for females in 1995 (International Labor Office, UN) explain the need for alternative formal and informal educational organizations providing services to populations that do not have access to educational attainment and employment.

A. J. Schwartz (1975), in her critique of the "culture of poverty," described as "the unskilled marginal occupational group . . . all explicable by either structural or cultural conditions" (p. 381).

## METHOD

This is a critical qualitative case study (Hamilton, 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Stake, 1994). Data were collected during fieldwork observations and open-ended interviews with an array of participants, volunteers, and staff, who varied in age and gender. Data were collected during four different several week visits in the summers of 1994, 1996, 1997, and 1998. For this article we utilize only material from our 1997 and 1998 fieldwork. Data were collected by the authors in Spanish.

In this case study we asked: How does a leader with a commitment for social justice foster authentic participation and how does it look? Data originally focused on the leadership role vis-à-vis local community participation in the running of the center, but did not focus on the dynamics of decision-making processes in terms of gender, age, education, family structure, and other categories that may unveil power tensions and inequities.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

Our questions and data are grounded in a discussion of power arrangements from critical perspectives including an understanding of organizations and leadership as disciplinary practices (Anderson, 1998; Anderson & Grinberg, 1998; Ball, 1990; Cherryholmes, 1988; Foucault, 1977, 1981, 1990; Gane, 1986; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). A disciplinary practice is:

A set of discourses, norms, and routines that shape the ways in which a field of study constitutes itself . . . [that connect] with historical, political, cultural, and economic contexts but are enacted within specific, local, and contingent institutional arrangements, and . . . [that entail] the establishment of conventions, agreements, and rules that regulate and legitimize current ways of distinguishing among "best practices," desired outcomes, academic rigor, and valid knowledge claims. (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998, p. 330)

As Freire (1992, 1998) asserts, a critical perspective questions in favor of whom practices were fostered. Therefore, we found useful Anderson's (1998) suggestion for understanding the discourse of "participation" by answering the following questions: "Who participates? Participation in which spheres? What conditions and processes should be present locally?" (p. 587). The assumption is that the answers to these questions will illumi-

nate how authentic participation is in terms of to what extent interested groups and individuals can have a say over decisions that have an impact on their interests.

We also focused on authentic participation because we considered it a cornerstone of experiencing and solidifying participatory democracy among those communities that historically have been displaced and excluded from power arrangements in relation to their own living conditions. Thus, the potential transformation of power arrangements creates spaces to practice social justice since it is generated through popular participation in a democratic process in order to serve the needs and expectations of the community as defined by its members. In this context we use the concept “popular” to highlight the participation of the local residents in defining their interests and in deciding about the use of resources for meeting their own needs, on their own terms, and in open advertised forums fostering a consensus-building process. Certainly this is not free of tension, but leadership for social justice requires the creation of organizational mechanisms to facilitate such space and conditions. As Anderson (1998) states:

Participatory democrats argue that the future of democracy depends on the existence of local social spaces in which human actors can learn and exercise the skills of dialogue and debate necessary for the development of a democratic citizenry. . . . The ultimate ends of participation should be the constitution of a democratic citizenry and redistributive justice for disenfranchised groups. (p. 575)

As Goldfarb (1998) argued, educational institutions such as community centers and schools are important places to start, sustain, and advance such practices in order for local communities to assert their own destinies, breaking from dependency and the patronizing colonization of social agencies that define needs for them instead of creating urban sanctuaries. McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994) argue that “urban sanctuaries” create spaces in which “people care and in which worth is assumed and individuals valued; environments in which the young person has an identity, a role, and pride in membership . . . and find the protection and security we all need” (p. ix). The dispositions and discourse practices (Cherryholmes, 1988) of leaders in these institutional arrangements are crucial for advancing social justice, equity, and radical democracy (Anderson, 1998; Ball, 1990; Freire, 1992, 1998; Giroux, 1988; Grinberg, 2000; Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000; Luke & Gore, 1992).

We therefore argue that leadership for social justice is the disposition and propensity to critically articulate, conceptualize, create, and promote

spaces for change coherently with these values. Here “critical” means the process of unpacking how institutional and organizational power arrangements, also manifested through practices in their daily routines, operate in favor of a few and to the detriment of many (for a discussion of power see Anderson and Grinberg [1998]). We define social justice as the exercise of altering these arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions, among other forms of relationships.

A leader or leaders interested in fostering and forwarding social justice ought to problematize existing practices and reform proposals with the purpose of not just becoming more efficient at doing more of the same, but with the purpose of imagining and constructing new institutional possibilities, both formal and informal (Grinberg, 2000). Such leaders engage in a collaborative, team-based effort to produce alternative discourses, carry on the responsibilities derived from the new proposals, and support meaningful and collectively scrutinized efforts initiated by others. Within this perspective, good leadership for social justice is about creating critical conditions and safe spaces or urban sanctuaries for educational transformation because everyday decisions about what to teach, how to teach, and to whom to teach what are inherently political acts (Grinberg, 2000). These decisions can open or close opportunities and cannot be made “neutrally” since neutrality works in favor of the status quo.

## **FOSTERING A COMMITMENT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND AUTHENTIC PARTICIPATION**

In response to the social devastation and marginal economic situation of its local neighborhood, BCC redefined itself in the process of creating and enacting democratic living through a variety of educational and sociocultural activities. The center exists as a local section of the International Social Services and it is a nonprofit organization supported in part by private donations and by a very small government national fund. The minimal fee for the classes and activities is charged only to those who can pay the small amount and only for some of the classes.

The government of the center resides in the board of directors. This board oversees the daily activities of the center, and its primary functions are to develop and appraise programs and to hire, fire, and evaluate personnel. They meet every week and their work and function is

based on democratic principles, with consistent attempts to establish consensus when possible, thus having long meetings and at times postponing decisions. Representatives of the community, the staff, and the director of the center form the board. It is important to consider that volunteers from the community who participate in the center's activities select their representatives to the board. It is also important to understand that the decision-making process for supporting the programs and services are the result of what community members identified as their own needs.

When the new director arrived at the community center in the late 1980s, she realized that the center was disconnected from the people who lived in the neighborhood, that they did not have any input concerning services and directions of the center, and that mostly they did not feel any attachment or ownership over the place: "I made my goal to open spaces for participation, to hear what is it that those who will be served think they want or need" (I. Cortinas, personal communication, June 15, 1997). The new director invited local community members to open meetings where brainstorming, deliberation, discussion, and prioritizing took place. Consistent with Anderson's (1998) proposal for assessing authentic participation, BCC is owned by its participants because they are actively engaged in the decision-making processes, in policy shaping, approval of proposals, and in the debates over priorities, spending, and programming, as the following typical vignette illustrates:

A debate is taking place this afternoon. Some older male members seem to agree that it is important to provide more classes in metallurgy and perhaps auto mechanics. A staff member argues that auto mechanics demands facilities and reorganization of space and equipment, this is not possible, it is too expensive. Also, it is questioned whether some local garages owned by community members could be used for these classes. A community member suggests to investigate exact costs and with several proposals in hand to make an informed decision about its feasibility, "Why rush decisions? This is too important, a big investment," he argues. Others support him and no decision is made at this time. (Field Notes, June 20, 1997)

In this way, programs and services were not imposed from the outside but rather evolved from the participatory process, where the role of professionals was to listen and to facilitate, to suggest and to implement, but not to impose. Another interesting element in the process was the provision of a "safe" space for children and youth to voice needs and concerns. In turn, the board prioritized services and programs following the "town hall" meetings' recommendations and according to budgets and resources.



Sometimes decisions are not easy because there are not enough resources and the prioritizing process leaves wounds. The following vignette represents some of these tensions:

Mario told us that his martial arts program couldn't have more sessions. He is unhappy about it because it is a very popular program among youngsters. He thinks that it is not just sports, but that it helps to build self-esteem, discipline, and respect. He wondered how he could select who would participate, given the large numbers of kids who want to be in the program. He acknowledged, however, that the participants' financial contributions do not pay for the costs of the program or even for his salary. He reported that the decision was made the past evening and that it was a long evening for many until they came to some agreement over prioritizing costs for other programs. Many people wanted to speak out, to give their opinion. Compromising, Mario said, is sometimes very painful. (Field Notes, July 14, 1997)

While certainly there are times of tension and disagreements as illustrated in the above vignette, the insistence on dialogue, debate, frank exchange of ideas, listening to each other, and agreeing to disagree forces the enactment of respect, trust, listening, understanding, sharing, and even giving up. This is particularly relevant because democracy is not free of conflicts, and at BCC, rather than avoiding problems, issues are discussed and concessions are made.

## SERVICES

This section's description was composed based on our field notes, interviews, and written memos collected during our fieldwork. The center has divided its services into four main areas: social, educational, cultural, and recreational.

### Social Services

Social services include providing solutions to social, individual, family, and community problems. University students soon to be graduating from the social work program provide families and individuals with free counseling. Law students provide free legal assistance. In the late 1980s, the community center board decided that there was a need to address another urgent problem in the neighborhood, and that led to providing biweekly Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

One of the most successful activities has been the summer camp. Every July and August the center offers a summer camp for children 7 to 14 years old. An average of 400 children participate every summer.

The camp provides trips to museums, parks, and beaches. Campers also get to watch movies and play. These activities are important because for many children this is the only opportunity they have to experience a museum or a movie theater. Many households do not have the resources to pay for movie tickets or VCRs at home. The children also get two hot meals a day while participating in the camp. In order to participate, each child must bring his or her toothbrush. They do that so the children have some "responsibility" in connection with the provided meals and to provide health care support.

The BCC also created a "Neighborhood School" with the goal of developing community leadership and theoretical and practical knowledge of private and public institutions related to social welfare and local politics. Another crucial educational component is the "School for Parents." This program deals mainly with providing knowledge about human development and health information with an emphasis on child growth. Also, the School for Parents advises and gives information on parent-child relationships provided by professionals from universities, research institutes, and health organizations. Prevention of delinquency, especially juvenile delinquency, is a constant topic that parents ask for as a workshop focus.

### Educational Services

Traditional educational services are divided into three main sections. The first section provides short-term vocational education to youth and adults in areas such as metallurgy (with enrollment averaging 20 students per section offered), cutting and sewing (120 students), hairdressing (150), designing (30), accounting (30), electronics (15), typewriting (50), and basic English (15). The second section provides supplementary high school classes in chemistry (90), physics (60), English (80), and mathematics (180). The third section is a subsidized preschool where an average of 90 children attend the morning and afternoon sessions.

### Cultural Services

The goal of the cultural area is to promote and encourage the development of cultural manifestations in the community by providing a space for legitimization of its diverse cultural roots. This is accomplished by providing classes and performances of folk dance, chorus, *cuatro* (a four-string instrument widely used in Venezuela for folk music), guitar, drama, and children's creative workshops (mostly fine arts). Every 15 days a free movie is shown in the center. The community

is also exposed to presentations from individuals connected with the performing arts, the media, politics, and professionals in areas selected by the members.

### Recreational Services

The recreational area focuses on the development of a “healthy body” and is very popular among adolescents in particular. There are classes of tae kwon do (35 students average per session), karate (120), gymnastics (30), aerobics (40), and yoga (15). There are basketball, volleyball, and chess clubs. It is also important to mention that all the instructors are required to promote and model habits of discipline, responsibility, and teamwork, having to attend several meetings with community members throughout the year.

## DISCUSSION

The open door of the center is open because there are people who want to enter it. They want to enter it because this is their space, a space where their diverse voices are heard; their perspectives are explored, at times contested, and at times accepted. The center bases its life on the principle that to learn to live democratically, democracy should be experienced. Thus, the source for the existence of this center depends not only on the caring, dedication, and commitment of the director and the staff, but also on the ownership of the local community.

## OWNERSHIP

Several years ago, as the social conditions of the neighborhood deteriorated, the center was a target of robbery and destruction. The center is located on a hillside. Young people used to go uphill and just throw stones toward the building.

It was a mess. Windows were broken and never replaced. Graffiti was all over the building. It was not a safe place to come for activities. Although there was a cleaning service, it was not kept clean. Each time it was repainted, it did not last for too long. People did not care and youngsters used it only for vandalizing the building. (I. Cortinas, personal communication, June 15, 1997)

However, after a year and a half of the current administration, all this “vandalism” stopped. A reason for the change of attitude toward the center on the

part of the youth is the perception of ownership. When services began to change as a result of input from community members about their needs, people began to identify themselves as part of the organization. Now the building is very clean and welcoming. Members are in charge of cleaning, repairing, painting, and maintaining the building, which in turn provides work-experience for many youngsters without a trade (Field Notes, June 15, 1997).

The more participation there was from volunteers, the more community members began to take part in the decision-making process. Youth started to perceive the center as *their* center, as *their* property for which they needed to care, and not as a foreign imposition on them. Volunteers periodically organized cleaning and painting days, building days, and other activities to make the physical plant look aesthetically pleasant. They routinely incorporated, in their paintings on the walls, themes that represented cultural icons relevant to their diverse roots.

This feeling of ownership by members is vital to experience because it furthers participatory democracy, which makes self-empowerment possible for the local community. As stated by Delgado-Gaitan (1991, p. 23), empowerment is an “ongoing intentional process centered in the local community involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources.” Part of the empowerment process lies in the way in which popular participation takes place at the center through fostering respect, understanding, tolerance, compromise, concessions, critical reflection, argumentation, prioritization, caring, designing services, and volunteering.

Empowerment is not provided by a social agency of an institution, but by the social agency of the participants who appropriate space and resources for their own needs (Goldfarb, 1998; Grinberg & Goldfarb, 1998). The role of leadership is, therefore, that of facilitating the opportunity for empowerment rather than “delivering” it. Delivery perpetuates dependency. Thus, institutional power should be used to create mechanisms and spaces for democratic processes. In turn, there should not be a need for a leader because leadership becomes a community endeavor, rather than an individual effort.

The BCC has provided a source of knowledge and information about areas directly connected with the daily living and struggles of the members of the community. As Perrone (1991) reminds us, it is not enough to talk about democratic practice, we have to practice democracy, and therefore, we have to learn the power of cooperation and collaborative work. However, this is not an easy task. As Hunt (1996) states:

Striving to live democratically is challenging; intellectually stimulating; chaotic; full of conflicts, dialogue and celebrations. It requires speaking and

listening habits that have at their core a commitment to democratic attitudes and values, a dedication to working on issues of community, equity, liberty, and equality. (p. 2)

That is why the new director worked to change the old board of directors at BCC—in order to include volunteers and local community members, thus creating a legitimate space for the voices of those who participate in the life of the place. The Neighborhood School was created to promote the development and continuity of community leaders. A public library was established to ensure the community's free access to knowledge and information, to promote lifelong education, to support the educational area, and to offer up-to-date information on local and national resources. Furthermore, since the classes and services provided by the center run from Monday through Saturday, community grassroots organizations use the facilities for meetings and social activities on Sundays.

## EMERGING POSSIBILITIES FOR SCHOOLING AND LEADERSHIP

Creating the opportunity for the type of experiences in social institutions described in this article is a crucial pedagogical tool to sustain and nurture democratic life (Cordova, 1997; Darder, 1997; Freire, 1992, 1998; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Kincheloe, Slattery, & Steinberg, 1999). This is especially true in Venezuela, a country that in spite of free elections in a democratic "tradition" for the past 40 years, has savage material inequalities between the few accommodated powerful and a large mass of dispossessed.

It is, however, equally relevant to bring the discussion to the United States' context. Our intention is not to generalize and transport structures from one context to another. Certainly there are many differences between the context of Venezuela and that of the United States, at least in terms of wealth, organization, resources, and markets. However, there may be some parallel issues in terms of roles, relationships, and learning to live democratically. When thinking about U.S. schools and the public good, we think that the case study of BCC is relevant in terms of ownership and empowerment and in terms of experiencing democracy and its struggles. People learn through experiences such as those described here how to nurture and sustain their sanctuary. Consequently, it is relevant for U.S.-based educators to systematically ask: What is the input of children, caregivers, parents, teachers, the community (and, at times, even principals) in the lives of schools, in their curriculum and practices, in their services, and in the definition of needs and priorities?

As with the “old” BCC, many schools in Venezuela and in the United States are institutions that are geographically in the community, but culturally and socially removed from it (Darder, 1997; Freire, 1992; Gallegos, 1998; Grinberg & Goldfarb, 1998; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Kincheloe, Slattery, & Steinberg, 1999). Many times these schools are “divorced” from the local community, they are “foreign” institutions “planted” in a location, as a form of benevolent colonialism in places defined as “at risk” from the outside (Carlson, 1997; Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000; Spring, 1994, 1997). In such cases, schools deliver the same package of activities as other schools with no interest in knowing if these activities are relevant for its students. They operate within what Freire (1992) called the “banking model,” since it imposes an interpretation of the world, assumes a passive recipient role for students, marginalizes local needs, meanings, and ways of knowing.

The processes and services of the BCC invite us to see that education does not take place only in schools or classrooms. The BCC serves an adult population that often schools do not accommodate, and it serves children and youth with many activities and programs that schools in Caracas usually do not provide, such as sports and music, help with homework and vocational skills, and also summer classes. Since many children work or wander the streets, the BCC is the only place where they can access formal knowledge, engage in exciting activities that take them to places they could not imagine before, or “create” such places through their own imagination, reading, drawing, painting, playing music, and free play.

Another aspect of the BCC is that while the adults with whom children in schools typically interact are in positions of authority, they seldom see and experience what adults do or how adults learn and participate. The center provides such opportunities to observe and interact with adults, furthering the idea of lifelong learning. Perhaps, schools could provide opportunities for children to see adults working, learning, thinking, and interacting with one another (W. Ayers, personal communication, November 1996).

The results of having a critical leader, who uses his or her power for opening space for voice and ownership, have implications in terms of participation and caring, as expressed in the case described about the young people who stopped throwing stones and breaking windows. We wonder if schools in Venezuela and in the United States that are concerned about caring for their physical plants ever attempted to create opportunities for their students to feel the school as their own—to feel that it is part of their “property.” Do students participate? Do they have legitimate input in the development of policy, in prioritizing, programming, curriculum, design, visual expression, playground construction, and so forth?

This case also invites us to speculate about what could happen if schools either work together with community centers or become community centers offering an array of services and activities and classes to all ages year round, including childcare and preschool programs for infants and toddlers. This is not a fresh idea (Dropkin & Tobier, 1976; Goldfarb, 1998; Hall & Carpenter, 1976; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Perrone, 1991), but it becomes a powerful proposition when thought of in terms of governance with authentic local participation, not only through activities or programs, but also through decision-making process where participants define their own needs and directions. Of course, this could be an administrative nightmare for school districts and superintendents in schools in the United States. Nonetheless, who owns the schools and what should schools be for?

## CONCLUSION

An important role of leadership for social justice is providing opportunities for authentic participation. Therefore, as a result of this study, we propose that it is essential to provide spaces and resources for the community to determine its own destiny, and that participating professionals have the responsibility to facilitate, advise, and consult, but not to impose. The idea is to neither tell the community members what they should do nor “assess” their needs; nor “provide” services in order to “mainstream” marginalized populations; nor “serve” “deprived” social groups with social service agencies dictating services and program content. Such practices are another form of colonizing populations, which historically have been dispossessed and constructed as “other.” They are a form of symbolic colonization through institutional services.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to symbolic colonization, the case of this community center suggests that the task focuses on building critical, participatory, equitable, and just relationships; creating safe and trusting spaces, urban sanctuaries—not by working on community members, but with them.

The sustainability of this center depends on the leadership and ownership of the local community. Moreover, this case illustrates that to learn to live democratically, democracy should be experienced. Therefore, we

<sup>5</sup>“Symbolic colonization” refers to “how certain practices maintain an unequal and hierarchical distribution of power . . . through educational and social relations . . . without institutional possibilities for advancement or change, given the present legitimate and/or informal rules” (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2001, p. 422).

argue that urban educational transformation has more chance to succeed if the leadership:

- facilitates and creates urban sanctuaries by working “with” the communities and not “on” the communities;
- fosters an organizational structure that is flexible and democratic; and
- creates a safe (trusting) environment where the local community is engaged in authentic participation.

The BCC promoted participation through the active involvement of the local community in the process of building its own programs and services, defining its own needs and priorities, allowing participation to be voluntary, and permitting flexibility to keep changing. In short, this case demonstrates that:

- authentic participation is possible even when extremely adverse material and social conditions exist;
- when democratic participation happens, it creates a very different type of dynamic in terms of relationships, ownership, and responsibilities for others, for the physical plant, programs, and services;
- democracy that is “lived” everyday helps people develop the skills and practices to sustain it and the capacity to dictate their own directions.

This case also illustrates the practice of “broad inclusion,” “relevant participation,” and “authentic local conditions and process,” as advanced by Anderson (1998). Authenticity at the micropolitical level presents a major challenge to furthering it in the macropolitical context. Because the process of participation is not easy, and uneven power relations manifest themselves in different ways in different situations, we suggest that there is need for further fieldwork, for research that explores an array of potentially harsh relations that emerge within a process of participation. An analysis of how gender, educational level, age, and other social categories operate in the dynamics of decision making in particular contextual settings is necessary for a better critique and praxis of social justice.

As we walked out on the last day of our visit, we saw a group of 10 or so young people, ranging in age from 7 to 15, sitting and chatting on the stairs in the entrance of the center. We said hello and asked them what they were doing. They replied, “We are waiting to see if there is need for our help.” Bolívar Community Center has created a safe environment, where authentic participation is experienced, where reciprocal interactions sustain this urban sanctuary, and where there is always an open door.



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