GROWING FOR JUSTICE

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A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUUM OF LEADERSHIP CAPACITIES AND PRACTICES

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CHAPTER 3

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STARTING WITH THE CONCRETE

Leading for Social Justice with Instrumental Capacities

The time is always right to do what is right.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. (1965)

In this chapter, we begin, as they say, at the beginning. As we will explore, for the leaders in our study making meaning with elements of an instrumental way of knowing—and for others looking back at the "spark" that first fixed justice for them as a strong value—the desire to *do good and right* emerged as a powerful way into justice-centering educational leadership. And the best news is that, developmentally speaking, this impulse can serve as a ground-floor entry point into the concrete domain of practice open to anyone eager to engage.

Toward this end, in this chapter, we zoom in on leaders' experiences within the concrete domain of our developmental model for justice-centering leadership, including

- the internal sensemaking informing their work (especially in relation to instrumental capacities),

- examples of promising practices,

- the developmental supports that helped them grow, and

- what it felt like to recognize the need for another layer of focus and practice (i.e., to be in transition, developmentally, between the instrumental and socializing ways of knowing).

By way of reminder, the concrete domain involves a focus on tangible action steps, often in response to specific and immediate needs. A preoccupying question here, for example, might be something like, "What do I need to do to make this right, *right now*?" As illustrated in Figure 3.1, this chapter teases out the concrete domain as the *central cylinder* of our developmental model—a cylinder that runs throughout and remains at the core of the layers that follow.

FIGURE 3.1 INSTRUMENTAL CAPACITIES AS ENTRY POINT INTO THE CONCRETE DOMAIN OF JUSTICE-CENTERING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICE
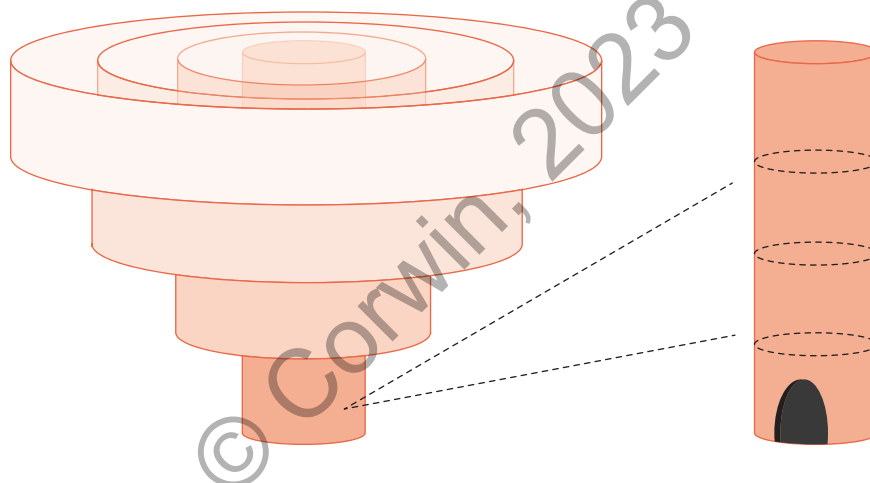
Also, as represented by the open doorway in Figure 3.1, we explore how successful entry into—and engagement with—the concrete domain is connected to leaders' ability to bring *at least* some instrumental capacities to their practice. Although, as you know, leaders with any way of knowing can focus on concrete actions and leadership moves (they remain, as we just mentioned, at the core of all that follows), the capacities that come along with growing into an instrumental way of knowing are of particular importance for leaders foregrounding individual acts or concrete demonstrations of care in their immediate practice.

As we shared in Chapter 2, educators with an instrumental way of knowing can orient strongly to justice as the "right" thing to do, but they have not yet grown the internal capacity to more fully see things through others' eyes—or to see their actions as part of a wider constellation of needed efforts. They are also still working—on the inside—to see beyond the perimeters

of their own lived experiences and inherited right/wrong understandings of how the world "works," meaning that they may unintentionally intuit and apply their worldviews as applicable to everyone, regardless of circumstance. (You might remember, from Chapter 2, the hypothetical educator who, with noble intentions, tries to teach their students in the same "right" ways they experienced growing up.) Despite these growing edges, instrumental knowers (and leaders just starting out in their efforts to more explicitly center justice) *can* bring many strengths and commitments to their work, especially in the concrete domain. As the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed in this chapter's epigraph, it's always a good time "to do what is right"—because "right" is so needed, again and again, in both the smallest and largest of things.

To help paint a portrait of some of the foundational leadership moves participants foregrounded in the concrete domain—as well as their connections to instrumental capacities and growing edges—we next share leaders' reflections and recollections about leading for justice in concrete, tangible ways. Though some of the leaders featured in this chapter were making meaning with some elements of an instrumental way of knowing at the time of our interviews, others were looking back at this time in their meaning making— or reflecting on their work with others for whom the instrumental way of knowing felt prominent.

In this and every chapter, we focus on ways leaders foregrounded particular internal capacities, but we do not link individuals with specific developmental "scores." Also, because the fifty leaders who participated in our study were diverse in terms of identity, role, and experience, when we "introduce" a leader for the first time in the chapter, we include the personal identifiers *they* named as most important to them when we interviewed them for this research. Because we know these aspects of a person's self serve as important context for their sharings, we also include, upon any subsequent mentions of that same leader, a parenthetical reminder about the key identifiers they shared as a kind of shorthand that, we hope, honors the importance of identity without essentializing any specific parts of it.

Because, as we mentioned, the concrete domain runs through the core of our model and is open to all leaders with at least some instrumental capacities, we are excited to share that the next sections feature stories from a great many leaders in our study, as they reflected on this particular dimension of their work.

We begin, next, with what many leaders framed as an underlying "call to do right" that can serve as a foundation for justice-centering leadership.

THE CALL TO DO RIGHT

For many of the leaders in our study, regardless of way of knowing, leading on behalf of social justice began with an ingrained call, as many put it, to "do

right." As Rana—an independent school head who identified as Egyptian American and Muslim—reflected, "I think I've always been drawn to service and serving others. . . . The idea of doing good in the world and trying to leave a positive impact was something modeled for me and seeded from a very young age." Likewise, D.—a teacher leader in his forties who described himself as a first-generation Latino American—told us that, for him, this call was a fundamental element of his identity and upbringing: "I am a community-oriented person. I grew up in a household where my parents volunteered and they taught me to volunteer."

Indeed, this idea of service—of rightness and goodness—grounded the practice of so many of the leaders in our study and finds echo in some of their most foundational understandings of and motivations toward social justice. As Bernard—a teacher educator and former principal and superintendent who identified as a fifty-seven-year-old African American father—put it, "I'm thinking about values. I'm thinking about a sense of morality. I've tried to model being right, just doing the right thing, and I try to exemplify that in my leadership, in my behavior as a teacher." A related idea was expressed by Yaacov—a teacher leader and middle school coordinator who identified as a thirty-two-year-old Orthodox Jewish father and husband—when he asked, "What's the point of this whole big rock floating through space if not to have a positive impact on your kids' lives and other peoples' lives?"

As these examples suggest, the underlying impulse to make the world a better place proved an important entry point for many leaders' justice-oriented goals and efforts—and one that connected, often, to their upbringings and fundamental understandings of morality and of being a good person in the world. Perhaps, looking forward, tapping into this impulse to do good and right might also help leaders bring more people on board with equity efforts in their schools and educational organizations?

One of the leaders in our study, Joyce—an educational consultant who identified as a Caribbean African American woman in her early thirties, and also the daughter of Jamaican immigrants—described taking this approach as a way into her equity-centered coaching and consulting. When confronted with resistance from teachers or leaders, for instance, or when working with educators who were open to equity learning but not sure where to begin, Joyce tries "to tap into their pedagogy and their reason for being in education." In her experience, teachers often enter the profession with a real care for children and youth, but this care can be fragile, eroded by burnout and hardship, or bounded by fear of change and/or unconscious biases and assumptions. To meet colleagues where they are, Joyce asks herself,

> How can I help them to identify who they are in education? Get them to be on board with this pedagogy of moving education? How can I support leaders in a way where they're still aligned to the reason why they got into education, and then they're being strategic about the moves they're making?

In this way, Joyce explains, she can honor others' potential *and* make inroads toward growth and change. With Joyce's grounding questions as framing, we detail in the next sections some of the concrete, individualized actions leaders took as starting steps in their social justice leadership and as expressions of instrumental capacities. We hope that these examples help add developmental, up-close nuance to the insight offered by educational anthropologist Mica Pollock and colleagues (2010) about how people often enter into diversity learning by first asking, "What can I *do*?"—with an emphasis on concrete steps and behaviors (p. 211).

Before reading on, we invite you to pause and consider the concrete actions and practices most important to *your* work and leadership:

REFLECTIVE INVITATION

1. What is top of mind for you right now?

2. What have been some of the important influences on your understanding of the "right thing"? Who or what has helped shape this for you?

3. What are some concrete things you do in your practice that help make a difference?

4. What do you think others notice you doing?

5. What local or immediate steps might be important to consider for your context?

LEADERS' CONCRETE ORIENTATIONS AND APPROACHES TO CENTERING JUSTICE

> *What you are will show, ultimately. Start now, every day, becoming, in your actions, your regular actions, what you would like to become in the bigger scheme of things.*
>
> Anna Deavere Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist* (2006)

For leaders in our study who were making meaning with some elements of an instrumental way of knowing—and for those looking for places to begin their social justice advocacy—translating the call to do right into action often began with concrete, localized moves, including

- taking tangible action steps, and
- focusing on the measurable and technical.

To begin to address the more intractable, complex, adaptive challenges of education, finding something tangible to *do* or *count* provided

important starting places for leaders. Yet, these foundational practices can also grow and develop over time. In other words, although it takes some instrumental capacity to first enter effectively into this domain of practice, leaders from across the developmental continuum can (and must) continue to intentionally *do* things, big and small, as part of their justice-centering efforts.

Capturing this idea, and emphasizing how small things could have big impact, Irene—an independent school director of admissions and enrollment who identified as a white, fifty-six-year-old Jewish mother, whose own mother left Vienna in 1939—explained of her understanding of social justice, "I think the answer—sometimes it's really huge and sometimes it's really small in my mind. . . . I mean, it can be in some ways as little as teaching kids how to be supportive and collaborative in a group, right?" Similarly, Lisa—an early childhood director who identified as a thirty-seven-year-old Black woman of Haitian decent, with seventeen years in education—explained that teaching and leading on behalf of any kind of justice "is like literally peeling an onion. There are so many layers to it that we just have to begin somewhere. We may not get to the end where everything is okay, but we have to start and we have to try at least."

For many of the leaders we learned from in our study, there was indeed wisdom in beginning where one could have the most influence (i.e., within one's immediate locus of control) as a way into challenges that could otherwise feel too big to tackle. As Rana—the head of school introduced earlier in the chapter (Egyptian American/Muslim)—explained, "it's really overwhelming when you look at it [the social justice challenges at hand] all at once, but we can take a moment to focus on our immediate context." Teacher leader D. (introduced earlier, first-generation Latino) likewise begins by asking, "What can I control in my classroom that's making this a place where kids want to be, kids want to learn?" Although these individualized steps may not solve the problem as a whole, it was important, he explained, to "work with what we've got."

As mentioned, for many of the leaders in our study, an emerging sense of agency—and locus of control—began with concrete, local, and immediate actions and foci. Although it is, of course, essential to understand these efforts as part of a larger arc and continuum of social justice leadership and advocacy, we spotlight them here as powerful starting points and essential, granular aspects of a more encompassing, intersectional approach.

Capturing this idea, Jean-Claude—a district-level coordinator of curriculum and teacher leadership who identified as an Asian American male in his forties strongly influenced by the progressive values of his West Coast city—described how taking small steps as an individual helps him better manage the stresses and urgencies of climate change and environmental injustice. "One way of coping with it," he explained, is by "learning more about it and

taking some small action within my own life that could somehow help the situation. That's one piece or one way of coping with it." Although Jean-Claude had the internal, developmental capacity needed to have a bigger-picture understanding of the vast complexity of climate change, he simultaneously recognized how engaging in smaller, concrete acts—in concert with other acts and the efforts of others—could add up to significant change over time.

As a core aspect of justice-centering leadership with the potential to carry through *all* layers of our model, then, we next celebrate and explore the promise of leaders' concrete actions, both in schools and out.

TAKING TANGIBLE ACTION STEPS

To help illustrate what it looked and felt like for leaders to engage, as a first step, in the concrete domain, we first share the reflections of Yaacov, the teacher leader and middle school coordinator we introduced earlier (Orthodox Jewish father). Recalling how he tries to operationalize the call to right in concrete but significant ways, he explained, "Try to do a little bit of good every day. That would be my world view, I guess." Further illustrating his stance, he recounted a few examples of moments that stood out to him from his work with students:

> I had this one kid I'd always eat lunch with. I'd bring him peanut butter sandwiches. Like I'd try to do other things, like I don't know, I brought a kid a pair of glasses once 'cause she didn't have glasses. . . . So those are just kind of individual things. Like I'm not changing the world. I'm just buying this one kid glasses 'cause she doesn't have glasses.

As Yaacov explained, working "on a small level" to develop "a connection with a kid"—by providing companionship, sandwiches, and/or glasses—might not make him a "superhero," as he put it, but it *can* make a real difference for the individuals impacted. These connections—made through tangible actions and behaviors—can also, as they did for Yaacov, provide fuel and energy for the hard work ahead. "I guess that's what kind of keeps me coming back as a teacher," he reflected.

In a similarly meaningful story, James—a teacher leader and middle school department chair who identified as a mixed-race/Hispanic male and a born-again Christian—recounted a teaching practice he felt provided students access to more high-level learning *and* built community connections. "My students' elementary education doesn't have a whole lot of science involved in it," he explained. "So when they come to me, I'm a real science teacher. We do experiments, we use microscopes, we do a lot of stuff with plants and dissections." In addition to addressing issues of access, James sees his work as a way of incorporating and paying forward his love of gardening and learning—with and for students. As he shared with us, this love translated

into a learning tradition that addressed a particular need in his school *and* connected hundreds of students and families:

> I have a plant that I got in my graduate studies. It's a papyrus plant. So the papyrus plant is used to make paper, right? In ancient Egypt they would make paper out of papyrus. It's an aquatic plant so it grows in water. So they're really easy to keep alive, they submerge, you can just submerge them in water and they'll just grow like crazy. So what I do is I kind of made like . . . four or five lessons at different grade levels where we take the papyrus plants, we cut one of the stems off, and we just put it upside down in water. And from there, it will grow roots, and the roots will fill the container, and it will grow a new plant. . . . So we call it Poppy the Papyrus. That's the name of the plant. And for many years on the last day of school, I would give away like fifty or sixty of these plants and wrap them up in a big sheet of paper that's kind of like when you go to the florist and you get plants. And [the students] would go home on the bus with them, and I have their siblings and their siblings would remember—some of them still have it. . . . It was just like a way to connect to different grades and to kind of have a schoolwide thing going. . . . Hundreds and hundreds of plants we made over a decade.

Hundreds of plants made, shared, and nurtured over a decade! Although James explained that some students called him "the plant guy or the nutty professor or something" because of his lab coats and enthusiasm, he humbly admitted, "Yeah, I think they like it. It's been positive." Reflecting on the literal and figurative beauty of James' papyrus plants sprouting across his community—and sprouting community—over time, we can think of no better symbol for the connective power of concrete actions offered with intention, care, and heart.

In addition, a few participants in our study—like Sylvia, a thirty-eight-year-old district-level leader who identified as Puerto Rican, Christian, and a mother—described the importance of working *outside* of school to be of good service and advance equity. These concrete "extracurricular" efforts were especially important to leaders working in contexts that were less welcoming or even hostile to social justice advocacy, and for leaders who had not yet figured out how to blend their personal commitments to justice with their professional roles. As Sylvia explained, recounting some of the service experiences most important to her,

> I do a food pantry that I organize once a month, and in the community I do a toy drive every year that I organize, a turkey drive for the community. So I'm very active in the community aspect outside of work or what I do, and I think that helps fulfill that part of me.

Evan, too—a district-level curriculum leader who identified as a thirty-six-year-old, white, cisgender male with thirteen years in education—explained that, outside of work, he is very "involved in activism" and political causes, even spearheading and participating in demonstrations. Yet, the "norms and decorum of being an administrator" in his organization made it more difficult to bring these expressions of his commitments explicitly to the foreground, professionally. As he shared,

> It's hard to believe that it's possible to be a special educator or a history educator without translating this into the work in a more specific way. So I'm trying, I guess, to find how to connect the dots in that regard. And it's challenging.

Both in school and out, then, the tangible nature of *doing something* to make the world a better place emerged as an important starting place and focus for leaders. Although, as we mentioned, engaging in immediate, tangible actions can become part of larger, more encompassing approaches as leaders gain more perspective and internal capacity, we find it important to celebrate the call to right as an entry point with an open door for anyone seeking a way into justice-centering leadership.

In the next section, we turn to another important aspect of leading in the concrete domain foregrounded by the leaders in our study: focusing on logistics and the technical, measurable dimensions of practice.

FOCUSING ON THE MEASURABLE AND TECHNICAL

Just as leaders who were making meaning with some element of an instrumental way of knowing (and those seeking to gain a first foothold in the work of justice-centering leadership) tended to begin with a focus on their own, concrete actions, a number of leaders in our study described the importance of attending to the *technical* dimensions of representation and inclusion—in classrooms, curricula, and communications. Although equity certainly cannot be achieved only by attending to the quantitative dimensions of access and representation (i.e., who and what is included in learning spaces and lessons), participants recognized the fundamental importance of interrogating what can be counted in schools by looking both without and within to examine their systems and themselves.

As Angela—a thirty-one-year-old district-level teacher development leader who identified as African American with West Indian heritage, as well as a heterosexual Christian woman with nine years in education—explained,

> One of the ways that I look for equity in the work that I'm doing is I look to see how many students are in the classroom. . . . I'll look to see who gets responded to, who doesn't? Who gets called on? I'll look to see how behaviors are dealt with, you know?

> I think looking at teacher interactions with students shows what teachers value and what teachers think students can do or can't do—that's the lens of equity as well. I mean there are so many different things that you never think about until you see it in action. I look to see who sits with who, who doesn't sit with who. I look to see behavior practices 'cause these are all equity, right? Those are the things that I'm kind of getting leaders to shift and look at when they look into classrooms.

In her sharing, Angela explains how she focuses on what can be measured, observed, and adjusted as one key lens for taking stock of the work ahead with the teachers in her care. These important and grounded foci, she also explained, can serve as readily accessible action items for colleagues to notice and attend to.

For some participants, this kind of purposeful noticing and accounting took a more inward turn and coincided with their growing understanding that thinking more critically about their *own* actions, understandings, and positionality was another important responsibility of and expectation for justice-centering leaders. As May—an academic dean in a charter middle school who identified as a white woman in her thirteenth year in education—recounted,

> I send out a family memo every week, and it occurred to me as I was putting a picture—I always put one picture a week of either a group of kids or one student, and I was going to put a picture of Matthew, who is blond and white. And I thought, "Let's look back and see who you've had in the past." And I thought, "No, I have representations of too many white kids in here." And I thought, "Wow, I can't believe that I was not even aware of that." That bothered me. So I changed the picture.

Although a welcome and important shift in its own right, May's realization that she had been overrepresenting white students in her school's communications—and her subsequent decision to change her practice in this instance—can feel limited in scope and impact if not incorporated into a larger constellation of efforts. Here, again, we can see how attending to the measurable and technical dimensions of leadership requires *at least* some instrumental capacity—but it can also continue to grow and evolve as leaders gain new internal capacities, perspective, and experience.

Indeed, without additional, coordinated efforts, focusing only on the immediate, tangible, and countable can leave educators struggling to effect the change they really wish to see, even when they approach their work with passionate engagement. For example, D. (teacher leader, first-generation Latino) described how important it was for him to bring issues of equity—and diverse topics and voices—into his curricula, as a matter of principle and conviction. By paying attention to what was—and was not—covered in

his classes, he was able to develop more representative and accurate lesson plans for his students. As D. confided, however, his curricular restructuring nonetheless left him feeling isolated within the broader culture of the school, which in his mind still felt unchanged and unchallenged. As he explained,

> The school doesn't celebrate women's history, Latino history, Black history—none of that shit. I'm in the classroom by myself talking about suffrage, suffragettes that history forgot. We're talking about Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells. I'm not a U.S. history teacher. I'm a global history teacher . . . but I *have* to weave that in.

Zooming in on and honoring D.'s relatable feeling of frustration, in the next section, we dive more deeply into leaders' feelings of being "stuck" on a growing edge—or, in this case, what it was like for them to lead on the boundary of the concrete domain with what felt like a limited locus of control. We turn also to the supports leaders named as *key developmental stretches* for leadership and internal capacity building through this transition.

DEVELOPMENTAL GROWING EDGES AND KEY SUPPORTS FOR GROWTH: BUILDING ON INSTRUMENTAL CAPACITIES

Lamenting how hard it was to impact the kind of change they wished to see at the time, some of the leaders in our study who were making meaning with elements of an instrumental way of knowing—and those who had not yet grown to expand their practice much beyond the concrete domain—confided feelings of professional frustration and limitation. As Serena—a thirty-one-year-old, central office special education leader who identified as a cisgender, Caribbean American woman—explained, "In terms of my current role, it's very limited. I'm not able to really work for social justice in the way that I want." Confined by what she perceived to be the rules and boundaries of her work, Serena felt stuck between what she was "allowed" to do and what she thought would be best for students and families. Similarly, Jack—a fifty-four-year-old assistant principal who identified as Eastern European/Slavic and an immigrant—described his own feelings of disempowerment, connecting them to the bounded nature of his position. "I would like to impact the profession a lot more," he confided, "[but] I don't have an outlet." Reflecting further, he shared, "I'm trying to attempt change from the wrong position in the organization. I need to become a principal so people value my opinion." For Jack, assuming the principalship would mean amplifying his influence in a hierarchical system, allowing his "voice to be able to reach people." Without that formalized authority, he felt, he wasn't authorized to do the things he'd "love to do but can't." "Nobody listens to me right now," he confided.

Although some participants, like Jack and Serena, attributed their perceived lack of power to their professional role and position in the hierarchy, others

described feeling overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the world's inequities. As Yaacov put it,

> We have a society that's constructed and . . . some people have been screwed over worse than others. But like what should I do about that, you know? . . . I totally buy into that we're all affected by the decisions of people from hundreds of years ago or thousands of years ago—or the luck of the draw of where you were born and who you were born to. I totally agree with that. I just don't know what I'm supposed to make of that.

Although starting with concrete actions, behaviors, and adjustments is certainly *one* entry point into the complex imperatives of teaching and leading today, a number of leaders shared with us their experiences of realizing they wanted to do and try even more.

Accordingly, we next spotlight two key experiences that leaders named as foundational to stretching their practice and agency:

- explicit learning about issues of equity, identity, history, education, and their intersections (i.e., through reading and purposeful study); and

- making connections and building relationships across lines of difference to expand one's worldview and understandings.

In the next sections, we synthesize insights from leaders across our study who—despite making meaning with different ways of knowing at the time of our interviews—were able to look back on these two shared, foundational learning experiences as key to growing beyond some of their earliest, taken-for-granted, and previously unquestioned understandings of the world, as well as developing the capacity to more fully stand with others in good company. Reminiscent of the insights shared by authors and activists Winona Guo and Priya Vulchi (2019)—who traversed the United States after graduating high school to invite Americans to share their stories and experiences of race and racism—the leaders' reflections we share next illustrate the importance of coupling *informational* learning with the *interpersonal* dimensions of lived experience. In this way, as we will describe, participants were able to begin to heed the call of professor, scholar, and current president of the American Educational Research Association, H. Richard Milner, IV (2020), to *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There*—as he titled his impactful book about preparing educators for racially diverse schools and classrooms.