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# A Learning Architecture: How School Leaders Can Design for Learning Social Justice

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The field of socially just educational leadership focuses on reducing inequities within schools. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how one strand of social learning theory, communities of practice, can serve as a powerful tool for analyzing learning within a school ostensibly pursuing social justice. The author employs a core dimension of the theory of communities of practice, “learning architecture,” as a conceptual framework to analyze one such school. **Research Design:** For the case study presented here, data were collected in the form of interviews with teachers, administrators, support staff, and volunteers and board members ( $N = 21$ ), field observations, and archival documents in an elementary school over the course of a school year. **Findings:** Members within a school community belong to multiple, overlapping, and interacting “communities of practice,” groupings of individuals who share common interests, practices, and purposes. The learning architecture illuminates design features that affect learning within and across these communities of practice. These features both facilitate and frustrate the efforts of individual teachers, administrators, support staff, and volunteers and board members to pursue social justice. **Conclusions:** This research suggests that the theory of communities of practice, and in particular the learning architecture therein, can be a valuable analytical tool within the field of socially just educational leadership, providing a perspective on

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how individuals within school communities learn to better serve traditionally marginalized students, along with the interconnections, depth, and edges to this learning.

### **Keywords**

social justice, leadership, communities of practice, sociocultural, learning theory, educational equity

Eliminating educational inequities is an ambitious and elusive goal. Barriers to equity in educational opportunity are multifarious and inextricably entwined with social structures that extend beyond the schoolhouse door (Kantor & Lowe, 2006). Nevertheless, schools can adapt their structures and practices to effectively educate students who are marginalized (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001), and school leaders play a particularly critical role in catalyzing such adaptation (Author, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2007).

Within the field of educational leadership, this goal of reducing inequities in schools is widely espoused but haltingly pursued. One promising way for improving progress toward this social justice goal is for school leaders to directly consider the requisite learning of educators. Pursuing social justice is a developmental process, namely, a *learning* process. Accordingly, social learning theory can guide this pursuit. The purpose of this article is to employ one strand of social learning theory, communities of practice, as a powerful tool for analyzing learning within a school ostensibly pursuing social justice. I apply a core dimension of the theory of communities of practice, “learning architecture,” as a conceptual framework. Presenting a case study, I argue that understanding learning as situated in communities of practice can help school leaders facilitate practices that reduce educational inequities and marginalization in schools.

### **Social Justice Praxis**

Social justice is a messy concept, complex and contested, stretching across a wide array of issues, including resource distribution, cultural domination, respect, and power relations (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002). Scholarship in the field of educational leadership both affirms the centrality of social justice (Murphy, 2002; Starratt, 2003) and acknowledges that praxis—moving from theory to practice—is complicated.

Exploring social justice praxis, many scholars draw from extant theory. Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, and Hodgins (2007) use theories of distributed

leadership to frame their analysis of a high school community's journey toward equity. Shields (2004) employs theories of transformative leadership, relational pedagogy, and moral dialogue to provide school leaders criteria and direction: "[T]ransformative leadership, based on dialogue and strong relationships, can provide opportunities for all children to learn in school communities that are socially just and deeply democratic" (p. 110). Marks and Printy (2003) find that by integrating the qualities of transformational and shared instructional leadership, leaders more effectively "mobiliz[e] collective action of individuals to produce high-quality teaching and learning" (p. 388). Weaving adult learning theory, transformative learning, and critical social theory, K. Brown (2004) describes ways to reform leadership preparation with the goal of cultivating school leaders committed to pursuing social justice in their practice. Other scholarship in social justice praxis builds theory. Unpacking the resistance that principals encounter within the school community as they strive to promote educational equity, Theoharis (2007) crafts a nascent theory of social justice leadership. Finally, some scholars caution against overarching theories altogether, asserting that no single theory can guide this complex and messy work and that meanings of justice are inherently contingent and constantly reinvented (Author, 2006; Bogotch, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2008).

Collectively, this body of scholarship examining social justice praxis tends toward a normative and descriptive tenor, imploring educational leaders to ameliorate marginalization and describing ways to accomplish this goal. In this, the literature has succeeded remarkably. Espoused commitments to social justice are commonplace. Educators far and wide claim to value equity, from leadership preparation programs within institutes of higher education, to research published in journals and presented at conferences, to the foci of practitioners at district and school levels and language of state and national administrator standards. Structures to enact these commitments include equity audits (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004, 2006; Skrla, Scheurich, & McKenzie, 2009) and integrated service delivery models (Frattura & Capper, 2007a, 2007b). Empirical scholarship describes how leaders expand educational opportunity: building professional capacity, providing strong instructional guidance, creating a robust learning climate, and cultivating parent-school-community relations (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010)

A limitation of this body of scholarship, however, is its failure to articulate coherent theories of action through which school leaders actually apply social justice praxis. Specifically, the requisite learning processes within and among educators in school communities tend to remain undefined. For example,

while describing how to conduct equity audits or to integrate support services, the literature leaves underexamined the mechanisms by which educators themselves *learn* to enact these changes. A key question emerges: What supports such learning?

Theories of organizational learning and organizational change, which frequently draw on sociocultural dimensions of learning (e.g., Collinson & Cook, 2007), address this question. Louis (1994) points this out, “Learning involves the creation of *socially constructed interpretations* [italics added] of facts and knowledge that enter the organization from the environment, or are generated from within” (p. 8). Marks and Louis (1999) emphasize that cultural components—such as the relationships among people—scaffold capacities for learning in a school community: “School staff provide each other with support, exchange ideas and reach consensus, and treat each other in professional and egalitarian ways. These are not aspects of reform that cost a great deal of money; they are reforms of culture” (pp. 731-732). Studying math and science teachers at the high school level, Printy (2008) finds “neither departmental leaders nor principals are influential in shaping an understanding of teachers’ pedagogical competence. *Participating in communities of practice* [italics added], teachers establish norms for practice and become accountable to each other rather than to any external agent” (p. 215).

The research presented here contributes to this growing understanding of how sociocultural learning promotes changes in practice. The central question I explore is the following: How do communities of practice affect learning among educators in an aspirant socially just school community? I begin by situating “communities of practice” as a specific sociocultural theory of learning salient to this query, detailing the conceptual framework of a “learning architecture” from this theory. Next, I apply this theory to an empirical case study of a school purporting to pursue social justice. I conclude with implications for the field of socially just educational leadership, pushing the level of analysis from a case study to the broader conceptual problem of how educators learn to pursue equity (Ogawa, Goldring, & Conley, 2000).

## Conceptual Framework

Sociocultural theories of learning form a deep well that has largely gone untapped in the field of socially just educational leadership. Once considered primarily an individualized process of internalizing knowledge, learning is increasingly recognized as shaped by social and cultural contexts (Resnick, 2010; Resnick & Hall, 1998). Learning is generated through interactions with others in enterprises that are of value, as well as through experiences in

the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Content, process, and application are seen as inextricably linked (J. S. Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). This understanding of learning views the world as socially constituted: objective dimensions of the world are subjectively experienced, and we come to know, learn, change, and grow through our interactions with others. Meaning is not given, but produced and reproduced. We understand via experience, and, in turn, our experiences are shaped by our understandings.<sup>1</sup>

### *Communities of Practice*

The strand in sociocultural theories of learning that I foreground in this article is “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009).<sup>2</sup> Communities of practice are groups who share a common purpose and learn how to pursue this purpose from one another. They have three constituent characteristics: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). Being mutually engaged in relationships defines the community. Through this engagement, members pursue a common enterprise, employing a repertoire of artifacts, both tangible (e.g., vocabulary, tools, symbols) and intangible (e.g., stories, concepts). Indicators of these three constituent characteristics are captured in Table 1.

As a hypothetical, one might consider math educators in a high school to be a community of practice. This group shares a common purpose—advancing students in the math curriculum—which members learn to pursue together. As the middle column (Table 1) suggests, certain types of knowledge and skills facilitate their joint enterprise. The left column enumerates ways these colleagues are engaged in relationships. Some relationships may be amicable, others strained. What ties them together is not a job title but the common pursuit of teaching students math, and that they learn this practice with and from one another. Membership is not limited to school employees but could, for instance, include a volunteer tutor who works with students after school. Finally, the right column indicates the repertoire facilitating this practice, such as the way these educators talk, the jargon they employ, and the curricular scope and sequence.

Beyond illustrating these three constituent characteristics, this example of math educators captures other dimensions of communities of practice as well. First, members of a community of practice dwell in different locations. In this case, a regular tutor may be an insider whereas an occasional tutor is on the edge. Second, one’s location in a community of practice is fluid. A relatively

**Table 1.** Indicators of Communities of Practice

Mutual Engagement	Joint Enterprise	Shared Repertoire
Sustained relationships (harmonious or conflictual)	Shared ways of engaging in doing things together	Rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
Substantial overlap in participants' description of who belongs	The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products	Very quick setup of a problem to be discussed
Mutually defining identities	Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise	Specific tools, representations, and other artifacts
Certain styles recognized as displaying membership		Shared discourse styles and content (lore, stories, jargon)

Source: Adapted from Wenger (1998, pp. 125-126).

inexperienced math teacher bringing fresh passion for the topic may be becoming more central to the community of practice. By contrast, a veteran teacher on the verge of retirement may be becoming more peripheral. Third, despite the positive implication of “community,” communities of practice need not reflect harmonious agreement. Whether particular math educators have dysfunctional or copasetic relationships with each other, they share a common purpose. Fourth, learning within a community of practice can unfold in manifold directions, some relatively productive, others less so. Math educators may be learning to be collaborative or that their pedagogy is essentially a private matter; they may be learning to increase the academic press or to dampen their expectations; they may be learning to differentiate their instruction to address the range of students or to distinguish “high-ability” from “low-ability” students and tracking them into classes based on these distinctions. The point is not *what* is learned but rather *how* learning occurs: with and from others.<sup>3</sup>

A final point about communities of practice is that they exist in overlapping networks, and that we learn not only within but also across communities of practice. Typically organizations are composed of “constellations” of communities of practice that are loosely configured and interrelated (Wenger, 1998). Some individuals interact within a single community of practice, whereas others span boundaries, spending time and affiliating with a broader

array of individuals. Boundary spanners facilitate communication and enable coordination across communities of practice. To build on the example above, educators who teach science in a high school may constitute a separate example of a community of practice from math educators. One teacher may span the boundaries between these, teaching both physics and calculus, whereas other teachers stay within a single content area, teaching in only one content area.

In sum, communities of practice are a vehicle through which much learning takes place. They represent potentially powerful spaces of transformative learning. Transformative learning is a generative process whereby new experiences provoke rethinking old mind-sets (Mezirow, 2000) and has been identified as a core dimension of social justice leadership (K. Brown, 2004). Communities of practice can support transformative learning to the degree that they balance the tension between acquiring and generating knowledge. It is important that communities of practice can promote continuity of practice as well as interrupt this. Wenger (1998) describes the paradox: “[I]t is not easy to become a radically new person in the same community of practice. Conversely, it is not easy to transform oneself without the support of a community” (p. 89).

Educational leadership literature at times references communities of practice, often applying the theory to organizational units such as professional learning communities (e.g., Kelley & Shaw, 2010; Marks & Nance, 2007; Printy, 2004).<sup>4</sup> Research on communities of practice frequently focuses on a contrived structure in a particular content area (e.g., Supovitz, 2002). In addition, literature examines discrete components of the theory, such as boundary spanning (e.g., Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Honig, 2006; Merchant & Shoho, 2006; Miller, 2007). Yet even when the theory has direct application—such as to professional learning communities—it is often either ignored altogether (e.g., Hipp & Huffman, 2010) or employed in a broad, general manner (e.g., Printy, 2008). The study presented here takes a different tack by delving deeply into a core dimension of the theory—learning architecture.

### *The Learning Architecture*

Learning cannot be designed directly. As any teacher knows, the most finely crafted lesson can still flop, and no process or product guarantees that one’s students will learn. Although designing learning is not possible, designing *for* learning is. This is to say that certain processes and products facilitate learning more than others. The metaphor of a learning architecture captures



this point (Wenger, 1998). As architecture typically signifies the process and product of designing buildings, a learning architecture refers to the process and product of designing for learning.<sup>5</sup>

Wenger (1998) describes the learning architecture in four dualities. Dualities are not dichotomies that form ends of a spectrum. Moving toward one does not entail moving away from another. Instead, each element of a duality can be thought of as akin to the bass and treble controls on a stereo: Both can be raised or lowered independently of each other, but together they affect the sound through their balance and coordination.

First, learning within communities of practice involves interplay of participation and reification. Participation signifies individual action and one's interaction with others. Reifications are processes and products that facilitate participation. Thus, this duality holds that we learn through what we do (participation) and the structures that shape and accompany this (reifications). By way of example, consider a professional development workshop for math educators. Learning involves both participation (e.g., attending and actively engaging in the workshop) and reifications (e.g., the presentation material, the handouts, the workshop itself).

Second, learning emerges in response to design. This duality emphasizes that practices are at once stable (designed) and malleable (emergent). The resilience of design provides a structure that governs the community of practice to a certain degree, yet this design gives way to what unfolds. To continue with the example of the professional development workshop, the formal schedule (designed) might be adapted based on how it unfolds in practice (e.g., shifting the afternoon schedule based on issues that emerged in the morning). The designed/emergent duality juxtaposes intended and unintended dimensions of learning (e.g., at the professional development workshop, a participant was supposed to learn some techniques on teaching numeracy, but inadvertently also learned about a novel presentation tool that the facilitator happened to be using). Worth noting, features of this designed/emergent duality parallel the previous (reification/participation): That which is designed is reified, and that which emerges is participatory.

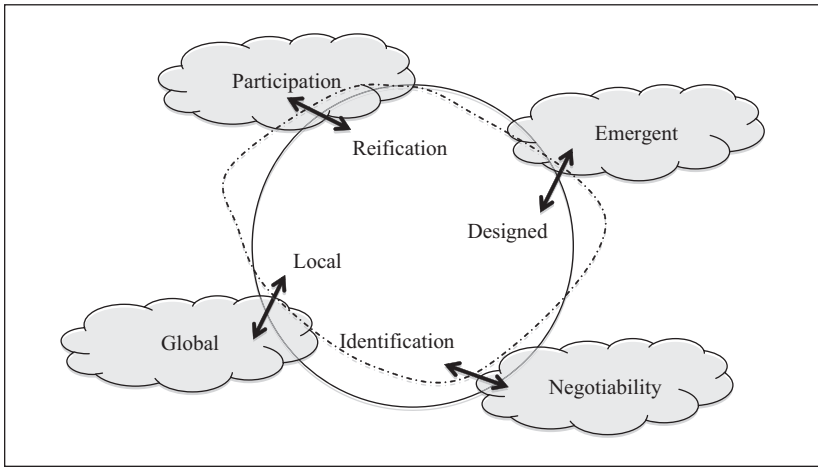
Third, learning within communities of practice involves both proximate (local) and distant (global) influences. This local/global duality holds that while we are engaged in our immediate contexts (e.g., school-based communities of practice), factors from beyond these contexts (e.g., from colleagues in neighboring schools, online communities, or noneducation sectors) deeply and directly affect our understandings. Returning to the example of the workshop, the discourse on improving instruction among math teachers from a school sitting together (local) is guided by a keynote speaker who has been

brought in for the sole purpose of leading the event (global). Although outside influences often serve as catalysts, the learning ultimately must emerge at the local level (e.g., the keynote speaker will not be around for the long haul, and the learning, thus, has to take root and grow within the local context).

Fourth, learning involves a duality of identification and negotiability. Wenger (1998) defines learning as that which “changes who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong, to negotiate meaning” (p. 226). Learning thus changes our *identities*: who we are, what we do, the communities to which we belong. Identity formation involves this duality: associations (identification) alongside our capacity to influence the meanings of these associations (negotiability). Again, consider the professional development workshop. All the participants *identify* as math educators. Yet participants must *negotiate* their particular roles and contexts for themselves. Participants who formerly identified primarily as teachers may be in the process of becoming math coaches. Their *identification* with this new role involves establishing new relationships, such as with teachers from other grades and with fellow coaches in other buildings. *Negotiability* signifies the degree to which they find they can control what it means to be “the math coach.” Is their primary function instructional? How do they move from primarily teaching students to primarily consulting with teachers? How do they balance competing pressures, such as those from their teacher colleagues, their principal, and their teachers union? In other words, their identification with the role of math coach is not static, but involves negotiating competing claims on what this role signifies.

The individual dimensions of these four dualities are portrayed in Figure 1 as distinct yet connected (positioned separately but linked via the arrows). Some elements of design are relatively stable: Reification, designed, local, and identification are located inside the circle. Others are in the process of becoming: Participation, emergent, global, and negotiability are located in the clouds outside the circle. The dashed line in Figure 1 weaves the dualities together to indicate their interconnections, suggesting that designing for learning entails considering each in relation to the others. The learning architecture weaves these dualities together. As design elements, these dimensions “define a ‘space’ of possible approaches to design problems, in which a given design is located by the way it addresses each dimension. . . . [T]he notion of a learning architecture makes learning concerns into issues of organizational design” (Wenger, 1998, pp. 236, 250).<sup>6</sup> Thus, design can either facilitate or inhibit learning.

The learning architecture provides a conceptual model for analyzing learning among members of communities of practice. I now apply this as an

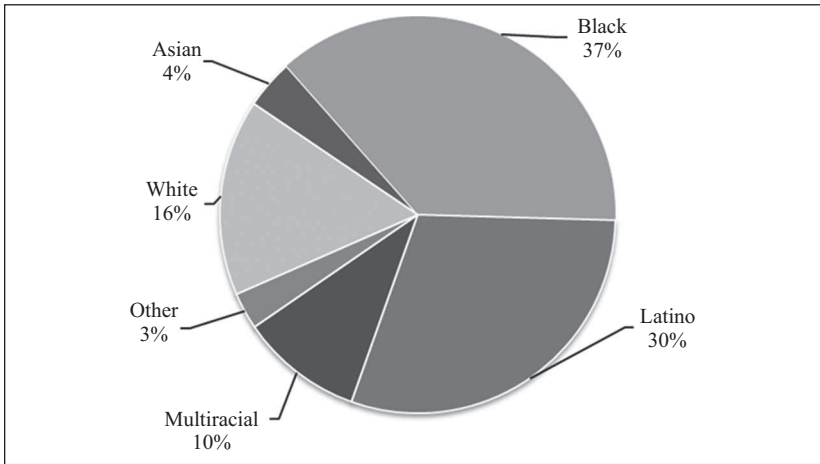


**Figure 1.** Design elements of a learning architecture  
Adapted from Wenger, 1999, p. 240

analytical tool to examine learning among educators in a school community purporting to pursue social justice.

## Research Method and Design

This case study focuses on St. Malachy (all names are pseudonyms), one of five schools included in an instrumental multicase study (Stake, 1995). More than half the student body in each school was identified as “traditionally marginalized” because they shared one or more of the following characteristics: qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, were people of color, were English language learners (ELL), or had identified special needs. Of the five schools, St. Malachy had the most heterogeneous student body across these dimensions of diversity. St. Malachy served 370 students (kindergarten to eighth grade) in an urban area in the Midwestern United States. This Catholic school was demographically diverse (Figure 2). Students of color and students of limited socioeconomic means were the majority. More than one in three students (36%) were identified as having limited proficiency in English, with Spanish being the primary language spoken by these bilingual students. Although the vast majority of students (97%) identified as Christian, fewer than half (47%) identified as Catholic. (By contrast, the



**Figure 2.** Racial and ethnic composition of St. Malachy

average population in schools in this region is 89% Catholic [McDonald & Schultz, 2009].) Although the student body was diverse across these dimensions, the research participants were relatively homogenous. Of the 21 research participants, 18 were White, and 17 were monolingual.

This article builds from a previous study of St. Malachy that examined how a private school community promoted inclusivity as it experienced accelerating degrees of diversity (Author, 2010). A central finding of that initial study was that “[r]ather than pursuing inclusivity in a direct path, educators in St. Malachy responded to their increasingly diverse student body in manners that were often nonlinear, serendipitous, and accidental” (Author, 2010, p. 591) and that individuals understood social justice in ways that both expanded and limited their practices in serving traditionally marginalized students. Here I extend this research by directly analyzing how St. Malachy educators learned to understand social justice and pursue inclusivity.

I gathered qualitative data (interviews, observations from site visits, archival documents) to create a holistic, empirical, interpretive, and empathetic understanding of this school community (Toma, 2006). I conducted 21 semistructured interviews (Kvale, 2001), each lasting, on average, an hour. Interview participants represented a variety of perspectives within the school community: six teachers, five administrators, five support staff, and five volunteers/board members. Their experience level ranged from

first-year rookies to veterans who had been working in the school from its inception 12 years earlier. Interviews were guided by a protocol focused on (a) the strategies for recruiting traditionally marginalized students, (b) the strategies for retaining these students, and (c) the reasons (resources, values, beliefs, and traditions) and conditions supporting these strategies. All interviews were transcribed and available for review by research participants. I conducted follow-up communication via email or phone with six of the research participants to request additional information and clarification.

Alongside these interviews I spent 30 hours in St. Malachy observing classrooms, assemblies, faculty meetings, and nonacademic periods (e.g., lunch, recess). Using an observation protocol, I focused on activities and artifacts regarding the inclusion and allocation of resources toward traditionally marginalized students. I captured these observations through field notes and analytic memos (Maxwell, 1998). To triangulate my observational and interview data, I gathered archival data in the form of (a) accounts of the school history, (b) demographic enrollment data on gender, race and ethnicity, home language, socioeconomic status, and disability, (c) student attendance and academic achievement data, (d) school mission and vision statements, and (e) school long-term and strategic planning.

I analyzed these data applying the learning architecture conceptual framework. I began by combing data for examples of events and processes that suggested educators were learning to improve educational opportunities for traditionally marginalized students. To better understand the complexity of this pursuit, my analysis focused on evidence regarding how research strategies to recruit and retain these students took root within the school. Using constant comparative processes (Glesne, 1999), I proceeded to code these data across the four dualities of the learning architecture (participation–reification, designed–emergent, local–global, and identification–negotiability). I applied these dualities of a learning architecture to describe the space within which St. Malachy educators seemed to be learning to enact the social justice aspirations that their school espoused.

## **Findings**

How do communities of practice affect learning among educators in St. Malachy, a school community aspiring to be socially just? This research question can be answered in two parts. I begin by applying the lens of communities of practice to the school as a whole. Following this, I employ a central aspect of this

lens—the learning architecture—to illuminate the space for learning among the educators in St. Malachy.

### *A Consolidated School Community*

St. Malachy was created in the early 1990s as a consolidation of five Catholic parish schools located within a few miles of one another. This geographic area was characterized by social and economic instability, including rising rates of abandoned businesses, deteriorating housing, and increased crime. A conglomeration of factors (e.g., aging parish populations, escalating educational costs, deteriorating facilities) left these parish schools struggling to survive. The formation of St. Malachy was a last-ditch effort to save a Catholic school presence within the area. As documentation from one of the parishes claimed, “This consolidation created a K-8 school better equipped to serve the diverse . . . community.”

Consolidation forced the founding schools to shift enrollment. Fr. Dan, a founding board member, observed, “The most significant change . . . was . . . .becom[ing] more a community school for children in the neighborhood, not necessarily for children who were members of the various parishes.” As he described, this was an explicit purpose of consolidation: “We knew in the neighborhood that we had plenty of kids to draw from. Demographically there are plenty of kids in the geographical neighborhood that our kids come from. . . . St. Malachy evolved organically into a community school.” At the time of this study, over a decade after the consolidation, St. Malachy appeared to have reached a level of stability and unity. Faculty meetings I observed were characterized by lively discourse in a collegial atmosphere. The climate seemed to emphasize teaching and learning, with classrooms typically reflecting order and hallways adorned with student work. Interactions I observed among educators—faculty, staff, and administrators—were universally cordial and professional, and often strikingly friendly and supportive.

A palpable example of educators’ learning in this consolidation involves the school’s common mission. Ms. Arnold, a novice teacher in the school, at first was caught off guard when asked about the mission. Not knowing quite what to say, she fumbled for words: “You know, it’s kind of embarrassing. I know it’s in the handbook and I’ve read it!” Yet when encouraged to simply paraphrase, she spoke easily: “The mission of the school, in my words, is to meet the needs of whatever child is presented to the school. Whatever kids show up, we’re going to try to teach.” Her words parallel more polished recitations by others. For instance, Ms. Kendell, the assistant principal, was clearly accustomed to discussing this:

In our mission we talk about this community being open to families in this community. We talk a great deal about diversity—and by that we mean ethnic, economic, [and] religious diversity. We’ve got a lot of different students going on here. Our mission is for each child—academically, socially physically, and spiritually—to have a safe and challenging environment for them.

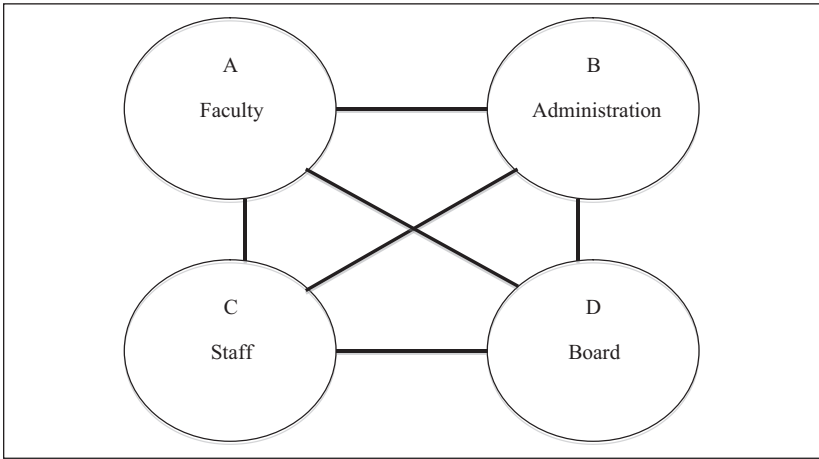
Educators in the school seemed to have learned to agree on a common mission. Even when they challenged or questioned aspects of the mission, educators expressed approval, as the reflections of Ms. Paige, another novice teacher at the school, reveal. She began by focusing on the welcoming atmosphere: “It’s about giving these kids structure, expectations, about embracing everybody that comes to us. Whether it’s culturally diverse or religiously diverse, we embrace everybody and we’re here to accept.” As she continued, however, she noted a tension between emphasizing the religious and academic identity in the mission:

I think our mission is a lot more academically centered than faith centered. We do have the language about Christian environment—but I think what the school right now is trying to prove is that we have academic standards and that our kids are excelling academically.

These reflections suggest educators in St. Malachy were learning to embrace a new mission to provide quality education, welcoming the diversity of students in the neighborhood. The mission reflects the school’s espoused commitment to social justice. It represents a shift from before consolidation, when the schools (generally) emphasized educating parish members and tended to be homogenous by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and home language, with little explicit attention to the population of the neighborhood per se.

*A constellation of communities of practice.* This apparent unity of St. Malachy can overshadow the web or “constellation” of communities of practice that operate within. Organizations comprise many communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Neither isolated islands nor amorphous entities lumped under one broad umbrella, communities of practice are connected to one another, sometimes tightly, sometimes loosely. When considering how learning among educators in St. Malachy, I focus on four: faculty, school administration, staff, and school board (see Figure 3).<sup>7</sup>

Attending to this constellation shifts the unit of analysis from a single entity to a web. Figure 3 provides a diagram of this network, with the



**Figure 3.** Constellation of communities of practice in St. Malachy

circles representing the four communities of practice included in this case study and the arrays indicating boundary spanning among these. Each research participant belongs to at least one of these communities of practice; some belong to several. For example, Ms. Paige is only a member of the faculty (Circle A), whereas Ms. Marks, the school principal, is part of the administration (Circle B) and also an ex officio board member (Circle D).

The metaphor of the constellation underscores the point that learning happens not only within communities of practice, but across them as well. Boundary spanning facilitates this. Sometimes the burden for boundary spanning falls on one individual, such as Ms. Marks. Since few other board members and administration members interact, she is the primary conduit between these two communities of practice. Other boundary spanning relationships are distributed. For instance, the administration (Circle B) includes the principal, assistant principal, dean of students, and business manager. Most of these individuals (save Mr. Mathy, the business manager) interact closely with the faculty (Circle A), linking these two communities of practice tightly. Observations showed considerable overlap in the daily routines of administrators and faculty members, ranging from conversations about individual students to coordination of school events to sharing in responsibilities (e.g., an administrator stepping in to substitute for a teacher).

Individuals cross boundaries of communities of practice with varying levels of comfort. For example, Ms. Lopez, a school secretary, previously



worked in other positions. In the communities of practice I carve, she would be primarily situated as a staff member (Circle C). Yet because of her outgoing personality, her deep tacit knowledge of intricacies of individual students and their families, her history in the school, and her bilingualism, Ms. Lopez interacts with the administration (Circle B) and faculty (Circle A) with an ease not enjoyed by other staff members (such as cafeteria workers).

As these examples suggest, the scope of boundary spanning relationships within the constellation of communities of practice is affected by the nature of the position (e.g., secretary vs. cafeteria worker, principal vs. business manager). In addition, personal identities influenced these patterns. Some teachers operated in more closely confined communities of practice because of disposition, not position. Take teachers Ms. Arnold and Ms. Braun. Ms. Arnold was a first year teacher, whereas Ms. Braun was a veteran who had been at St. Malachy from inception and previously taught at one of the founding schools. I expected that Ms. Braun would be a boundary spanner across various communities of practice whereas Ms. Arnold would be fairly isolated. As it turned out, however, neither one interacted much with the administration (Circle B) or board (Circle D).

*Learning a common mission within and across the constellation.* Some educators in St. Malachy operate primarily in a single, discrete community of practice with a relatively closed web of relationships, whereas others cross boundaries readily, interacting to greater or lesser degrees in several communities of practice. This boundary spanning promotes learning within and across the constellation. Clearly individuals from different communities of practice held a common understanding of the overarching joint enterprise of the school. As the quotes above indicate, Ms. Kendell (an administrator who was used to talking about the mission) and Ms. Arnold (a faculty member less accustomed to this discourse) share congruent understandings of this joint enterprise. Ms. Arnold's description that "the mission . . . is to meet the needs of whatever child is presented to the school" parallels Ms. Kendell's: "Our mission is for each child . . . to have a safe and challenging environment."

At the same time, individuals in St. Malachy learn to enact the mission within their particular communities of practice. The formal mission statement literally calls for developing the "spiritual, academic, social, physical, and personal integrity" of the students. People interpret these words subjectively and learn to apply them within particular contexts. Interviews and observations showed teachers' understanding of this mission influenced how they made practical decisions, such as adopting and implementing the discipline program. The joint enterprise of teachers involved tacit knowledge from

daily interactions with each other, students, and their families. They knew this joint enterprise experientially. By contrast, members of other communities of practice, such as the board, had different understandings. Interviews suggested that board members interpreted mission language in a more abstracted, policy-oriented manner. Their joint enterprise involved periodic meetings to make decisions on long-range plans (e.g., how to consolidate campuses and raise funds to finance this). By and large, they knew this joint enterprise vicariously, in an abstracted manner.

Describing the context of St. Malachy as a constellation of communities of practices highlights how learning by individual educators is situated. The common mission reflects a shared commitment to social justice—namely, by welcoming and effectively educating culturally and linguistically diverse students from the neighborhood. Yet individual educators learn to pursue this mission within and across a constellation of communities of practice. Thus, to promote this learning, school leaders must support this learning both within and across the constellation.

*Alternative constellations.* A final point about these communities of practice is that my grouping of faculty, administration, staff, and board members (refer back to Figure 3) is one of many possibilities. Indicators of communities of practice—namely, individuals who were mutually engaged in a joint enterprise and sharing a repertoire (refer back to Table 1)—drew my attention to these delineations. These are neither the only nor the “best” ones, and different communities of practice in alternative constellations exist. Some variations would be more finely grained groupings of the same members. For instance, subsets of the faculty were occasionally referenced (e.g., “the third to fifth grade team” of teachers). Other variations would configure new groupings altogether. Ms. Hanson, a veteran teacher, described her colleagues as old-timers and newcomers. “There are a corps of us who’ve been here. We’re really dug in. We’re planted here,” she explained. “We’re going to stay here as long as the school exists. . . . [We] have a bond that isn’t talked about—it’s just kind of there.” She contrasted this with the newcomers: “I think there are some newer [members] that bring an energy. . . . I don’t know how they feel about being here . . . .but I know [they are] real assets . . . .and they’re very good at what they do.” While clearly aligning herself as an old-timer, Ms. Hanson saw strength in the combination of the groups:

It’s exciting when you get in new teachers that are really good at working with the kids, that the kids really respect. But you also have a good core group of people that have been here and are committed to the place.

**Table 2.** Analysis of Learning Architecture in St. Malachy

Dualities of Learning Architecture	Examples of Learning Among Educators
I Participation Reification	Linguistic diversity Antiracism initiative
II Designed Emergent	Professional development Recruitment of families
III Local Global	Mission financing Welcoming school community
IV Identification	Enrollment of traditionally marginalized students

Ms. Hanson's carving of old-timers and newcomers might constitute two communities of practice to the degree that these groups are mutually engaged in a joint enterprise and employ a shared repertoire. Each of her groupings could include not only teachers but also select members of the staff, administration, and board (as well as other individuals altogether, such as alumni).

Considering alternate constellations underscores how the conceptual framework of communities of practice can work as an analytic tool. Boundaries of particular communities of practice are subjective and fluid, not objective and fixed. School leaders can promote learning among educators by considering how different communities of practice web together within larger institutions (here, within St. Malachy) and by striving to design for learning within this constellation. It is to this design for learning that we now turn.

### *Examining the Learning Architecture*

Having shown how St. Malachy can be conceptualized as a constellation of communities of practice, I now turn to the learning architecture. I apply the four dualities of this architecture to describe the space in which educators learned to pursue the mission within these communities of practice. Table 2 presents an overview of this. Each duality (left column) is paired with select examples of how educators in St. Malachy learned to better serve traditionally marginalized students (right column). These do not provide an exhaustive inventory of the educators' learning but illustrate how each duality of the learning architecture can facilitate analysis of this learning.

***Duality I: Learning Involves Participation and Reification.*** Some aspects of the learning are captured in reification, such as forms, documents, tools, symbols, and myths. Other aspects are left to the actions and interactions of educators, the realm of participation. Two examples of this duality that speak

to the learning among educators to reduce educational inequities involve St. Malachy's response to the increasing level of linguistic diversity and the school's antiracism initiative (see Table 2, Row I).

*Linguistic diversity.* One way to see how both participation and reifications shape learning in different communities of practice (faculty, administration, staff) is to focus on a single dimension, such as the increase in linguistic diversity. A central individual connected to this is Ms. Lopez. Currently the school secretary, she started as a library assistant 6 years earlier. She recounted that the increase in linguistic diversity took the school by surprise:

When I was working in the library a parent came in [to the school office] to look into registering her child. And somebody made an announcement over the PA that we had a Spanish speaking family. "Does anybody in the school speak Spanish?" So then I got back to them and said, "I speak Spanish." So then the word was out! [laughing] Then that family registered. . . . Every year since we've had more and more Latinos in, because now they realize that there's somebody here who can assist them.

Ms. Lopez was positioned to facilitate learning through participation: serving as an ad hoc school translator. She served as a boundary spanner facilitating learning across multiple communities of practice. As a staff member, she initially responded to a need in admissions (an administrative realm) and soon found herself translating regularly for both teachers and administrators.

Educators throughout St. Malachy were initially unprepared to accommodate the families with limited English proficiency. Accordingly, nothing was reified; all the learning was participatory. Simply put, they learned to respond to these demands as they arose. The reflections of Ms. Willow, a teacher in the early elementary grades, speak to this participatory dimension of learning:

We're reacting to the changes and the environment and the situation. It's not necessarily negative because you can't always foresee those changes. For instance, [consider] the increase in the ELL learners. We . . . are responding to meet their needs rather than anticipating that they're coming and then getting the resources to them or going out and marketing our school to that population.

In time, reifications arose, the most obvious being positions and procedures. According to several interviews, the principal created a new position allowing Ms. Lopez to directly provide bilingual support to teachers, staff, and administrators. Ms. Lopez lobbied to formalize procedures for communicating

with these families: “I started pushing by saying that anything that goes home has to go home in both English and Spanish. . . . It took quite a few years for people to realize that everything had to go home in both languages.” Other procedures strengthened the accommodations, such as formalizing the role of volunteer translators at parent–teacher conferences (e.g., having them sign a statement of confidentiality). Over time, other positions were created or adapted as well, including another bilingual resource support staff member, a bilingual kindergarten teacher, and bilingual classroom assistants. For example, Ms. Willow described a new bilingual parent liaison:

He basically serves the Spanish-speaking community. So he’ll come in and work with the children, particularly the newly arriving kids. I’ve had kids come—one just two weeks ago—who don’t speak a word of English. Now he’s really swamped because he does a lot of our translating and a lot of calling parents. Plus he does tutoring. But he can’t really work with those kids every day consistently for a significant amount of time.

This unfolding and evolving practice of accommodating linguistically diverse families shows the interplay of participation and reification that foster learning. Some dimensions of this learning occur via reifications (i.e., positions and procedures), whereas other dimensions necessarily remained within the realm of participation (i.e., the actual interactions of educators with families and students).

Attending to the interplay of participation and reification allows school leaders to consider facilitators and barriers to educators’ learning. When the learning is too dependent on participation, it may need more reification to provide form. Ms. Willow’s description of the school “responding to meet [linguistically diverse students’] needs rather than anticipating that they’re coming” suggests this. The reifications that were created in St. Malachy create structure that conserves this learning, allowing it to “travel” across communities of practice, as when teachers, administrators, and staff members draw on the expertise of the newly hired bilingual resource specialist. Reifications, however, do not stand alone; they depend on the participation of individuals. For instance, just establishing the position of a bilingual resource specialist does not ensure changes in practice. Whether or not educators actually collaborate with her is the realm of participation. The learning, thus, occurs in the duality of participation and reification, both within and across communities of practice.

*Antiracism initiative.* A nascent antiracism initiative provides a second illustration of this participation–reification duality as it relates to educators in St. Malachy learning to craft a socially just school community. Ms. Marks, the principal, raised the issue of race when describing the identities of educators and students: “We are . . . mostly White, middle-class women teaching poor children of color. It’s obvious that race matters here in what we do.” As noted earlier, more than four in five students were of color, whereas more than four in five educators who participated in the study (including Ms. Marks) were White. Although this mismatch struck the principal as important, it was not as obvious to some of Ms. Marks’s colleagues. She described their reaction to the initial faculty workshop she scheduled on antiracism:

It was real interesting. Real interesting. The whole gamut, from, “You’ve got to be kidding, this is garbage, it’s not true, why are you trying to make me out to be the bad guy?” (Of course, that was the White people.) . . . Interestingly enough, every staff person of color came up to me and personally said thank you, which to me said we obviously need this. [They said] it was, “The best thing they’d ever been at, finally someone was talking about it, it’s about time.”

Ms. Marks saw the antiracism initiative as an example of how the school, as an organization, was adjusting to a shifting student population. The initial workshop provided faculty “an exposure to the concept of institutional racism.” The learning involved participation—the educators in the workshop—as well as reification—materials from the workshop. As an outgrowth of this workshop, some members of the school joined a task force (a new reification) and devoted a year to reflection and planning (a new form of participation). The task force included various constituents, from parents to teachers to board members to community members. It began with an extensive 30-hour training and resulted in a transformation team formally advocating for St. Malachy to “become an antiracist institution.”

Considering elements of both reification and participation is helpful for understanding the evolving antiracism initiative. The initial in-service resulted in a task force that created a position statement and a transformation team. Through these reifications, elements of learning could travel across the constellation of communities of practice, from teachers and staff to administrators to board members. At the same time, only through participation did members of these communities of practice give life to these reifications. The learning around antiracism is entwined both in reifications, such as the workshop addressing specific topics (e.g., “institutional racism”), as well as in the

participation of individuals responding to the workshop. The transformation team itself serves both as a reification and as vehicle facilitating participation across communities of practice (e.g., bringing together parents, teachers, board members, administrators, and community members). To push one step further, the transformation team may emerge as a new community of practice, playing an instrumental role in facilitating how the organization as a whole learns to grow antiracist.

Considering this participation–reification duality can also reveal missed opportunities for learning. By way of example, in an interview, the fifth grade teacher recounted a recent lesson in which students reflected on experiences of racism. They articulated cogent, compelling anecdotes, such as one student who shared a memory of a jarring encounter: “We just moved to a different neighborhood, and there was this little White girl who said that I shouldn’t be there because she thinks that since I’m Black, I shouldn’t live in a good neighborhood.” The teacher then incorporated students’ insights into a publication about how children view racism. This publication circulated within the broader Catholic community. Yet when I asked, colleagues in St. Malachy were unaware of either the lesson or the publication. Applying this duality, narrow participation (the class lesson involved only this fifth grade) and ineffective circulation of the reification (the publication) help explain why this learning spread neither within the most immediate community of practice (teachers) nor across the constellation of communities of practice (to administration, the board, and staff). This example of the antiracism initiative, like the previous one regarding linguistic diversity, shows how the participation–reification duality can illuminate design features affecting learning of educators.

***Duality II: Learning Is Designed and Emergent.*** A second dimension of the learning architecture is the designed–emergent duality. This holds that some components are structured by design and some practices emerge in response to these structures. When considering how educators in St. Malachy learn to better serve traditionally marginalized students, two salient examples of this duality are professional development and recruitment of Latino families (see Table 2, Row II).

***Professional development.*** In response to the increasing pluralism of the student body, most professional development efforts in St. Malachy sought to increase teachers’ efficacy educating culturally and linguistically diverse students. Ms. Kendell, the assistant principal, described the current priorities for professional development as “directed toward . . . discipline, ELL, and . . . differentiated instruction.” Ms. Arnold, a new teacher at St. Malachy, reflected on her experience of professional development support. Her initial comments

were positive: “I think that the school . . . does a good job of letting teachers go to workshops. I’m actually going to a workshop in December about literacy and it was no problem getting the OK to go to that.” She continued by describing ongoing dialogue with colleagues focused on current reforms: “We have two staff meetings a week, and every other week we trade between ELL issues at a staff meeting and the discipline program, so there’s always that dialogue happening.”

These reflections suggest congruence between the intended design and what emerged in practice. The literacy workshop Ms. Arnold referenced was focused on linguistically diverse students, for instance. She saw coordinated learning within her immediate community of practice of teachers (“there’s always that dialogue happening”). She also described receiving support from other communities of practice, noting at one point, “We have an academic dean who is also tracking the academic trends and programs.” To Ms. Arnold, the professional development she was receiving applied to her as an individual and connected her to colleagues.

These examples are designed elements of professional development. As she continued, however, Ms. Arnold noted impediments to her learning that emerged:

I think the issue that most teachers are facing is there’s not enough time in the day to teach all the curriculum available for students. . . . I think the biggest barrier is time rather than the availability of professional development. . . . To be able to sit with staff and hear what’s working and what’s not working is helpful. It’s also that things take time to learn how to work and learn how to do. It’s hard to have two staff meetings a week in the morning because—especially for primary—there’s so much prep work that needs to get done. Sometimes I feel like I’m running in right before the kids do. And there’s so much work to be done here—I mean I think this could be a 24-7 job if I let it be.

Ms. Arnold’s musings point to a tension between the designed and emergent aspects of professional learning. By design, the professional development focused on key areas. Regular meetings created space for teachers to engage in these areas. Yet as it *emerged* for Ms. Arnold, the design was both beneficial (i.e., it “is helpful”) and constraining (i.e., it leaves her rushed).

Ms. Paige, another relatively new teacher at the school, had a slightly different take, emphasizing a disconnect between how professional development was designed and how it actually emerged in practice:



I feel like there could be more support both academically and with discipline. We talk a lot about it as a faculty, that these are things to work on the [discipline program], or differentiated instruction was a big push last year. But in the daily grind—unless I were to go to a teacher and say, “I’m trying to teach this what do you think I should do?” or “Can you help me generate a project related to this?”—unless I seek it out, there’s no regular communication about instruction, or how to make it exciting and innovative. There’s really no forum here for professional dialogue. And it’s kind of hard because I’m still at a stage in my career where I want to be better. I want to sit down and literally talk about how should I teach this lesson. How should I set up this project? I would have to seek that out. It doesn’t happen naturally here.

Ms. Paige experienced professional learning as designed to focus on key areas. In her experience, however, what emerged from this design was limited in effect because it emphasized vicarious engagement (i.e., “we talk a lot about it”) at the expense of tangible analysis of practice (i.e., “I want to be better”). What emerged did not, to Ms. Paige, enact the design promoting professional discourse. As she puts it, this does not “happen naturally.” Observations from a faculty meeting in which student work was discussed support the concerns expressed by these two teachers. Although some time was spent considering examples of student work in small groups, the reflections appeared rushed and superficial.

In St. Malachy, the *design features* of professional development—scheduling time for staff meetings focused on meeting the needs of linguistically diverse students, for instance, or creating access to outside professional development opportunities to support differentiating instruction—intend to facilitate learning by fostering a common focus on practice. What *emerges* in practice, however, unevenly fulfills these intentions. A compressed time frame (for Ms. Arnold) or isolation (for Ms. Paige) constrains the practical implementation. Considering this designed–emergent duality can help school leaders understand how learning is unfolding among educators. The point is not whether learning is happening; this is assumed to be the case. Rather, this duality draws attention to the congruence between what learning is intended and what is actually unfolding in practice.

*Recruitment of Latino families.* A second example from St. Malachy illustrating this duality is the learning involved in recruiting Latino families. Ms. Lyle, who had served in administrative capacities for 4 years and was currently the dean of students, described some designed recruitment efforts: “We have

some staff members that are bilingual and they would go to churches . . . or other times when churches might have a fair or something . . . and those staff members would speak about our school.” At the same time, Ms. Lyle discussed emergent recruitment strategies:

There is a strong—especially in the [Latino] population—a strong sense of community. So often referrals would be like, “My cousin is coming here,” or an aunt or uncle who has children here—a word of mouth kind of thing. So I guess that’s where I saw my role being very key, listening to those parents, then, and trying to help them get their questions answered if it was a word of mouth kind of referral.

Ms. Willow, teaching the early elementary grades, experienced the influx of these families firsthand, as the largest proportion of these students enters at this level. Her description of how the school changed to accommodate these students suggests a combination of designed and emergent elements:

I think it’s been more reactionary. . . . What has happened is that [the Latino] population has come to us, and now we’re responding to the population. And then, because our numbers have dropped, then we’re going out to market to them. But it’s still kind of reactionary.

The reflections of Ms. Willow (a teacher) and Ms. Lyle (an administrator) point to a cycle of designed and emergent aspects of learning. Initial responses to increases in student populations emerged in “reactionary” manners to a population that was coming to the school. Then, because of enrollment concerns, school personnel designed outreach in the form of direct recruitment: go to parish communities populated by Latinos and describe the benefits of coming to St. Malachy. These outreach efforts seemed designed to engage specific educators—particularly bilingual school personnel—less than to foster a common understanding and approach across communities of practice. Yet it was not this designed outreach that ended up being the most effective method. Instead, what emerged as the best recruitment tool was relying on word of mouth for initial referrals and then spending time responding to questions to help prospective families determine if the school would work for their children.

These examples (the efforts at recruitment of Latino families and professional development) show how learning unfolds in the interplay of what is designed and what emerges. Awareness of this duality can help leaders develop a productive perspective. More than simply remembering that even

the best laid plans play out unpredictably, leaders can anticipate and explicitly attend to the tension between the designed and emergent, recognizing it as part of the learning architecture. The struggle between maintaining fidelity to a design and deviating from it need not be seen as a dilemma to solve, but an inherent aspect of the learning process in which the leader must continually seek balance.

An important cautionary note is that regardless of design, what emerges holds sway. Just because the practice that emerges is divergent from the design does not mean that learning has not happened. Rather, the learning might simply be of a different type. For example, the lasting learning that can paradoxically come out of Ms. Paige's experience of professional development is that although the school pays lip service to collaboration, she really has to go it alone. This underscores how important it can be for school leaders to attend to the designed-emergent duality when considering learning among the educators in their school communities.

**Duality III: Learning Is Local and Global.** A third dimension of the learning architecture is the local-global balance. On one hand, all learning happens locally, within communities of practice, whereas on the other hand, this learning is invariably subject to broader (global) influences. Across the constellation of communities of practice within St. Malachy, evidence suggested that educators learned to serve new student populations with immediate colleagues. At the same time, this learning was consistently influenced by more distant entities. Two examples of this duality are financing the mission of the school and building relationships among students, families, and the community (see Table 2, Row III).

**Mission financing.** As described earlier, the mission of St. Malachy involved embracing culturally and linguistically diverse families, particularly those living in poverty. To finance this mission, the school needed to forgo the typical private school route of relying on tuition fees to cover expenses and instead raise considerable external funds. A founding board member, Fr. Dan, described efforts to enlist a broad pool of constituents who would financially support the school. One strategy was recruiting members to the board from beyond the immediate geographic community in which St. Malachy was situated: "The fact that we gained board members from the larger suburban communities who took a real interest in this new model of Catholic education in the core city, that certainly is a reason why we survive." The viability of the school depends on donations from these nontraditional constituents. Fr. Dan connects the record of strong student learning outcomes with attracting this support: "When our scores are 84-85% [advanced or proficient] in reading and math, that's close to what a lot of suburban Catholic schools do, and quite

a bit higher than a lot of core-city public schools are able to reach.” He explains that this record not only helps the school recruit families to enroll their children but also helps it attract donors: “When we go out to a foundation or to a family fund or to a parish . . . we can go to them and say, ‘Look, here’s the bang you’re getting for your buck.’”

This pursuit of financing its mission points to how local and global dimensions of learning interact. At the classroom level (local), teachers link their success to the resources from external (global) sources. By way of example, Ms. Braun, a veteran teacher, described great benefits to “quarterly meetings with specialist to apprise me of special needs of students and diagnosis and testing for things like autism, anxiety disorder. . . . And providing me with a folder of specific details on the child’s condition and suggested ways to assist them.” Providing this type of support to teachers depends on having access to personnel with diagnostic and instructional support expertise. Hence, success at the classroom level is enhanced by broader connections to resources; the local is augmented by the global.

Moving in the opposite direction, the global requires a local grounding. Board members striving to raise money for the school need to connect outsiders (global) to the school (local) level. For instance, Mr. Zehr was a board member who first became involved with the school not because of any direct connection but in response to an invitation from a friend on the board. His approach to helping engage others in the school reflects this trajectory from being an outsider to coming to adopt the school as his own:

Rather than try to make a short elevator speech about [St. Malachy], I will just drop in the phrase, “I was over at my school today,” and then stop. And that usually gets people’s attention. Here’s a 50-year-old guy [who] doesn’t have kids in school anymore. What do you mean, “Your school?” So that can prompt some discussion. And then I talk about . . . what’s going on over there. Another analogy I think is helpful. I think a lot of our inner city schools are the victims of “drive-by” incidents, meaning that everybody is driving by, nobody’s stopping. And that’s almost as bad as shooting in the windows. Because if you stop driving by and . . . you go look around you’ll find people there that are kind of like you, kids that are in need and can achieve.

Mr. Zehr situates global connections within a local context. He strives to recruit outsiders to become involved with St. Malachy, ultimately to donate financially, but also to become invested in the school more broadly. To engage individuals from external communities who are not naturally

connected to St. Malachy, he emphasizes the local level (e.g., referencing “my school” and discussing “what’s going on over there”). Hence, learning to resource the mission of the school involves interplay of both local and global influences.

*Welcoming school community.* Another dimension of learning to serve traditionally marginalized students is creating a welcoming school community. The local–global duality is helpful in understanding this dimension as well. Ms. Lyle, the dean of students, emphasizes building relationships with families. She reports a core concern from parents as being welcomed into the school: “Once they’re here, do they feel welcomed, for just who they are? Do they feel respected, and do their children feel respected?” To Ms. Lyle, strong relationships are important not only to recruiting families but also to working with the children once they arrive: “As I get to know the kids . . . I handle some things that are more family-related differently than some of the other tensions.” As dean, she recognizes that many behavior problems with origins from home and neighborhood that spill into the classrooms. Her relationships help her get at the root of problems. Learning to create a welcoming school community involves recognizing how communities are nested, the local (i.e., the playground and classroom) within the global (i.e., the broader contexts of students’ lives).

This learning is a distributed endeavor. For instance, through what the school calls “child study teams,” key members of different communities of practice meet to discuss the particular needs of an individual child. A child study team might include administrators bringing their knowledge from the family relationships, a couple of key teachers sharing insights from the classroom, and the counselor, Ms. Winesap, offering her perspective from working with the child (to the degree she can within the bounds of confidentiality). Child study team meetings are an example of how individuals in the school—and the school as an organization—establish processes and procedures that conserve and routinize the learning of the educators.

Influences come from both directions: the local and global. Ms. Winesap, whose role as school counselor has grown over the past few years from 2 days a week to 4, embodies this duality. She expands the types of services that St. Malachy is able to provide:

Families may or may not pursue [counseling] services for their kids outside of school . . . because of their schedule or their means or resources or insurance or something like that. There are many things that can get in the way, Maybe it’s also the convenience factor: they trust the school and it’s all kind of in one, instead of going somewhere else.

On one hand, Ms. Winesap is local: considered a staff member by colleagues in St. Malachy, present in the building day by day, meeting informally and formally with faculty, students, staff, and administrators. On another hand, she is global: hired via a partnership with an outside social service agency. She brings an external perspective, both from this agency and from the norms, ethics, and mores of the counseling field.

Another example of how the school learns to create a welcoming community is by engaging members of the broader community. Ms. Malloy is St. Malachy's coordinator of volunteers (an uncommon position, particularly in urban Catholic schools). Her part-time staff position was initially funded through a grant, but Ms. Malloy demonstrated such success in recruiting help from community members that the administration decided to make her position permanent after the grant expired. By design, the volunteer coordinator crosses boundaries of several communities of practice. She devotes considerable attention to teachers: "Part of my role is working with [teachers] and helping them learn to use volunteers most efficiently, get the most out of the assistance that they can get." The structural autonomy at the local level creates a hurdle she has to overcome: "A lot of the teachers are autonomous. It's their classroom and sometimes there's a little resistance to having someone take over a responsibility that's theirs. And so delegation is a big piece." Alongside working with teachers, identifying and training volunteers is another top priority:

We do some training on reading. . . . We've had some language learner training. . . . We've done some phonics training, offering some added tools so the volunteers are trained when they go in the classroom. Another big piece of my job when I'm interviewing volunteers, is finding out what their background is. We have a lot of retired teachers, and they come with skills they've honed for years. . . . And I look for bilingual volunteers for the language.

As volunteer coordinator, Ms. Malloy connects local and global aspects of learning. She bridges the classroom (local) needs with the knowledge and skills from the members of the broader (global) community. This is directly related to the school's pursuit of social justice, as volunteers' efforts primarily regard meeting the needs of traditionally marginalized students. One example of this was the success of eighth grade students who received tutoring assistance to prepare for a high-stakes standardized test. "We saw the pretest scores in the fall of last year were in the 40th percentile," Ms. Malloy began. "When the test came [back this spring], 82% passed! So it's been a huge

thing, that one-on-one attention.” Hence, the benefit of having a volunteer from the broader community accrues to the local context, such as within this classroom.

These two examples—financing the school mission and creating a welcoming school community—speak to the interconnection of learning at the local and global levels. School leaders can benefit from recognizing that all learning needs to be appropriated locally (e.g., within specific communities of practice) and at the same time is enhanced by global influences (e.g., across the constellation of communities of practice).

***Duality IV: Learning Involves Identification and Negotiability.*** Finally, the fourth duality of the learning architecture is identification and negotiability. Of the four dualities, this is the least intuitively understood. As described earlier, identification signifies how we associate ourselves. For example, as an educator in St. Malachy, I might identify in myriad ways: as an old-timer, a middle school teacher, and a member of the antiracism task force. Negotiability signifies how much we control the meanings of these experiences and reifications. Does my identification as an old-timer make me a curmudgeon or a valued expert? Does my identification as a middle school teacher mean that my colleagues from early elementary grades turn to me to draw on my content knowledge in math, or that they avoid me as disconnected and associated with the rowdy adolescents? Does my identification as a member of the antiracism task force make me an innovative teacher leader or a suck-up to the principal? Negotiability refers to the degree to which I determine how such questions are resolved. In this way, identification and negotiation work in concert: We balance the identities we claim with the meanings that these identities carry and our power to influence these meanings.

This duality of identification and negotiability points toward questions regarding how members of St. Malachy learn to embrace the mission of the school to enroll traditionally marginalized students (see Table 2, Row IV). On one hand, to what degree do educators identify with the core mission to serve traditionally marginalized students? On another, to what degree do educators shape what this mission means?

***Mission to serve traditionally marginalized students.*** Recall the formation of St. Malachy. As Ms. Hart, the principal, stated, “We changed from a consolidation of five parish schools . . . to a community school.” This represented a fundamental shift in mission from primarily enrolling parishioners who are White to nonparishioner neighborhood residents who are racially and ethnically diverse and represent a more socioeconomically marginalized population. Fr. Dan, one of the founding parish priests, described the racial dynamics

to this shift in membership: “Most of the parishioners of the parishes are White, and the number of children of color in the school rose. Across the board that’s been a phenomenon that organically happened.”

This process was adapting a new *identity*: we no longer identify as a parochial school serving parishioners who are relatively homogenous, but rather as a consolidated Catholic school serving a broader, more pluralistic, neighborhood community. The meaning of this shift in identity is not set in stone, but determined differently by various people. Some welcome the change, embracing it; others are begrudging. In other words, individuals *negotiate* the meaning of this shift in identity. Moreover, they do so not in isolation, but instead within particular communities of practice.

Take the board of trustees. Fr. Dan’s description reflects a perspective typical of how the board members negotiated the meaning of this mission to enroll traditionally marginalized students:

I think the Catholic Church has a history of being excellent at educating children. So [at St. Malachy] we’ve taken the traditional Catholic ability to educate and put it to work in the core city. And I think that’s a social justice outreach, absolutely, and I think it’s understood as such. . . . Sixty different churches . . . have children in [St. Malachy]. . . . Eight of those churches are Catholic. I think that’s a tremendous outreach. We’re reaching kids who are, as I said earlier, below the socio-economic level of the neighborhood in general. Those are precisely the kids that Catholic education reached when the immigrant population arrived in this country. . . . So it’s from that—if you want to call it “mission-oriented status,” that I think St. Malachy comes.

In other words, Fr. Dan makes sense of enrolling children on society’s margins as central to the identification of the school as Catholic. The identity of the school is associated historically with a sense of “social justice outreach.” Implied in Fr. Dan’s reflections is an element of control: “We’ve taken” this tradition, he claims, and now “we’re reaching” out to other children in our context. Thus, this meaning is not foisted on the school, but chosen. The centrality of serving traditionally marginalized children, thus, is something with which Fr. Dan identifies as well as something that he helps define.

He does not develop this understanding as an isolated individual, but as a board member, working within this community of practice. For instance, Mr. Zehr, a fellow board member, uses different language to emphasize the importance of this identity:



This could be a model for the nation. . . . [St. Malachy's] story, it needs to be told on a broader scale: How resources from concerned business people, parents, everybody, came together to build something that's never been done before that has really the core values of Catholic, Christian education extended and expanded to serve all members of the community. Because the old model . . . is Catholic schools are full of a bunch of little Catholic kids supported by a bunch of Catholics in parishes. But that isn't happening [here]. . . . This is very unusual.

Mr. Zehr negotiates the meaning of the school's mission and organization as nothing short of pioneering a potential new model for Catholic schooling. This expansive approach to the school of Mr. Zehr and Fr. Dan reflects their role as board members focused on issues of governance, policy, and strategic planning.

Within another community of practice, the administration, a related interpretation of the mission to enroll traditionally marginalized students emerges. The emphasis is more practical, however. The principal, Ms. Hart, sees a trajectory for schooling as a matter of course for contemporary Catholic schools: "I think we're the point of the wave . . . that's coming, what other [Catholic] school's are going to be experiencing in the next couple years. We're already there—in terms of changing population, and when the population changes the need changes." Ms. Hart pointed toward the racial and ethnic dimensions of diversity and the gradual process of shifting this identity:

There are no students left in the school who were part of the consolidation. That took nine years to go through, because how big the school is, being K-8. And frankly, my own personal position is that that's why—one of the big reasons why—our children of color has [*sic*] gone up. When we were first formed we had [one parish] on one end that was mostly students of color and two parishes that were mostly White—and we as White people love the idea of diversity as long as we remain the majority—and when we're not the majority anymore it's a lot more scary for us. I think part of that happened here.

Ms. Hart implies that some students and families resisted this shift to enroll a more racially diverse student body, and that this resistance dissipated in the school only as those averse individuals graduated. Her reflections show how what Catholic identify means can be contested as enrollment patterns shift.

Other administrators echo Ms. Hart, focusing on the practicalities of enrollment. For example, the business manager, Mr. Mathy, describes the

mission of the schools as “to provide . . . a quality education for the children who live in [this neighborhood].” He distinguishes this as a new way to think about what it means to be a Catholic school:

In my way of thinking about it, we’re a Catholic school in that we do that because that’s what we do as Catholics. We’re not a Catholic school because we have mass or we have crucifixes in the classrooms. Our Catholicity is in our outreach to children who are in need and who are looking for a safe place to receive an education. . . . I think there are many people who think more in a traditional Catholic school category. . . . Catholic schools have traditionally provided the service for the parish and the children of the parish first. And then if you wanted to pay a premium, the out of parish tuition, you could come and be a part of it too. But you’re going to have to pay extra to do that. . . . I think we’re more like a ministry of Catholic Charities. Catholic Charities doesn’t require you to be Catholic to come to the branch and receive a meal. You provide meals to everyone in need because you’re Catholic. To me it’s analogous to that.

Mr. Mathy’s perspective provides another perspective on the Catholic identity of the school and enrollment patterns. To him, “Catholicity is in our outreach” to traditionally marginalized students, regardless of their religious affiliation or nonaffiliation. Again, this identification is not foisted on the school but rather defined by it. To apply the terms of learning architecture, these administrators hold the power to *negotiate* the meaning of St. Malachy’s *identity*.

The duality of identification and negotiability provides a way of thinking about how and why individuals make sense of the claim that serving traditionally marginalized students is central to the mission of St. Malachy. Though not directly stated, their remarks hint at how identity and negotiability are experienced across a constellation of communities of practice (e.g., by these administrators and by the board members). Attending to this duality allows school leaders to consider (a) that learning shifts identities, (b) that what these shifts mean is contested (or *negotiated*), and (c) that individuals experience and make sense of these shifts within particular communities of practice.

In this section I have applied four dualities—participation–reification, designed–emergent, local–global, and identification–negotiability—to analyze learning among educators in St. Malachy. These dualities compose a learning architecture by pointing toward design features promoting learning.

The examples from St. Malachy suggest how learning within and across the constellation of communities of practice in a school is complex, yet discernable. These dualities draw attention to how educators in St. Malachy learn to respond to a population of students that is increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. In the final section of this article I discuss implications of this analysis for the field of socially just educational leadership.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Examining communities of practice, Wenger (1998) observes that learning cannot be designed directly, but rather can be “designed for.” This case study suggests a parallel: Socially just schooling cannot be designed per se. Rather, school leaders can *design for* such schooling by cultivating communities of practice as spaces of transformational learning. Examining learning among educators in this aspirant socially just school community, I found educators in St. Malachy learned to better serve traditionally marginalized students in constellations of communities of practice and that the dualities of a learning architecture describe the space of this learning. These findings show how the lens of the learning architecture can facilitate a nuanced understanding of the messy process of pursuing social justice. Two implications of these findings for school leaders involve interconnections within the learning architecture and the depths and edges of learning.

### *Interconnections*

The dualities of the learning architecture create an interconnected matrix by which school leaders can analyze design decisions. Although the dualities can be presented distinctly (as shown in Table 2), they overlap and interconnect (as shown in Figure 1). For example, the antiracism initiative in St. Malachy, which I used above to portray one duality (participation and reification), directly reflects the other three:

- **Designed–emergent:** The initial in-service of this initiative was *designed* to introduce the faculty as a whole to some seminal concepts, such as White privilege and institutional racism. Other features of this initiative, such as the planning task force, were also designed. The antiracism initiative engendered learning within communities of practice, such as among the faculty at the in-service or among the task force (which brought together representatives from various perspectives to form a new community of practice).

This learning was not designed, however, but instead *emerged* in response to the designed elements.

- Local–global: This initiative depended on ideas that were *global*, not local, such as knowledge about societal trends in racism and approaches to combating racism. To wit, an outside consultant facilitated the initial workshop with the faculty and guided the task force. For this to affect St. Malachy, however, learning had to occur *locally* (e.g., the formation of a transformation team could not be imposed as a forgone conclusion, but needed to emerge from within).
- Identification–negotiability: The antiracism initiative intended to lead educators to *identify* as antiracist. Yet individuals *negotiated* the meaning of this identity. This negotiation was affected by a range of factors, from their own racial and ethnic identity and experiences to their participation in the various aspects of the antiracism initiative.

When considering a specific design dimension, a school leader is well served by attending to the interconnections of all four dualities of the learning architecture. Understanding these interconnections can help educational leaders influence the direction of educators' learning. This is not to suggest a simple calculus, but instead an orientation. Table 3 shows aspects of such an orientation through questions (right column) that might promote strategically designing for socially just schooling. To apply these questions to an example from St. Malachy, consider the professional development efforts to increase teachers' efficacy in educating culturally and linguistically diverse students. The first two dualities on Table 3 could prompt leaders to consider certain structures of professional development (*reification*), such as staff meetings dedicated to reflecting on student work. Juxtapose what is *designed* about these meetings with what *emerges* in practice. Where is authentic *participation* in this learning evident? Do the processes and products (*reifications*) of the learning need to be tightened (e.g., formalize the types of student work teachers bring to the meetings)? What barriers constrain *participation*, and how might these be addressed?

Analogous strings of inquiry might be drawn from the third and fourth dualities of Table 3. For instance, the third (local–global) might prompt reflections about how the professional development efforts balance learning from expertise within the school with expertise from colleagues elsewhere (e.g., other schools, local institutes of higher education, research literature). The fourth (identification–negotiability) might encourage leaders to consider how teachers, as individuals and within communities of practice (e.g., the middle school faculty), identify with these professional development goals

**Table 3.** Applying the Learning Architecture

Dualities of Learning Architecture		Examples of Questions That Examine Design Features
I	Participation Reification	When should learning be captured in reifications, and when should it rely on participation?
II	Designed Emergent	What is the relation between designing structures promoting social justice and the actual emergence of social justice?
III	Local Global	How does learning social justice connect the communities of practice within the school to experiences and perspectives beyond?
IV	Identification Negotiability	How do designs for learning social justice invite educators in the school community to personally identify with these goals?

Source: Paraphrased from Wenger (1998).

and appropriate these meanings for themselves. In short, the learning architecture framework does not provide a laundry list of questions, but instead explicates ways to apply social learning theory to generate such questions.

Another application of this interconnectedness is that although some dimensions of the learning architecture are relatively stable, others are more processual (see Figure 1). As dualities, these dimensions of learning co-occur. This suggests that school leaders must at once attend to the dimensions of design that are relatively stable and to the dimensions that are in process, and that these complement one another. In short, the dualities of the learning architecture guide school leaders to analyze design elements promoting learning among educators.

### *Depth and Edges of Learning*

A second implication is that attending to the learning architecture can help school leaders apprehend the depths and edges of learning. This case explores how communities of practice affect educators learning to respond to a shifting population of students. One aspect of this learning focused on linguistically diverse students. In St. Malachy, educators learned to communicate more effectively with families by translating and expanding recruitment efforts. A key member catalyzing this learning was Ms. Lopez, a bilingual staff member with vital experiential knowledge. Boundary spanning to other communities of practice (administrators, teachers), Ms. Lopez helped

colleagues communicate with Spanish-speaking families. Subsequent developments, such as hiring bilingual aides and recruiting bilingual volunteers, further supported this goal of communication.

The learning architecture provides a way for school leaders to consider why particular types of learning occurred, and, critically, *why this was not inevitable*. This raises an essential point: Different (and arguably much richer) types of learning might have occurred. Educators in St. Malachy might have learned not to merely communicate with students and families who were perceived as having a deficit (viz., lacking native oral fluency in English) and instead to embrace students who come with an asset (viz., possessing native oral fluency in Spanish, positioning them as nascent bilinguals). Such learning might have more strongly supported the espoused mission of the school (to “provide students from diverse family, financial, and cultural backgrounds” with an education that develops their “spiritual, academic, social, physical, and personal integrity”).

To apply the language of the learning architecture, the school leaders might have *designed for* other types of learning. Other global influences might have promoted a different local design: Members of communities of practice within St. Malachy (teachers, administrators, staff) could have investigated schools with well-developed bilingual supports, or the larger system of Catholic schools in which St. Malachy was situated could have encouraged bilingual–bicultural educational approaches. The point is not that either of these scenarios would ensure that St. Malachy would enact more asset-oriented approaches to linguistically diverse families, but rather the importance of understanding the factors that influenced the depth and edges of the learning. This provides a more nuanced perspective than the previous analysis of St. Malachy that saw the pursuit of social justice to be “nonlinear, serendipitous, and accidental” (Author, 2010, p. 591). Instead, the learning architecture provides a framework for school leaders to discern how to intentionally design for the learning of educators in their school communities.

### *Design for Learning and the Pursuit of Socially Just Schooling*

The field of socially just educational leadership has emphasized descriptive and normative dimensions of social justice praxis, encouraging educational leaders to promote equity and describing programs and approaches for doing so. In this article I have departed from this focus by exploring the requisite learning beneath social justice praxis, arguing that the learning architecture provides a framework to *design for learning* social justice.

This suggests a shift in the level of analysis for the field of socially just educational leadership from the topical to the conceptual (Ogawa et al., 2000). Ogawa and colleagues (2000) have critiqued research in educational leadership as “fragmented on specific topics rather than coordinated around deeper, larger conceptual problems” (p. 353) and suggested that a fickle focus on timely topics has inhibited substantive growth in the field. They have asserted that a more fruitful path to advancing knowledge will come from scholarship that considers the “enduring conceptual issues or problems” (p. 352), of which particular topics are manifestations. An enduring conceptual problem in educational leadership is designing for learning social justice. Attending to this conceptual problem will facilitate addressing particular instances of inequity.

This has implications for scholarship, preparation, and practice in the field. Research can explore the connections between organizational learning and sociocultural learning theory, particularly within school communities that are making significant gains in reducing educational inequities. Empirical work is needed to promote our understanding of learning processes that occur within and among educators in school communities that are pursuing social justice. For instance, how do communities of practice that extend beyond schools scaffold particular practices within schools? How does learning that occurs in an external community of practice—such as a local “teachers for social justice” group that meets face to face or a virtual community with online and multimedia resources (e.g., the Teaching Diverse Students Initiative of Teaching Tolerance, at <http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/>)—differ from the learning that takes place within an internal community of practice, such as the English department?

Implications for research overlap with those for leadership preparation programs. For instance, how do preparation programs affect a preservice leader’s identity formation as a “social justice educator”? Do cohort models that support vibrant communities of practice promote this formation in more robust manners than noncohort models? Moreover, how would leadership preparation improve by more directly incorporating social theories of learning? Thus, this scholarship builds on literature calling for leadership preparation programs to deliberately prepare school administrators for social justice leadership (McKenzie et al., 2008). The implication is that social learning theory can be deliberately integrated into preparation coursework (e.g., organizational theory, the principalship, supervision of instruction) in ways that scaffold socially just educational leadership practices.

Most important, however, are the implications for practice. Here, the goal of “addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools” (Theoharis, 2007,

p. 223) is not speculative or normative, but applied. How do school leaders design for transformative learning within communities of practice, particularly in the pursuit of social justice? We belong to communities of practice via engagement, imagination, and alignment. Of paramount importance are opportunities for engagement within communities of practice, core locales of learning: "Our communities of practice . . . [are] resources for organizing our learning as well as contexts in which to manifest our learning through an identity of participation . . . identity and learning serve each other" (Wenger, 1998, p. 271). Fostering opportunities for educators to engage in communities of practice that are oriented toward social justice is a fundamental implication for practitioners. Moreover, leaders benefit from experiential knowledge of spanning boundaries across communities of practice (Honig, 2006).

In addition to learning directly through engagement, we also learn through the imagination and alignment that communities of practice foster. The work of imagination involves how our identities are formed and transformed, how we are orientation and reoriented. The work of alignment involves our allegiances, values, and principals. Communities of practice, in other words, create space for reimagining and realigning our work. These dimensions of learning are distinct from, but complementary to, the actual practices in which we engage. Thus, school leaders can foster opportunities for educators to reflect on new images of social justice education and align themselves with such visions. Designing for learning social justice, in the final analysis, intentionally addresses underlying processes of learning among educators that scaffold structural changes promoting socially just schooling.

In conclusion, promoting equity and educational opportunity in schools presumes a learning process of educators therein. An enduring conceptual problem in educational administration is designing for learning social justice. We are adept at identifying educational inequities and describing structural changes to ameliorate these inequities, but less clear about the processes of learning to bring about these changes. This study applies the conceptual framework of communities of practice, and in particular the learning architecture, to examine how individuals within St. Malachy learn to better serve traditionally marginalized students. Doing so, it illuminates how a school moves forward designing for learning social justice.

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1. Clearly, sociocultural theories of learning have implications for educational institutions. For instance, they contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how past learning can transfer in ways that prepares us for future learning (Bransford & Schwartz, 1998). Preconceptions can inhibit or enhance the learning process depending on the degree to which these are acknowledged and incorporated, and metacognitive approaches to instruction help people take control of their own learning by allowing them to define goals and monitor their progress (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).
2. The theory of communities of practice has been developed and critiqued extensively (e.g., Fuller, 2007; Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007). For the purposes of this article, I employ Wenger (1998), widely cited as the foundational work.
3. An important point here is that learning occurs within communities of practice regardless of the merit and morality of the content. One might learn bigotry and racism within a neo-Nazi hate group or discipline and compassion within a Buddhist meditation group. The theory describes how, not what, we learn.
4. As an aside, the theory of communities of practice is often misused in describing professional learning communities, ignoring a key point that Wenger (1998) makes: "Communities of practice . . . are not a new solution to existing problems . . . they are not . . . a new kind of organizational unity or pedagogical device to be implemented" (p. 228).
5. To make the metaphor an even tighter parallel, consider different subsets of the field of architecture. Residential architecture is concerned with design for living, whereas commercial architecture designs for working. Along the same vein, the learning architecture is focused on designs for learning.
6. These four dualities involve issues of meaning, time, space, and power (Wenger, 1998). Applied to the same example, the meaning of the professional development event unfolds via the interplay of participation and reification; the time is designed, but the event emerges within this design; the space in which people are engaged in the event is local, but affected by global influences; and power is played out in the identification of individuals and how they negotiate what these mean.

7. As I discuss below, my decision about where to draw the lines for these communities of practice is subjective but not arbitrary. Some communities of practice in the school (such as the child study teams) weave together faculty, administrators, and staff. Other constituents that are not included in my research (e.g., parents, caregivers, and students) belong to other communities of practice in the school.

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## Bio

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