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Rethinking the Politics of *Fit* and Educational Leadership

Autumn K. Tooms,[1] Catherine A. Lugg,[2] and Ira Bogotch[3]

Abstract

This theoretical analysis employs a poststructuralist lens to reveal the constructs behind the word *fit*, an oft used descriptor integral to the discourse of school hiring practices, personnel decisions, and politics. Although the term is a part of the everyday culture of school politics, it is rarely considered with any depth. Using the metaphor of a mechanical watch, the authors explain how two theories and a sociopolitical concept (identity theory, social constructionism, and hegemony) conflate the role and responsibilities of leadership with the frameworks of one's identity. Thus, fit is used to perpetuate hegemony and the social construction of what a school leader is. The authors cite empirical examples of how some leaders negotiate their fit and how some leaders are able to transcend the boundaries of tolerance to recreate the definition of "the best fit for the job." Finally, they outline the implications of the politics behind the word *fit*, along considerations for those who prepare school leaders, those who are serving as schools leaders, and those policy makers who govern school leaders.

Keywords

poststructuralism, fit, politics, administrative hiring practices

[1]Kent State University, Kent, OH
[2]Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
[3]Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL

Corresponding Author:
Autumn Tooms, Kent State University, 404 White Hall, Kent, OH 44242
Email: atooms@kent.edu

> You gave a solid interview for the assistant principal's position at our school. Your certifications are all in order, and you have wonderful references. You will make a fine administrator somewhere, just not here. In the eyes of the hiring panel, you just didn't fit. Think of it like this; interviewing and leading is like going to a bar. You have to play it a little, you have to be coy. You have to think beyond your qualifications. If you really want to be a meliorist in education, you have to think about building relationships, and how you as a candidate, fit the picture people have of what a leader is.
>
> Dr. Jared Cook, principal of Harper High School, 1993[1]

Dr. Cook, like many educational leaders, had a knack for weaving esoteric words into everyday language when explaining leadership. In this case, it was the word *meliorist*.[2] Autumn valued Dr. Cook's advice back in June 1993 because she was interviewing for administrative positions in her local school districts. What struck her then, as it still does now, is that the meanings and definitions of words are not always best revealed in a reference book such as a dictionary or thesaurus. It was not *meliorism* that puzzled her as much as it was the more commonly used term *fit*. What does this one syllable word of three letters mean?

For example, the phrase "you just didn't fit" failed to explain how Autumn could improve her chances of winning an administrative position. Furthermore, the word failed to provide any details as to why she was not selected. Who benefits from such feedback? Certainly not the candidate. Six months after the interview and subsequent meeting with Dr. Cook, Autumn offered the very same answers in a very similar interview format for the same administrative post, but this time in another school district. The result? She was declared to be *the best fit for the job* and was hired. Again, she asked, what was meant by the phrase "best *fit* for the job." The answers were always vague, yet the term was ever present.

What do educators mean when they declare a school leadership candidate a fit? In almost every recruitment, selection, and hiring decision, the "best fit" is one of many qualified candidates as determined by experiences and state certification. Likewise, the roles of school administrators across districts all have very similar job description indicators. Yet personnel decisions are made on the meanings that a candidate for one school and its surrounding community is the best fit, and for another setting not *a fit*. We wonder what the mystery is about this three letter word.[3] For educational leadership researchers, this vague, open-ended response should not be satisfactory.

We are not the first to ask such questions. Duke and Iwanicki (1992) described the word *fit* and noted that it was rooted in organizational sense making. They found that fit was best understood as perception or attribution *when all other qualifications are considered equal.* They further posited that the notion of fit referred to the leader's interactions with members of the school community and could be triangulated with school culture and community expectations of leadership for personnel decisions to be judged by perceived efficacy and desirability of a school leader. Although we acknowledge that there are multiple frameworks in the literature that allude to the process of fit from various lenses such as critical theory (G. Anderson, 1990; Apple, 2001; hooks, 1991; Scheurich & Imber, 1991), critical race theory (Larson, 1997; Scheurich & Imber, 1991), and feminist theory (Blount & Tallerico, 2004; Lakoff, 2004; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000), none, save for the Duke and Iwanicki piece, examine the use of the word *fit* and its contributions to the micro politics of schools. This theoretical analysis extends the discussion fit into the theoretical interactions of sense making as language, culture, identity, power, and politics.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to reveal the underlying dynamics behind the meanings, use, and politics of the word *fit.* We hold that the meanings and implications embedded in the decision of who fits and who does not fit in school leadership are contingent on intersections of two theories and a sociopolitical concept listed below:

1. Social constructionism: A psychological theory that explains how we construct and perceive reality through our interactions with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966)
2. Identity theory: The examination of how we see ourselves and others based in psychology and sociology (Stryker & Burke, 2000)
3. Hegemony: A sociopolitical concept explaining how groups of people are subjugated by other groups of people through metamessages of what is normal (Gramsci, 1971)

The common use of the term *fit* has made these three elements invisible not only to those who are charged with making personnel decisions at the leadership level but also to candidates for school leadership positions. Such is the politics of fit.

In this discussion, we periodically refer to a visual metaphor of a mechanical watch to illustrate how the above three elements work in tandem to influence

our understandings of leadership in the context of personnel decisions. Our discussion is not about personnel functions but rather about how we define school leadership and school communities inside the dynamics of fit. By exposing these interactions, we hope to expand the awareness of school personnel through theoretical analyses—so that the use of the term *fit* can also lead to the hiring of those candidates who are not, on the surface, the best fit. By using a poststructuralist lens, we reveal, critique, and debate the meanings of *fit*, *not a fit*, and *misfit*. We begin this discussion with the "science" of fit and the many historical false steps that have been used to identify the best fit. Next, we introduce the metaphor of a mechanical "Fit Watch" to examine the three elements of fit and how they interact with each other. Our discussion then shifts to look at empirical examples found in the literature that illustrate fit, politics, and the work of school administrators. This is followed by a consideration of the politics of fit and the possibilities of transcendence. Our discussion concludes with implications and suggested considerations related to fit for leadership preparation programs, school district personnel, and state legislatures.

The "Science" of Fit

The mysterious and vague definitions of the term *fit* imply that we might discover a scientific explanation to justify how we understand fit. The logic of such a paradigm (like the logic of the science of educational leadership, political science, or even the science of business management) might explain why one individual fits an organization or society better whereas another does not fit. Historically, we can document how various "sciences" were used to match physical and character analysis with leadership capabilities, as research based actual practices in various occupational fields including education (see Blackford & Newcomb, 1922; Gould, 1981; Seldon, 1999; Tralle, 1925). For example, phrenology and craniometry (the study of skull and brain sizes and shapes) as indicators of various character traits and abilities) were taken quite seriously by respected scholars in the 19th century and early part of the 20th century.[4]

As "science," these practices proclaimed objectivity in the name of systematic data analysis, research methodologies, and scientific progress. Today, we understand them for what they really are: empty measures, stereotypes, and prejudices. What stands out from these "scientific" treatises was their dependency on measurement scales and data (Gould, 1981). The theories produced from these data collections were absolutely wrong. Worse yet, they were used to support personnel judgments based on fixed assumptions or prejudices rather than on professional conclusions of work quality and on-the-job learning. There is, of course, some validity in the ideas that physical and

mental attributes along with specific skills and dispositions contribute to a person's *fit* and subsequent successful performance on the job. But once such characteristics are associated with a job description, they become the legitimate measures or criteria of *fit.* As a result, other qualifications, attributes, dispositions—that is, the multidimensional aspects of an applicant's personhood—are rendered invisible, and instead personnel decisions are based on fixed reference (e.g., measures) points that have little or no validity (Blount, 1998, 2005; Gladwell, 2005). House (1998) underscored the horrific ramifications of depending on such "sciences" when he said,

> Although Craniometry seems ludicrous now, gross injustices were perpetrated on vast numbers of people. From this history, we might draw two conclusions: first, the precision of methods is no guarantee of impartiality. Second, the ideological climate of the age can seriously affect the conclusions reached. (p. 22)

Putting aside the failures of "science," personnel practices look to specific job characteristics that are most relevant to one's job performance. The question is whether such characteristics, criteria, and competencies predict one's job performance within the circumstances of the hiring process. In other words, just because a candidate looks, acts, and sounds like those on a hiring committee, does that mean that the candidate will be an effective leader? According to Duke and Iwanicki (1992), fit is more than a matter of behavioral competence. So then what should we make of the list of competencies for principals recommended by a National Association of Secondary School Principals? The list includes problem analysis, organizational ability, decisiveness, effective communication skills, and stress tolerance (Hessel & Holloway, 2002). Other lists state that school leaders must be able to articulate a vision and value set and transform and revitalize a school's climate and culture. All of these are communicated by candidates on letters of application, through references, and in interviews (M. E. Anderson, 1988) and are incorporated into the licensure processes (Hess, 2003). Whether stated as competencies, action verbs (e.g., collaborating, facilitating, etc.), or values, the mystery of *fit* is not adequately addressed in any of these discussions.

From Mystery to Commonsense to Critique

So far, we have cast a critical eye toward personnel decision making that relies on the science of fit. We do not contest the meanings of *fit* as much as we object to the limitations such meanings impose on our school leaders. We do not oppose the use of the term *fit*, but we do believe that we have to question

the commonsense discourses surrounding the term to overcome the limitations resulting from the politics of *fit* in public schools. Given its popularity in our profession, the meanings of fit are both more and less than the sum of its varied parts (see Foucault, 1983). To some extent, *fit* is both understood and yet indescribable to those who frequently invoke the word.

Some scholars have focused on sense making and leadership in terms of administrators' interpretations and reactions to various aspects of school culture (G. Anderson, 1990; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Ogawa & Malen, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1999; Stout, 1986). Others have examined how school leaders play a role in affirming cultural and social structures with communities (G. Anderson, 1990; Greenfield, 1977; Marshall & Kasten, 1994; Ortiz, 1992; Pillow, 2003; more generally Foucault, 1980; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). These efforts recognized the existence of both subtle and overt forms of control that shape the definitions of leadership and therefore who fits as a leader.

We have broadened Duke and Iwanicki's (1992) idea that *fit* is a notion of attributes and perceptions in two ways. First, by utilizing a poststructural stance to assume *that whatever fit* can best be understood as an amalgam of the many *contextual* intersections of role, identity, and relationships. We employ the term *poststructural* to "refer to the academic theorizing and critiques of discourse knowledge, truth, reality, rationality, and the subject of the last of the 20th century" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 37).

Second, we unpack Duke and Iwanicki's notion of *fit* by looking at it as a *symbolic cultural* icon of public school leadership. To unpack this assertion, we explore three critical elements (i.e., social constructionism, hegemony, and identity theory) that work in tandem to create perceptions of individuals, roles, and expectations. These elements underlie how the labels and politics of *fit* are used in practice. We believe that current organizational practices and the commonsense uses of the term *fit* have not only blurred the important distinctions among persons, roles, and communities but also hindered the capacity of public school officials to recruit, select, and support leaders who might better serve us in facilitating school reforms. Although the blurring of such frameworks has been previously noted in research dedicated to other related topics such as social justice, critical race theory, and feminist theory, it has not been identified in conjunction with the politics of school leadership, administrative hiring practices, and the use of the word *fit*. For example, Peshkin (1999) conceptualizes (albeit by a different name) *fit* within a small Illinois town as being a "friend":

> Consider who is eligible to occupy the social role of good neighbor, acquaintance, friend, best friend, or mate, and the professional roles of

> doctor, lawyer, teacher, mayor or school board member. Residents in this study have applied an ethnic criterion and a kind of means test to determine someone's eligibility. The test passed, the person could then be conceptualized as "friend." (p. 10)

Peshkin's work differs from this effort because it does not theoretically identify forces that determine how the "test" is constructed or passed, and his discussion is not solely focused on school leadership.

The Fit Watch: An Organizing Metaphor

We begin our arguments for rethinking *fit* with a metaphor of an old fashioned pocket watch operated by three synchronized gears. Although dated as a contemporary timepiece, the watch itself is a common object. We take for granted that it will serve as a reference point for our day-to-day interactions. Now, try to imagine the same watch with only one hand, an hour hand. It still keeps time in terms of hours, but we have to now use other ways of knowing to approximate the minutes and seconds based on something other than the slow movement of the hour hand. For example, we might rely on our environment as well as what we call our internal clock. Over time, we will get used to this watch and it will become normal to tell time with just this one hand. Our single-hand watch remains our everyday reference for telling time. We stop thinking in terms of minutes or seconds and just accept the hours as our common sense of reality. When the single hand points up, it is midday or midnight. There is no half past, quarter past, 5 minutes till. We become confident in our ability to tell time, and why not? The hour hand becomes good enough.

Why might this analogy be troubling to personnel decisions? Is it possible that the one-handed watch has become the meaning or criteria of fit, best fit, not a fit? Is it possible that even our multifaceted interviews, tests, paper reviews are all referenced to a single dimension of time (space), ignoring the myriad of other possibilities? Might our measures of fit in terms of leadership be one dimensional and render invisible the very dynamics we most need to improve schools? As researchers, we think it is important to raise such questions of reference points as criteria so that we can examine how leadership is socially constructed and has remained stagnant in part by our use of the term *fit*.

Figure 1 illustrates how social constructionism, hegemony, and identity serve as gears that move the hand around the face to points of reality. Like this watch, the gears or constructs are embedded underneath the surface of our relationships to each other and to reality. We ignore them because, like the

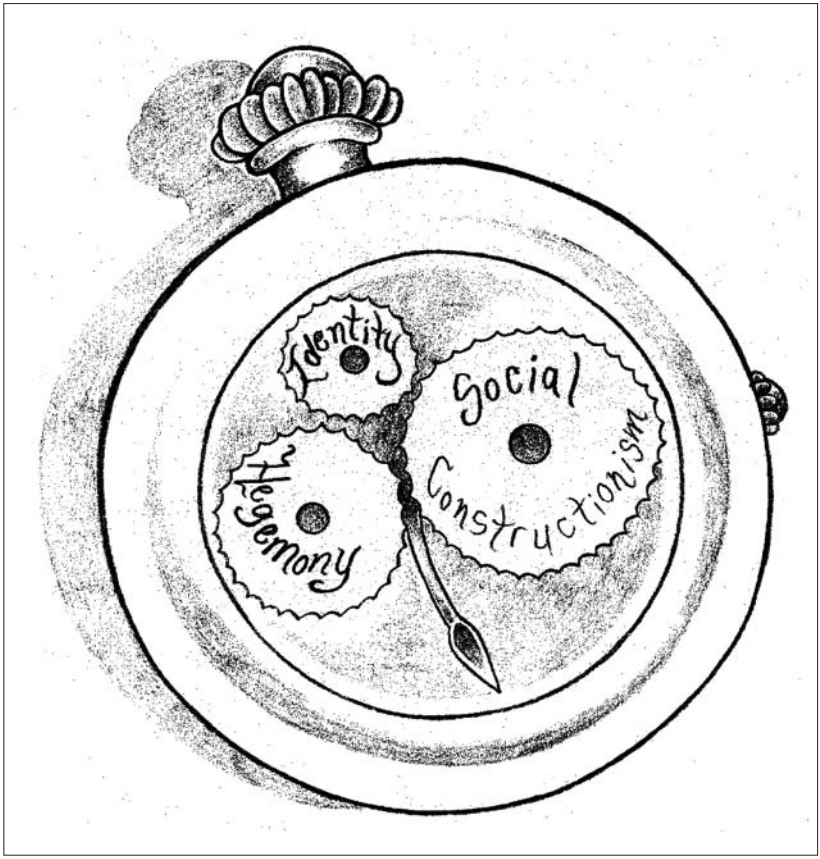

Figure 1. The Fit Watch

gears in the watch, they are inside, permanently embedded within our everyday interactions, and serve to move the hour hand, which metaphorically is used to gauge our realities.

When Duke and Iwanicki (1992) explained that *fit* was a notion of organizational sense making by a school community, they were in essence saying we have stagnant notions that everyone accepts and uses to understand realities of jobs, people, schools; hence public school leadership. Missing from the contextual and systemic analyses are the minutes and seconds that provide the deeper nuances that broaden the concepts of watch. Public school systems and various leadership practices opt for reductionist meanings of *fit*

(e.g., the 12 signified hours) versus the expanded notions of *fit* that are complex (in terms of minutes, seconds, and relativity). Through persistent and accepted practices, the internal dynamics of *fit* are rendered as invisible as the organic dynamics of people, jobs, and organizations. Before we discuss how social constructionism, hegemony, and identity all intersect to create notions of fit, we suggest that a poststructural framework is needed to understand how reality was first constructed and how we, as educational researchers, can transform that reality to different set of mechanics that drive other meanings of fit.

What Does Poststructuralism Have to Do With Fit?

By taking a poststructuralist perspective, we are asserting that fit requires an analysis of the intersections of multiple theories and concepts. Poststructuralism as an intellectual movement began in Paris and claims such thinkers as Foucault (1975), Derrida (1982), and Barthes (1968). The prefix *post* refers to the movement's rejection of structuralism, or the idea of an independent and superior signifier that asserts knowledge of absolute reality and truth (Capper, 1999; Cherryholmes, 1988; Foucault, 1983; Scheurich, 1997). One of the aims of poststructuralism is to deconstruct such traditional points of view regarding reality and truth. *In other words, poststructuralism views the realities of underlying structures as culturally conditioned, ongoing interpretations, filled with biases and glaring omissions.* At the heart of poststructuralism is the concern with deconstructing the power relationships embedded in the words, texts, and discourse practices that shape our social relationships and status. In this context, discourse and discursive practices include the different ways in which we integrate language with the communicative tools of nonlanguage such as symbols and nonverbal behavior in an effort to give meaning to the world (Gee, 1996). It is important for the reader to understand that our reliance on poststructuralism should not be confused as a reliance on the lenses of postmodernism. We mention this as a recognition of St. Pierre and Pillow's (2000, p. 16) assertion that postmodernism and poststructuralism are commonly conflated. They are also in agreement with Peters (1996), who noted this blurring of the epistemologies results in the "homogenization of the two terms among post structuralist thinkers" (p. 19). We argue that this theoretical analysis is poststructural because it is specifically dedicated to the power and political constraints embedded in words and their use in the day-to-day activities related to school leadership. Although both postmodernism and poststructuralism recognize the value of blending multiple perspectives to cast a critical lens, they are different, as postmodernism is a much broader

lens. And although this discussion does not utilize an explicitly feminist stance, there are some embedded feminist assumptions (see Butler, 1997; Lakoff, 2004; Sherman, 2005; Weedon, 1987).

Determining Who Fits: A Look Inside the Watch

When a school board member tells a reporter that "Principal Jinn is a great *fit* in Summit County Schools," the board member is creating a statement of opinion that is interpreted as fact (i.e., reality) that the principal is a "good" leader because he or she has behaved in a way that is *suitable for the position as defined by those who hired him.* Our analysis, however, goes below the surface to explain the dynamics leading to judgments of *fit.* We hold that three interrelated theories are needed to understand such judgments: social constructionism, identity theory, and hegemony. That is, social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999) explains how we create understandings of one another and of the world around us. Identity theory considers how human beings are understood by each other within multiple contexts. Hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) is a sociopolitical concept that explains how certain groups of people in society are constrained, oppressed, and subjugated by other groups of people without the use of violence and through the creation of cultural metamessages.

The intersections of hegemony, identity theory, and social construction are so embedded in our everyday practices that they become ordinary, taken for granted, and invisible, like the inside gears in a watch. As such the term *fit* becomes a commonsense shorthand used everyday to make sense of and justify personnel decisions by institutions and individuals themselves.

The Primary Gear: Social Constructionism

Often scholars in education will confuse this primary gear with another term used regularly in education, *social constructivism*. The latter, social constructivism, places the site of world construction within the mind of an individual. Social constructionism is a theory (Ratner, 1989) primarily concerned with relationships as the central site of the construction of reality (Gergen, 1999, p. 8).

The term *social constructionism* was first coined by the sociologists Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality*. In essence, they posited that reality is cocreated by humans, Furthermore, they recognized that one reality affects the creation of other realities (in simpler terms, "the world creates humans and humans create the

world"). According to Gergen (1999, p. 47), there are four contours that best define social constructionism:

1. The terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required nor demanded by "what there is"
2. Our modes of description, explanation, and representation are derived from relationships
3. Describing or otherwise representing reality reflexively fashions our future[5]
4. Reflection on our forms of understanding is vital to our future well-being

The four tenets above demonstrate the immense challenge found in sustaining valued traditions and yet creating new realities. This is the crux of educational leadership, and it begs us to consider the implications related to both large and everyday discourses that frame the realities associated with schooling. Constructionists believe that the generation of what is "good" comes from *within a tradition*, one that already has accepted constructions of what is real and good (Gergen, 1999, p. 50). The issue here is whether we frame this knowledge as a fixed thought and belief or as a tentative thought, a hypothesis, or a question (Bogotch & Taylor, 1993). For example, was a principal "good" because she supported the wishes of her staff and community and kept her school racially segregated (see Bogotch & Roy, 1997)? Social constructionism invites us to reconsider the nature of school leadership in a way that relentlessly considers the blinding potential of "commonsense" knowledge and the mundane routines of school. The tension between the socially constructed rules of leadership and a leader's decision to observe, subvert, or transcend these rules determines how we assess a leader's fit.

Social Constructionism, Fit, and the Intersections With School Leadership

Social constructionism is a key component of *fit* because it recognizes reality as a huge umbrella encompassing the social parameters of tolerance, roles, identities, and responsibilities. This umbrella is cocreated through discourse by individuals, groups of individuals, and the links between them. Those selecting new administrators from a pool of equally qualified candidates rely on constructed values of leadership that have little to do with skill set and more to do with selecting what is desirable along the lines of ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, and age (G. Anderson, 1990; Capper, 1999; Ortiz, 1982; Sherman,

2005). By the same token, those aspiring to the position work to reflect the organizational cultural norms that they perceive (G. Anderson, 1990; Hernandez, 2007; Valverde, 1980). Two quotes from the literature aptly illustrate this point:

> When it came to interviewing for the principal's job, I wasn't really worried about the questions; I was more concerned with the politics and how to demonstrate I was already a good fit. I prepared for my interview by attending a few governing board meetings, I looked at what the other women wore who were principals, and I bought the same kind of suits they had. In other districts the principals wore broomstick skirts. Not here though, it was suits and heels. I had my hair cut in the same newscaster bob that all the women had. I figured out that the principals all played golf together once a month, so I learned how to play golf. And when the interview came, I talked about the programs that I knew the other principals liked and used in their schools and how I played golf to relax. I did everything I could to show that I could be professional in exactly the way they were. I wanted to show that I was a leader just like them. (Tooms, 2006, p. 13)

Or consider how this Latino principal explained his role as leader in his school community:

> I was the first Latino to be hired in my district in an administrative position. Every time I turned around my face was on a billboard to show how diverse our district was. Every time something came up in the district that had to do with publicity, I was expected to leave my building and participate in the event to show how diverse we were. This was really annoying because being the "face" of diversity got in the way of my duties as principal. It was like being the spokesperson for diversity was part of my job description and more important than the other responsibilities I had. (Hernandez, 2007, p. 8)

Thus, the social construction of what a leader is can be based on skill sets as well as *visceral perceptions of what a leader looks and acts like* (Lugg, 2003). This argument, in turn, introduces the second dynamic: identity theory.

Identity Theory: The Second Gear That Influences Social Construction

Within the context of identity theory, sociologists and psychologists recognize three distinct usages of the term *identity* (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The

first is the use of identity in reference to a culture shared by people. Discussions written within this broad line of inquiry fall along the lines of critical race theory (hooks, 1991; Oderberg, 2007), Latino critical theory (Hernandez, 2007), feminist theory (Lakoff, 2004; Lather, 1991), and queer theory (Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Lugg, 2003). A second way to use the term is in reference to a common culture that connects participants (Snow & Oliver, 1995; Tajfel, 1982). For example, one can be identified as a "Cubs fan" or an "educator in the Leighton school district." Although we recognize the importance and value of the literature in both lines of inquiry, we have chosen to employ for this discussion the third usage of identity as identified by Stryker and Burke (2000). Below is an explanation of how this word is relevant to this discussion.

Identity Theory, Role, and Fit

Identity can be used as a reference to parts of a self that are composed of meanings attached to the roles people play in society (hooks, 1991; Laing, 1966; Stryker & Burke, 2000). These roles are fluid and exist on a continuum that is our life. For example, we can consider that a Jewish, American, female principal is also a mother, wife, member of the local gym, doctoral student, Democrat, football fan, and volunteer at the local soup kitchen. Her children primarily identify her as "mother" rather than "Democrat" or "student." The same can be said for her teachers who identify her as "principal." Why? Because we generally ignore the other contexts that create one's identity outside of the one with which we interact.

In terms of sociolinguistics, researchers note that how we explain, model, and understand who we are differs with different circumstances (Butler, 1997; Gee, 1996; Goffman, 1967; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Kroeger, 2003; Lakoff, 2004; Lather, 1991; Morkos, 2003; Stryker & Burke, 2000). For example, two men playing golf together early in the morning might use a different set of words to describe their frustration than they would in front of their children or wives. Or two principals having dinner together might not be as eager to order a bottle of wine if they are eating in a restaurant that was located in their school district.

Identity Theory, Fit, and the Intersections With School Leadership

When considering discourse and how it intersects with societal structures, there are words, phrases, or maxims that stir vivid impressions and a listener's most basic values. These bits of language are called *condensation symbols* by sociolinguists (Gee, 1999). We argue that within the realm of school leadership,

the word *fit* is a condensation symbol that recognizes our unconscious and conscious blurring of one's identity with ones role and responsibility. It is this blurring that affects how leadership is defined and evaluated in ways beyond formal assessment. We do not think about the context in which we understand another's identity with much depth. For example, we may assume that the principal who fulfills our expectations of leadership will also "fit" with our expectation of other aspects and contexts of identity. We are confident of this assumption because we like our principal and have decided he fits. Because he fits one set of our expectations regarding identity and role, we assume he meets others. Thus, our principal must be a "good" conservative Christian because that is what we are *because his presentation of self within the context of school is just like us.* Thus, we are shocked when we discover he had a drink at a seedy bar on a Saturday night, without his wife. We may then decide he is not the leader we thought, and we may not feel compelled to support him. We make judgments of his abilities as a leader through our constructs of what is acceptable. This is because we associate role so closely with context that we run the risk of assuming the performance a person exudes in one arena is the same in all others. In most cases, it is not. If this example is still muddy, consider Gary Hart's failed presidential campaign.

We argue that within the practical everydayness of school leadership, we know that candidates cannot be refused a position on the basis of some aspect of their identity (gender, race, sexual identity), and yet we know from critical examinations of hiring practices, they are (Blount & Tallerico, 2004; Shakeshaft, 1999; Tooms, 2007b). If we are going to alter personnel practices, then the lines between identity and role offer a far richer range of choices than merely the surface features presented at the interview table. Therefore, we must consider hegemony and its relationship to understandings of what a leader *is.*

Hegemony: The Third Gear

Because hiring committees, governing boards, and ultimately the community decide who fits as a leader, we need to consider what forces subtlety influence the definition of leader. Hegemony, the final gear in our watch, is just such a force. Hegemony explains that some groups or individuals maintain dominance over other groups of individuals in society through socially constructed persuasions and coercions (Gramsci, 1971). This dominance is achieved through convincing members of subordinated groups to accept, adopt, and internalize the dominant group's definition of what is *normal* (Kumashiro, 2004). This type of veiled oppression is achieved by using mechanisms such

as the mass media and mass schooling, which inculcate and reinforce the viewpoint and power of the dominant class (Apple, 2001; Derrida, 1982; Edelman, 1988; Foucault, 1975).

Those subjugated by hegemony are rarely aware of its presence because the messages of what is normal permeate the everyday consciousness of society through symbols, language, and other structures influenced by the dominant group. For example, during the early twenty-first century, the U.S. political Right brilliantly exploited hegemony's power by getting working-class Whites to rail against the unfairness of inheritance taxes because they reframed the issue as bereaved working people being hit with "death taxes." The vast majority of Americans did not pay inheritance taxes, only the very top tier in socioeconomic status did so. However, by reshaping "inheritance" as "death," the implication was everyone's families would be stuck paying this tax unless it was revoked—when the converse was true.

There are also modern illustrations of how hegemony affects identity and fit. For example, Lawrence Mungin, an African American Harvard-educated lawyer, stated that he understood the price of success as an attorney, despite his education, was a negation of his race. He said, "I wanted to show I was like white people; 'Don't be afraid. I am one of the good blacks'" (Barrett, 1999, p. 43). In terms of school leadership, hegemonic constructions serve to blur of the role of leader with understandings of what a leader looks and acts like. Blackmore (2002, pp. 56-62) explains that women in positions of school leadership choose to operate at work from one of several gender scripts of leadership. These include a "being strong" script, a "superwoman" script, and the "social male" script. Curry (2000) explained that hegemonic structures in the United States mandate that women deal with leadership norms within education by constructing a "leader persona" that requires the compartmentalization of certain features of themselves. The hegemonic compartmentalizations stretch across facets of identity that include gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual identity. A mundane example of how one's role as a school principal, one's identity, and hegemony all intersect is found in the reflections of Nancy, who identified herself as a closeted lesbian serving as a high school principal (Tooms, 2007b):

> I don't ever talk about my partner, to anyone. Pictures of trips we've taken aren't up in my own space because I can't risk people wondering why there is not a man in the picture. Or people will ask me about who's in the picture and then I'll have to lie or out myself. *And I can't do that; I could lose my job.* (p. 620)

Foucault (1975) extended the concept of hegemony when he argued how institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals serve as mechanisms that produce and reproduce the power structures of reality within a society. He explained how this is accomplished by coining the phrase *panoptic mechanism*.[6]

To understand how schools function as panoptic mechanisms for administrators, consider that an administrator is someone who both acts and is acted on. His or her roles and responsibilities do not stop once he or she leaves campus. Thus, for many who are not members of the social majority, leadership encompasses a consciousness of maintaining a leader persona while grocery shopping, attending church, or even enjoying an alcoholic beverage at a local bar or, if a member of the sexual minority, dining out with their life partner (Lugg, 2006; Tooms, 2007b). Here is how the administrative panopticon works: If you are always being watched but yet you do not know who is watching, you edit your own actions to follow the rules of those to whom you report—the school board. For example, consider the universal understanding that school administrators do not drink with their colleague in establishments that are located within their school districts. Why? Because they do not want the waitress (who brought them three martinis and heard them curse the events of their day) to report what she heard to her sister who might be the president of the elected school board. What makes public schools panopticons for administrators is that one is never fully aware of the relationships that members of one's community have with those who are charged with one's hire and supervision. So the sense that an administrator's day never ends is reinforced because of the rare moments of privacy and ever-present commitment to self-surveillance. Furthermore, there is a constant reinforcement that the school community is composed of both visible and invisible social networks that are free to make judgments. These in turn shape and reshape the social construction of how one fits as a leader. Ultimately, hegemony promotes self-surveillance for those who are public school administrators. Because fit is rooted in hegemony, which serves as a catalyst for self-surveillance, fit becomes another example of a panoptic structure that maintains the status quo in our educational systems, policies, and practices. It keeps those in power in and those who challenge power out of public school leadership.

Hegemony, Fit, and the Intersections of School Leadership

All schools (both public and private) not only inculcate members of society in terms of *how to be*; more importantly, they constrain members of society

by teaching and reinforcing *how not to be* (Foucault, 1975). This is accomplished through language games. To some, the word *game* may smack of cynicism. Our characterization is not flippant, rather it is based literally on Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1965, p. 71) theory of *language games*. He explained how reality is formed and reformed through the use of the language games that are a series or cycle of interactions that contain covert and overt rules. People use language games to understand these rules as well as honor, break, or change them. In school administration, words that play a part in power structures and language games include *professional*, *collaborative*, and *appropriate*. An example of a real language game involving fit can be found in Autumn's tenure as a principal. She regularly gave brief speeches to her school community at concerts or awards ceremonies. The small group of power holders in her community were monolingual English speakers, but the majority of community members were monolingual Spanish speakers. Previous practice in her school district had been to address a crowd in English first. Then, if translation was available, a Spanish version was offered by a Spanish speaker. Autumn chose to give a speech in Spanish first, followed by English. The monolingual English-speaking president of the school district governing board was outraged that Spanish was spoken first in an "American school." Thus, Autumn was counseled by her supervisor that she needed be more "professional" by speaking in English first.

Foucault (1975) used the word *game* to explain the ways in which societal institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons, affect individuals' interpretation and understanding of reality. These institutions depend on how the dominant group in a school community chooses to frame what is appropriate (i.e., "normal") in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and the professional identities of those employed in the public school system. Because school administrators serve at the whim of the school board, they must learn from their community what is and is not "normal" regarding their behavior as a leader. Hegemony forces the school administrator to constantly make decisions based on the struggle to determine what margins of tolerance can be challenged and what margins, if any, can be extended. For example, historically in the United States, public school administrators have been professionally socialized to embrace a heterosexist mind-set as well as an adhere to the gender-related stereotypes of manly men and womanly women (Blount, 1998, 2005; Lugg, 2003, 2006).

For contemporary administrators, dangerous and yet commonly used words instead of normal include *professional* and *appropriate*. School leaders ill prepared to recognize this dynamic may have difficulty in understanding the tensions found between their self-understanding of appropriate leadership

actions and the decisions and the interpretations of their superior organizational members.

Hegemony influences who fits and who does not fit because it contours the discussions around what it acceptable and unacceptable behavior in societies, organizations, schools, and even classrooms. It frames and contours the margins of tolerance (Charters, 1953) that society creates within school communities. Hegemony influences who works in schools and the kind of behavior deemed useful to gain and maintain the social capital granted in accordance with the socially constructed view of what is professional (Blount, 2005; Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Lugg, 2003; Tooms, 2007b). To reach back to the metaphor of the watch, consider that although all watches tell time, they do so imperfectly (our watch has just one hand) and with different styles. That is, some gears run continuously on batteries, others rely on motion, and some have to be wound by hand. Therefore, the internal, cultural nuances—unless made explicit—remain invisible. Unless the "invisible" differences are made known and also challenge the norms of acceptable professional behaviors, then hegemony reigns and triumphs. The single hand of the watch is deemed necessary and sufficient for recruiting, selecting, and hiring school leaders.

Examples From the Literature: Fit, Politics, and the Work of School Administrators

The community, which ultimately governs a school, sets the parameters of acceptance of school leadership through discursive interaction as to how an administrator *is to be and not to be* in terms of both role and identity. The national and international research in educational leadership has noted that school administrators seek to understand, obey, and perpetuate these rules because they are the necessary currency to obtain support and job security (G. Anderson, 1990; Barnard, 1938; Benham & Heck, 1998; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Calvert & Calvert, 1996; Hernandez, 2007; Lyman, Ashby, & Tripses, 2005; Nasaw, 1979; Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998; Oplatka, 2006; Stout, 1986; Waller, 1938). Ultimately, school leadership candidates blend multiple aspects of themselves into *social selves* that shift discursively to context, situation, and desire. When they present themselves in a particular context to a particular audience, the reality is that "we are not lying; we are choosing among the aspects of our identity that we recognize as our own" (Kroeger, 2003, p. 10).

This practice is broadly understood as part of being "politically savvy" and "professional." At the same time, the recruitment, selection, and hiring process influences the candidates to present only one dimension of *their* personhood,

thus suppressing other aspects of identity. Aside from the reality of substituting a part for the whole (i.e., synecdoche), the personnel processes run dangerously close to the practice of essentializing.[7] As Gergen (1999) explained, essentializing is the act of treating a social category (e.g., women, gay men, Chinese Americans) as standing for an essence or a set of intrinsic qualities or characteristics residing within a group of people. The concepts of racial, gender, religious, and sexual identity exemplify how one aspect of our humanity can be formed, transformed, destroyed, and reformed by the political, social, and economic forces in our culture (Butler, 1997; Capper, 1999; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1991). In many Anglo-centric cultures, school administrators have been historically essentialized as White, Protestant heterosexual, male (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Blount, 1998; Hargreaves, 2005; Lugg, 2003a, 2006; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). In educational leadership, this has reduced those persons who are not members of this dominant culture to the status of "other" or, more bluntly, someone *who does not fit* (Carlson, 1998; Hacking, 1999).

Fit and its relationship to identity politics and hegemony become even more apparent when we consider how people are selected for leadership positions in public school districts. Researchers concerned with school leadership in Australia (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007), Europe (Roth & Burbules, 2007), South Africa (Ahmed, Sayed, & Soudien, 2007), China, Korea, Pakistan, Egypt, Lebanon, India (Oplatka, 2006), and the United States (Hernandez, 2007; Lyman et al., 2005; Newton, 2006; Valverde, 1980; Young & Fox, 2002) have noted that screening decisions were influenced by factors such as the chronological age, gender, and ethnicity of candidates. Often, the selection criteria for a leadership position within an educational organization do not rest on degree or pedigree in a pool of equally qualified candidates (Blount & Tallerico, 2004; Brown-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Griffiths, 1963; Hernandez, 2007; Iannocone & Lutz, 1970; Newton, 2006; Ortiz, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1999; Tooms, 2006, 2007. Within such a pool of candidates, an applicant can be deemed as the wrong, or the best, fit because of some nuance in his or her identity or image (Turoczy, 1996; Valverde, 1980; Young & Fox, 2002).

Fit is not just about adhering to the norms established by a particular school organization. It is also about *reproducing* those norms because school leaders are to a great extent the managers, definers, and custodians of organizational, political, and social reality (G. Anderson, 1990; Hargreaves, 2005; Nasaw, 1979; Roth & Burbules, 2007; Stout, 1986; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Here, *fit* speaks to the leader's capacity to reproduce the community's norms (G. Anderson, 1990; Greenfield, 1977; Griffiths, 1963; Iannocone & Lutz, 1970; Lyman et al., 2005; Nasaw, 1979). When one is deemed to be the best "fit" for a position

in educational administration, the community has decided which person represents what they believe a school leader should look and behave like. Therefore, the traits of identity as well as role expectations vary depending on how a community defines what an acceptable educational leader *is.* This can play out in a myriad of circumstances from the kinds of service organizations school leaders join to which church they attend and how the school leader socializes with other community members.

To illustrate this point, consider this extended perspective offered by Dawn, one of the few female secondary principals in the Bahamas:

> Yes, it is possible to have a woman as head of a secondary school here. But the truth is men are picked for positions of school leadership at the secondary level. And if it is a private school we are talking about, you can bet those men are White. We may have gained independence from the British, but there is really three Bahamas. The one for tourists, the one for the expatriates who live here, and the one for the true black Bahamians. If a black Bahamian man and a black Bahamian woman applied for the same position as head of school, you can bet that the man will get it. They don't even need half the training that women might have. Why? Because people here see leading a school as meaning doing the discipline. And a big man is considered a much better leader, because people think he can discipline better because he is a man. And so people think the children will listen to them more. Never mind that it is the mothers' that run the show. . . . Few men choose this profession because it doesn't pay as well as tourism or banking. So a man is a rare prize in education to start with. So because he is seen as stronger, of course, he doesn't have to try so hard to get a job in the principal's chair. To the black Bahamian people here, leader equals male, big, and strong. Of course, the expatriates who are millionaires and send their children to posh schools five miles down the road from public schools in Nassau. They would not even consider a black Bahamian principal. To them, principal means White, and European; gender is not so important but color is in those schools. (Tooms, 2006)

Dawn's general description represents the large societal discourse that has been a part of school personnel practices since schools themselves were institutionalized within the fabric of a society. *Fit* has marginalized the other and elevated stereotypes as well as cultural norms over empirical research, even where such evidence has been documented. The following section explores the challenging dynamics of change with respect to notions of *fit.*

Researchers have found numerous instances in which applicants are screened out of school leadership positions based on the frameworks of their identity (Blount & Tallerico, 2004; Hernandez, 2007; Newton, 2006; Ortiz, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1999; Tooms, 2007; Valverde, 1980; Young & Fox, 2002). In light of these findings, we wonder what happens when a community's rules of fit directly conflict with the educational leader's expression of self: What about the *misfits?* How did they manage to transcend the hegemony related to identity frameworks and school leadership?

Stripping the Gears and Pushing the Boundaries: Misfits, Negotiating Identity, and Leadership

Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) seminal work on the tensions between one's identity and its social construction provide some answers to this question. He found that those who possessed a social difference that crippled their status in the social hierarchy—*or a stigma*—made efforts to *cover* (i.e., downplay) their seeming social "deformity." For example, many people who are blind chose to cover their stigmatized status and tried fit in by wearing sunglasses (Goffman, 1963). Yoshino (2005, 2006) drew on this observation and noted several other instances where people downplay or *cover* an aspect of their identity in their professional lives. A specific example of covering in terms of school leadership can be found in the voice of a female Latino principal who noted that she felt compelled to wear darker conservative clothes and pearl jewelry to cover her Latino identity whenever she attended a meeting at the office of her district's governing board (Hernandez, 2007).

Such empirical examples should not be confused with assimilation. *Fit,* as a condensation symbol, explains how the mythic concept of leader is blurred with competing notions of identity and role by society. This blurring of lines contours the margins of tolerance for selection and support of leaders in the large and day-to-day actions and behaviors of the administrator. The administrator needs to constantly read the community's spoken and unspoken rules involving *fit* and then adjust his or her everyday actions to maintain community support. In other words, the administrator has to reconfigure or even strip parts of the gears of his or her identity and presentation of self to gain and maintain the social capital necessary to lead (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Blase, 2005; Blount, 1998; Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Hernandez, 2007; Tooms, 2007). Researchers have identified examples of covering (to fit in) when they described how female administrators felt the need to adopt a "leader persona," which requires them to "compartmentalize certain features of themselves as a partner or parent" (Lyman et al., 2005, p. 22). Examples of covering to fit in (and therefore covering to lead) are also offered by those

studying critical race theory and school leadership (Hernandez, 2007; Ortiz, 1982) and sexual identity and school leadership (Blount, 2005; Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Lugg, 2003a; Tooms, 2007).

For the time being, we have to say that school leadership demands a different set of behaviors and actions for those whose identities are marginalized in some way by the communities they serve. These demands may be subtle or overt because many contours of our identity are invisible to those around us. Given this reality, we may not even be aware of the painstaking efforts some of our colleagues are making to fit and therefore lead our schools. An example of covering comes from Laurel, a district office administrator in the Midwestern United States who is also a closeted lesbian:

> I work in a wonderful inner city school district that serves a population that is 95% African American. In just about every office or classroom in this district there are pictures of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and that is great. While I am not black, I understand why those guys are up there. And yet, I don't have a single picture of me and my partner together up in my office, or a rainbow sticker, or a sticker supporting gay marriage rights. That would be too much for people to take and it could affect my life here. I can't really talk about my personal life, or wear my hair too short, because my co-workers would think I was too masculine looking to be working in a school. And if I wear a wedding band, I am going to have to deal with people asking me who gave it to me. I can't really win because it is so frustrating to try and figure out how far I can go with people about who I really am. If I share too much, I could lose my job. (Tooms, 2006, p. 33)

The concepts and tensions surrounding *fit* tell us about how individuals, whole communities, and societies construct the definition of being a school leader. Woven into this construction are biases and a margin of tolerance related to the many aspects of a person's identity. The lines between what one does for a living and how one chooses to lead one's life begin to blur as the responsibilities of school leadership extend far beyond the school building and school day. For some, ensuring a sense of fit can be as simple as joining a particular volunteer group or church or changing a hairstyle. For others, it may mean constantly editing their speech and behavior. Because school leaders are usually not protected by a labor union, they tend to serve at the pleasure of the community's school board. Therefore, in the eyes of the administrator, fit and the ability to perpetuate notions of fit facilitate not only job security (Iannocone & Lutz, 1975; Tooms, 2006) but also the shape of the culture of

an administrator's school (G. Anderson, 1990; Apple, 2001; Ball, 1987; Blount & Tallerico, 2004).

The Politics of Fit and the Possibilities of Transcendence: The Meliorist's Watch

Let us return to the opening example of how fit is used within school leadership discourses. From the perspective of the job itself, Autumn was deemed *not a fit* for one school and as *the best fit* for another. Neither the person nor the job description had changed from Time 1 to Time 2. In fact, the difference in time was not the most relevant issue at all, but rather the difference in schools in terms of contexts and cultures. Yet we could argue that given the very same variables, Autumn was competent for either job. However, in the first instance, she did not *fit,* for whatever reason—culture, race, gender, and so on.

The assumption made by those who select leaders is that without fit there would be a clash of values between the newly hired and those charged with supervising him or her. This would eventually result in dissatisfaction on both sides and a lessening of commitment between the organization and employee over time (G. Anderson, 1990; Sherman, 2005; Stout, 1986). The problem with this conclusion is its failure to recognize the moral purposes of education as growth and development, as articulated by scholars (Counts, 1932; Dewey, 1920). Equally troubling is the total disregard for the role leadership *can and should have* toward initiating needed changes in the people, structures, climate, and cultures of schools. Instead, schools (like many organizations) hire leaders dedicated to maintaining the stability of the organization on the basis of a static notion of *fit rather than reforming it* (Barnard, 1938; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Lumby & English, 2009; Sherman, 2005). Fit does not begin or end with recruitment, selection, hiring, or evaluation; rather, forces that drive "who fits" and "who does not fit" in terms of leadership are embedded in every aspect of society.

We have presented not only the limits of *fit* but also how *fit* is something much more than a notion casually used in our field to describe a gut feeling of leadership skill or organizational congruence. The ease and accessibility of this word blinds us from the interplay of social constructionism, identity theory, and hegemony that reveals the complexity of its meaning. Unless we embrace these dynamic qualities inherent in both the capacity of individuals to be school leaders and the purposes of schools in societies, we will continue to relive the predictable failures of school reforms (Sarason, 1990). Sarason (1990) documented these cultural regularities of behaviors

that have been intractable to change without subsequent changes in how power is redistributed.

Although fit can be a mechanism for maintaining school regularity as an abuse of power, it also has the potential to unleash growth, diversity, and change in schools and therefore society. This can be accomplished through expanding the parameters of how fit and thus leadership are defined. Schools have been operating under the ideology of a one best system with models of leadership that themselves have been reduced to stereotypes. As a result, the field of educational leaders embraces a language of fixed and knowable standards, all with measureable outcomes as opposed to the fluidity of creativity, imagination, and multiple identities (Bogotch, 2002; Lumby & English, 2009). So long as there is a standardized, one best system school ideology indelibly linked to a one best *fit* leader, then differences, change, and the possibilities of reforms will remain limited and predictable for failure.

Micheal Dyson (2008) addresses the potential locked within the gears of fit in his examination of the intersections of transcendence, translation, and transformation in terms of stereotypes and leadership. He noted there is a danger in our society as stereotypes of roles and people often evolve into archetypes. For example, Dyson asks us to imagine what the president of Claremont College looks like. What did we see? Was the president a male or female? What was his or her ethnicity? Would the picture in your head change if you were asked to speculate on the ethnicity and gender of the president of the College of the Bahamas? (The current president is an Anglo woman from Canada.)

Until November 4, 2008, many around the globe imagined the 44th the president of the United States as anything but an African American male with a Muslim name. Dyson (2008) would argue that Barack Obama was able to transcend the constructs of *fit* to win the presidency because he presented himself as someone looking to transform the limits of race by emphasizing his experiences that many late-generation baby boomers share. He sought to elevate and transform the discourse of presidential leadership to reach beyond any single dimension of identity and create a movement to socially reconstruct what a leader looks and sounds like.

His election represents a rare moment for the study of leadership. He conceptually, ethically, and politically troubled the meanings of *fit* held by our citizenry. However, we must also recognize that although President Obama indeed troubled and disrupted the status quo in American politics, it is also true that in many ways he reinforced the notion of fit as to who becomes the president. He is a male, he is a light-skinned African American, like most presidents he claims an Ivy League education (Columbia University and Harvard Law School), he is heterosexual, he favors Wall Street over Main Street, and his ancestry does not include slavery within the United States. We cannot, of course, easily translate

the Obama victory to public schools. But what he did was clearly demonstrate that the Fit Watch (represented in Figure 1) is not an accurate reflection of societal and political reality because it is unidimensional. It is a closed reference point that most of us take for granted. But its symmetry is anything but reflective of reality. Reality and the discourses that frame it are not symmetrical like the Fit Watch in Figure 1. Obama and his election team, like other meliorists, realized that opportunities for creating systemic change are dependent on understanding reality with a different reference point than a one-dimensional Fit Watch. In other words, to make change, we have to educate those around us that the reference points of what a leader *is* are fluid and open to constant change if we are courageous enough to stretch the gears that constitute fit. Thus, leaders who actually bring about change understand that the Fit Watch does not look like the image presented in Figure 1. Such leaders utilize a different framework of reference that we are calling a Meliorist's Watch (see Figure 2).

This watch has very similar gears to the Fit Watch, but they are more precise because the gears are fluid and seep into the various constructs of reality that constantly change with social and discursive interactions. The meliorist seeks such subtle melting points and seizes the opportunity within them to act, react, and stretch the margins of what is understood as leadership. To contextualize the idea of a fluid reality, consider again the victory of Barack Obama. Several factors may or may not have come into play: the sudden collapse of the U.S. financial sector, John McCain's surprising choice of a vice presidential running mate, and the pent-up anger of the middle class who have experienced serious economic declines since the 1970s (Lugg, 1999). These and many other shifting factors stretched the contexts and boundaries of who was voted as the best fit for the U.S. presidency in 2008. The same argument can be made for the contexts and histories of school systems. Those who are committed to reform as a tenet of leadership need to consciously use a Meliorist's Watch rather than passively referring to the Fit Watch. Leaders interested in change need to diligently pay attention to the power of their words, their actions, and their lack of actions as a tool to understand the dull potential of their role as leader. Who and what "fits" are not "gut" decisions that compose the culture of school communities. The margins of tolerance for fit are socially constructed and therefore (and as we see from the Meliorist's Watch) present opportunities for reform. The question is whether or not a leader is willing to seek and seize such opportunities.

Implications and Suggested Considerations

No matter how many times we look inside a watch, we still cannot understand how the gears push and pull the hands. So the mystery lives on, unless, of

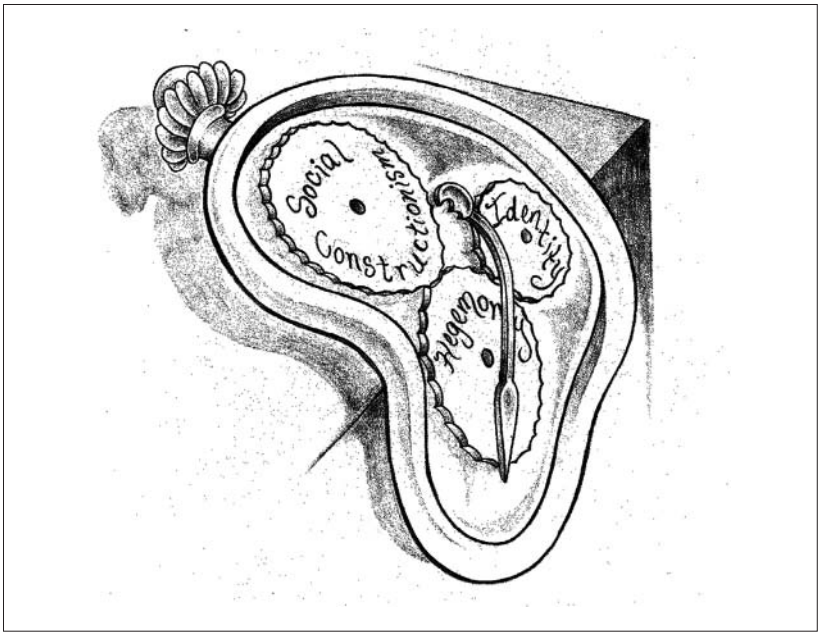

Figure 2. The Meliorist's Watch

course, we open the watch for ourselves and take it apart piece by piece. We have attempted to do just that by deconstructing the word *fit* in ways that show its ominous hegemonic power stretches across multiple frameworks of identity. We recognize there is a temptation for some to see fit as something that singularly speaks to racism, sexism, homophobia, or religious intolerance. We caution against this understanding, as fit is rooted in both hegemony and the varied sociopolitical contexts of a society. Fit traverses the aforementioned types of oppression and other unforeseen ones related to the multiple frameworks of identity. Fit is not just about racism or sexism. It is about how one group can decide and perpetuate whichever values (and therefore reality) they choose under the guise of crafting who best "fits" as a leader.

Too often, policy makers have demanded leadership candidates *fit* predefined professional roles (which are set by law and policy) as well as expected that they *fit* political and cultural roles, which are defined by social expectations and biases (Blount, 1998; Callahan, 1962; Nasaw, 1979; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Policy makers have historically assumed that local communities have only one center of political power—one that is White, male, and generally Protestant

and represents the business and professional classes (Blount, 1998; Callahan, 1962; Nasaw, 1979). Although the policy-making literature uses the term *community* when discussing educational leaders and their relation to "stuff outside of the school," a more accurate term that reflects the multiple dimensions of society would be "communities." If an individual's identity is unstable and multidimensional, this is especially true for 21st-century American communities (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). The United States is rapidly becoming a majority–minority country, not only racially and ethnically but also religiously. In fact, Protestants will soon become a religious minority for the first time in U.S. history (see Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). History has taught us not to offer a new science of fit or even a single theory, however contingent. Rather, we need to reveal the invisible mechanics of *fit* and understand how and why the politics of fit can both maintain the status quo and present schools with an opportunity for change. Essentially, we have a choice as those who conduct research and prepare public school leaders. We can continue to pretend that a Fit Watch that fails to capture the many dimensions of leadership and identity is accurate. We can even continue to pretend that fit is a harmless notion, similar to a gut feeling that selection committee members trust in these "democratic" processes. Or we can take the opportunity to create spaces for new understandings as to what leadership is based on, the recognition of embedded elements in our society that drive how we frame who is and is not leadership material. In an effort to advocate for such new understandings, we offer the following considerations and suggestions:

For those who prepare school leaders:

1. Addressing fit within the curriculum of leadership preparation allows candidates who are aspiring administrators to understand connections between school leadership as discussed in academe and school leadership as it is practiced in their place of employment.
2. Specific theoretical exercises grounded in understanding leadership through a critical eye include the following: How does fit shape the purpose of the school that students currently serve? What are the parameters of fit that students want to change through their leadership? What are the parameters of fit that students do not want to change? Why are these not inviting? What are the costs and benefits of identifying and addressing the parameters of fit? How does fit explain that leadership means different efforts for different people?

3. Empirical considerations of fit present an opportunity for researchers to extend the lines of inquiry as they relate to policy analysis, the purpose of schools in society, the micro politics of schools, and deeper theoretical explorations.
4. Do you know who fits and who does not in your department or program? What are the margins of tolerance for who fits in terms of faculty, curriculum development and implementation, and the candidate admissions process for your program?

For school leaders:

1. Do you know who fits and who does not on your leadership team? What are the margins of tolerance for who fits in terms of administrators, teachers, and students?
2. What messages do you and your staff send to students and the community about who fits and who does not?
3. What can (or will) you do to influence the boundaries of fit with the hiring committee you facilitate?
4. In terms of fit, do you see the role of school leader as meliorist? Why or why not?
5. What messages do you send in terms the politics of fit and the purpose of school in society?

For policy makers, including school board members, who govern school administrators:

1. What policy actions have encouraged the perpetuation of the status quo in the educational system? For example, if there were a policy that advocated for administrative certificate renewal based on participation in professional development that was conducted only by retired administrators, would this legislation allow the space for multiple considerations of school leadership for practitioners?
2. What policies are in place that ignore the multiple identities, and therefore needs, of students, families, teachers, and school leaders?
3. How are the policies above being addressed, amended, or revoked?
4. What policies are in place that honor and support such differences?

Examining fit has revealed that the selection and support of a school leader is not always an egalitarian process. Deconstructing the hidden gears of fit is only the first step. Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers need to decide

which second step to take: the one that consciously perpetuate who fits or the one that embraces meliorism as a deliberate method for reforming, transforming, and transcending leadership.

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Notes

1. Jared Cook and Harper High School are pseudonyms. Also, the word *candidate* is used in this discussion to refer to those who aspire to positions of educational leadership. For the sake of clarity, *candidate* is a category that also includes aspirants who may or may not be graduate students.
2. Meliorism is the belief that the improvement of society depends on human effort. Thus, a meliorist is one who strives to make improvements through one's actions.
3. It is through a lens of poststructuralism that we hope to demonstrate how *fit* and its constituent of identity needs to be contested from two perspectives: first, theoretically or epistemologically and, second, empirically. The former is addressed through our model of fit as a complex theory with both individual and institutional dynamics, the latter by what we call the politics of fit. Lumby and English (2009) argued persuasively, we think, that unitary constructs of self and identity have been institutionalized by leadership practices from hiring to performance without significant research to local empirical evidence to the contrary. Our poststructural lens contests the theories in practice and creates spaces for us to illustrate empirical alternatives—with implications for future research, policy, and practices.
4. Other "sciences" that looked at unidimensional facts as predictors of characteristics included craniometry (the scientific measurement of skulls), euthenics (the scientific improvement of the human species via changing the environment), and eugenics (the proposed improvement of the human species by encouraging or permitting reproduction of only those people with genetic characteristics judged desirable). It has been regarded with disfavor since the Nazi period in Germany.

5. To understand reflexivity, consider M. C. Escher's 1948 work titled *Drawing Hands.* This charcoal drawing depicts hands in an interdependent state of drawing each other. This kind of interdependency has the potential to blind members of a given social system because the discourses can reinforce a myopic view of reality and simultaneously close the door to new ways of considering *what is*.
6. This is in reference to the panopticon, a kind of prison designed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The panopticon allowed an observer to view all the prisoners without the prisoners being able to know if they were being watched or not. Consequently, the prisoners in a panopticon would learn to monitor their own behavior, just in case a guard might be looking.
7. Synecdoche is a figure of speech that refers to a part of something to represent the whole. For example, political news reporters in the United States will commonly use the term *the White House* when they are referring to the executive branch of government. Synecdoche also refers to using the whole of something to represent a part. For example, "use your head to figure this out" actually means use one part of your head, your brain.

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Bios

Autumn K. Tooms is currently an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Kent State University.

Catherine A. Lugg is currently an Associate Professor of Education at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

Ira Bogotch is a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Florida Atlantic University.