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Growing Bigger Selves for Social Justice

by Eleanor Drago-Severson and Jessica Blum-DeStefano on January 3, 2018

What does it take to build inclusive and growth-enhancing connections in today's complex and all-too-polarized world? What does it take to stand strongly for something that *really* matters, and at the same time remain open to alternatives and differing points of view? What do *you* think it takes to see into and influence the systems that shape our work as educators—and our lives and identities?

Educators and leaders across all levels are pressed by these vital, urgent questions that live within and between us, and by the uncertainties of the social and political landscape in the United States and around the globe. When we—as teachers and researchers of adult development—reflect on these challenges and questions, as well as the earnest yearning of so many educators who want to do and *be* more for the diverse students in our schools and classrooms, we return again and again to one simple and promising path forward: internal capacity building. We offer this with humility and care.

When we talk about building internal capacity in our teaching and writing—including our *Harvard Educational Review* article, "[The Self in Social Justice: A Developmental Lens on Race, Identity, and Transformation](#)"—we're talking about growing, collectively, the cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities each of us brings to our work and relationships. Importantly, research suggests that developing these capacities can help adults more effectively manage the complexities, challenges, and opportunities of contemporary leadership (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018; Kegan & Lahey, 2016). We think an internal, developmental lens also holds great promise for better understanding and supporting social justice-oriented educational practice. To be completely transparent, we do not position ourselves in any way as experts on race, gender,

sexual orientation, class, culture, or the intersections of these aspects of identity. That said, we *are* grateful to even more explicitly join the important and needed conversations in the field about how to better support and honor all kinds of diversity, and to share *one* lens that, when combined with others, may be helpful to all of us.

To make our stance even clearer, we posit that constructive-developmental theory (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018; Kegan, 1982, 1994) sheds a new and important spotlight on *why* social justice teaching and leadership can be so hard, and *how* we can help educators grow the internal capacity for authentic, equity-driven pedagogy and leadership. Because constructive-developmental theory illuminates four qualitatively different ways of making meaning—or knowing—in adulthood, it invites us to look deeper and more caringly into the diverse ways adults could be making sense of their experiences, responsibilities, identities, relationships, educational practices, and more.

For example, adults with an *instrumental* way of knowing tend to see things in concrete, dualistic terms, and have not yet developed the internal capacity to stand fully in another's shoes. Because of this, they often experience things as firmly right or wrong, and can struggle to look beyond their own needs and inherited worldviews. *Socializing* knowers, on the other hand, tend to be made up by the expectations, opinions, and judgments of valued others (e.g., supervisors, colleagues, friends, family members, and/or society at large), while adults with a *self-authoring* way of knowing have developed their own bench of judgment (in relation to others') and seek to demonstrate competency as *they* define it. Finally, *self-transforming* knowers orient to interconnection as essential for the mutual and continued renegotiation of the self, as they've come to see that they need others not to be complete, but to be *more* complete, and to continue to evolve. While each of these developmental stages has both strengths and limitations—and while they are in no way correlated with intelligence, kindness, or happiness—they *do* reflect the trajectory of growth in adulthood, and illuminate some of the less visible obstacles that can complicate social justice teaching and leading (as well as some promising strategies for helping educators stretch their practices and capacities).

More specifically, a developmental lens makes clear that effective social justice education isn't something adults can just *do*. They, like most of us, need *help* to meet these pressing demands. Fortunately, implicit in a developmental approach is the hopeful belief that adults at any stage *can* continue to grow when they benefit from the appropriate supports and challenges. We just need to know where to meet people. For instance, while some educators, particularly those with an instrumental orientation, may struggle to move beyond what Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014) described as “very limited and superficial notions” of culturally responsive and equity-oriented pedagogy (p. 77), helping these adults connect with and learn from students, families, and colleagues with different experiences can help them see there's no one “right” book, curriculum, or technique that will address the mounting challenges at our doorstep. Likewise, creating safe and intentional spaces to really engage with sensitive issues like race, equity, and identity—by developing, practicing, and honoring norms in teams, schools, and collaborative/supervisory relationships—can help more socializing knowers find and share their voices for the good of all. A developmental approach to inquiry and collaboration can also help self-authoring knowers let down the guard of their carefully-curated convictions when greater interconnection is called for—even in the face of ideas that

may at first feel diametrically opposing. This developmental capacity, we think—to thoughtfully consider alternatives rather than simply dig in our heels—may be especially important in this moment of history.

Ultimately, teaching, leading, and striving for social justice takes continued commitment *and* the internal capacity to see ever deeper into ourselves, each other, and the relationships and systems that connect us. While certainly not a silver bullet or the only worthwhile lens for promoting social justice, constructive-developmental theory *can* help us better recognize and address the aspects of our practice, thinking, and being that we'd still like to grow (as we all have these). It's also a lens that has been largely missing from the vital conversations about social justice teaching and leadership. Just as the last presidential election inspired new waves of activism, advocacy, and awareness by surfacing the *extent* of the deep and often hidden divisions within our country, learning more about the less-visible dimensions of our development can help us step forward in new and meaningful ways. That is our great hope for this work and for all of us.

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About the Author: **Eleanor Drago-Severson** is a Professor of Education Leadership and Adult Learning & Leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University. **Jessica Blum-DeStefano** teaches adult development and research methods at Bank Street College of Education and co-teaches with Drago-Severson in the Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College. They are the authors of "[The Self in Social Justice](#)" in the Winter 2017 issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, and *Tell Me So I Can Hear You: A Developmental Approach to Feedback for Educators* (Harvard Education Press, 2016).