

Voices for Change: Social Justice Leadership Practices

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the scant Canadian research regarding concrete social justice leadership practices. The critical, qualitative case study discussed examined the following question: “What strategies or practices do principals develop and engage in to do their social justice work in schools?” A description of the five practices that principals engage in against the injustice created by historical and social notions of privilege and power that marginalize students is provided in detail. A significant aspect of this article is that it gives voice to principals. Implications are made at the close of the article.

Keywords: Social Justice, Leadership Practices, Change

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Recommended Citation: Kowalchuk, D. (2019). Voices for change: Social justice leadership practices. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Special Issue#1 on Educational Leadership and Social Justice*, 3(1).

Voices for Change: Social Justice Leadership Practices

Introduction

All students deserve to be successful in school. Social justice and student achievement are defined and conceived of differently in the literature depending on the theoretical lens through which they are viewed. In the same way, arguments vary around what constitutes an attainable degree of social justice in public education and in schools, what is the role of social justice, and indeed, what is the purpose of schooling. Nevertheless, on the topic of educational leadership in general, most school leaders agree that social justice in public education is a worthwhile endeavour.

Over the past three decades, research has established the inextricable connection between educational leadership and student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Leithwood & Azah, 2014) and that school leadership is fundamental to supporting change in schools (Bell, Jones, & Johnson, 2002; Blackmore, 2002; Bogotch, 2002; Fullan, 1993; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Grogan, 2002a, 2002b; Lyman & Villani, 2002; Rapp, 2002; Riestler, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Solomon, 2002, cited in Theoharis, 2004, p. 2). This is especially the case in contexts where students are from varied racial, socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Connell, 1993; Foster, 1986; Freire, 1998; Furman, 2012; Furman & Shields, 2003; Griffiths, 2013; Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007; Portelli & Solomon, 2001; Ryan, 2006, 2012; Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2004, 2007, 2010). Bogotch (2002) goes as far as to say that social justice “cannot be separated from how educational theories and practices are being (re)defined and practiced by professionals within schools” (p. 2). And yet, many school leaders who have not examined the power their position affords them in student success do not see that they have great responsibility for the variations in the patterns of student success or failure.

Two authors within the critical discourse, Freire (1998) and Foster (1986), have particularly influenced the underpinnings of leadership for social justice. Freire (1998) terms his view of leadership as “critical pedagogy” in which social justice, like education, is a deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power. Foster’s (1989) four criteria for thinking about leadership comprise a working definition and conceptualization of educational leadership from a critical perspective, claiming it must involve critical, transformative, educative, and ethical practice. Theories of social justice leadership are discussed in the literature. These include, for example, transformative leadership (Shields, 2004, 2010), critical democratic leadership (Furman & Shields, 2003; McMahon & Portelli, 2004), inclusive leadership (Ryan, 2006, 2012; Griffiths, 2013), and social justice leadership (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2004, 2007, 2009). In spite of the ongoing research on educational leadership for social justice, one of the central criticisms Theoharis (2007) observes and references in the research of Blackmore (2002), Larson and Murtadha (2002), Lugg and Soho (2006), MacKinnon (2000), and Shields (2004) is that social justice leadership tends to be more theoretical than practical in nature with too few concrete examples.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the scant Canadian research regarding concrete social justice leadership practices. To this end, it reports on a critical, qualitative case study of 14 school leaders, principals, and vice-principals from Ontario, Canada. Ontario is Canada’s largest and most diverse province representing nearly one-third of the nation’s population and where almost four million people identify as members of a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2019). Each of the principals or vice-principals studied through interviews self-identified as having social justice at the centre of their

practice. Recruitment of participants focused on inclusion from the broad spectrum of local contexts within Ontario and included principals and vice-principals who work in English-speaking environments and who self-identify as racialized or non-racialized people as well as working in urban and rural, elementary and secondary, and public and Catholic jurisdictions.. The study examined the following question: “What strategies or practices do principals develop and engage in to do their social justice work in schools?” Along with specifically focusing on a Canadian context, a significant aspect of the study and this article is that it gives voice to school leaders who have examined and reflected on their leadership and can offer their insights into social justice leadership in schools. As a result, we can see the strategies or practices that school leaders develop and engage in against the injustices created by the historical and social notions of privilege and power in order to do their social justice work in their schools. Principals in the larger study that this article is based upon view social justice through a double lens—one of privilege and one of power:

They claim social justice in schools is anchored in the social and historical notions of privilege and power. Through a lens of privilege, principals define social justice as recognizing, acknowledging, and accepting difference that, together, leads to inclusion. Through a lens of power, they see social justice as the equitable distribution of power—in a robust sense—that leads to empowerment (Kowalchuk, 2017, p. 75).

Principal Burgess, for example, describes social justice leadership in the following way:

As educators build a climate where students are able to thrive academically, socially, morally, spiritually, depending on what the student wants where teachers are supporting students delivering an unbiased education and treating students with respect. (Burgess)

In the words of another principal, “It [social justice leadership] has to do with addressing exclusion and oppression” (Hadley). Grounded in these principals’ conceptions of social justice and social justice leadership, this article, through the voices of school leaders, describes the following five practices principals were found to engage in with students, staff and parents to enact social justice leadership:

1. Demonstrate social justice.
2. Challenge the status quo.
3. Exercise critical instructional leadership.
4. Shape and preserve respectful relationships.
5. Honour voice.

Theoretical Framework

The larger study from which this article draws its data is grounded in critical theory (see Freire, 1998). Freire argues in *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage* that neutrality in education does not exist and that education is “that specifically human act of intervening in the world” (p. 90). His body of work demonstrates that education can either reproduce or unmask the dominant ideology. This tradition influenced this work because critical theory raises our understanding of how and why the dominant perspective shapes, for example, political opinions, religious beliefs, gender roles, and racial self-image.

Freirian leadership is rooted in concepts of humility, faith, hope, and critical thinking. It is especially rooted in the concept of solidarity in which horizontal, rather than hierarchical relationships, and dialogue between the “oppressed and the oppressor”—those with power and those marginalized—are fundamental (Miller, Brown, & Hopson, 2011). Freire (1998) terms his view of leadership as “critical pedagogy.” It focuses on who has power, how it is negotiated, and how the structures in our society preserve the distribution of power that supports some members at the expense of others. This conception of education and leadership and can be seen in the works of Henry Giroux and others, including Michael Apple, Peter McLaren, bell hooks, Michelle Fine, Jean Anyon, Antonia Darber, Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg.

According to Foster (1986), “Administrators need critical theory so that they don’t reproduce bureaucratic ideals of culture based on standards of efficiency, accountability, and predictability,” where schools become “arenas for competitive accumulation of skills that serve only material gains” (p. 69). Lastly, a critical theoretical perspective underpins this work because it asks researchers to “view events in an historical perspective, to doubt the validity of received truth, and to continue our search for a more adequate solution to our problems” (Foster, 1986, p. 13).

Method

A critical, qualitative methodological design was chosen not only to explore and understand how principals interpret their experience but also to critique and challenge, “the underlying socioeconomic, political, and cultural causes of the problem” (Merriam, 2009, p. 12). The method of data collection consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews guided by flexibly worded questions. Responses were analyzed using a constant comparative data analysis process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), using both inductive and deductive components, to find recurring patterns that characterize the data. In this study, the Ontario principal and vice-principal was the unit of analysis.

Table 1: Profiles of Participants

Pseudo	Gender	Panel	Position	Location	Board	Race
Anderson	male	elementary	principal	urban	public	dominant
Burgess	female	secondary	VP	urban	Catholic	dominant
Collins	female	elementary	principal	urban	public	racialized
D’Andre	female	elementary	principal	rural	Catholic	dominant
Evans	male	secondary	principal	urban	public	dominant
Florence	female	secondary	VP	urban	public	dominant
Gray	male	elementary	principal	urban	public	dominant
Hadley	female	elementary	principal	urban	public	racialized
Idella	female	elementary	principal	urban	public	dominant
Jaabir	male	secondary	principal	urban	public	racialized
Kelly	female	elementary	principal	urban	Catholic	dominant
Lewis	female	secondary	principal	rural	public	dominant
Mackenzie	female	elementary	principal	urban	public	racialized
Norman	female	elementary	principal	urban	public	dominant

All names in this study are pseudonyms. Brief biographical sketches are outlined fully in the larger study (Kowalchuk, 2017).

Findings

For me, social justice is looking at all of those social historical pieces and looking at them from a very critical perspective and engaging in an opportunity to critically examine the way in which society's perspectives have been constructed and how to re-think that. (Mackenzie)

Since social justice is the foundation of social justice leadership and because conceptions of social justice are varied, complex, and contested (Marshall & Maricela, 2010), understanding how school leaders define social justice contextualizes the findings of this study. To reiterate, principals define social justice first through a lens of privilege that recognizes, acknowledges, and accepts difference that, together, leads to inclusion and then through a lens of power in which they see social justice as the equitable distribution of power that leads to empowerment.

Based on this conception, social justice leadership is “an active process focused on those who are marginalized and grounded in the principle of equity with a vision to inclusion” (Florence). Further, it is responsive to the injustices—the “exclusion and oppression” (Hadley) created by the social and historical notions of privilege and power within our schools.

Demonstrate Social Justice

I mean, you have to educate people about society and how society works and their role in it, but also to educate them about being human and how to treat people. (Principal Lewis).

In order to demonstrate or lead for social justice, the school leaders state that one must have “a clear vision of social justice” (Florence). At the centre of the social justice and equity that guide their practices is the welfare of the children in their schools. “I talk about the holistic focus of the school ..., holistic ..., mind and body ..., soul ..., the belief in himself or herself to overcome, the resilience to continue on” (Gray). With this vision, principals understand that their commitment is fundamental to enacting social justice in their schools. “My role is to really be the main support of social justice in a school; otherwise, it won't happen” (Gray).

To demonstrate social justice in their schools, the principals engage in dialogue and explain what they believe social justice to be, at every turn. “Be very explicit with what you believe in at every opportunity” (Gray). Then, to engage others in the vision, they model social justice and moral courage by challenging the status quo. “Promote that risk taking is part of social justice.... Otherwise people are not going to step up and believe in social justice because you're not modelling social justice as a leader” (Idella). Having a vision and a commitment to social justice involves all stakeholders. It involves hearing and listening to the very voices most marginalized in schools—the students. “When I'm establishing a shared vision, I look for those opportunities to have [marginalized students'] voices” (Collins).

Demonstrating social justice—modelling and being explicit in their belief in and commitment to social justice—involves demonstrating to members of the school community that difference is not always visible. The principals in this study first model that it is important to recognize difference by inviting members of the school community to tell their stories and, then, to really listen to the experiences that individuals and families bring to the education experience. “You have to really listen to people and then listen some more and then some more and then some more” (Idella). Attentive listening

enables principals to engage in the narratives to understand difference. “I have to separate my biases and put them to the side and listen to what this person is really saying” (Idella).

School leaders understand that they are the main support of social justice in their schools. At the same time, they acknowledge that they need to engage a team to enact social justice effectively. Principal Florence attests: “[leaders must] build a team of like-minded colleagues” (Florence). Principals, then, intentionally find or create opportunities to demonstrate—model and be explicit in their belief in and commitment to social justice—by building a shared vision and capacity within the school.

If you're going to lead with the social justice compass, you have to do that in everything that you can do. It is important for staff to see that leaders are not going to make excuses for socially unjust practices.
(Burgess)

However, school leaders sometimes find that demonstrating, modelling and being explicit about their vision is not enough to engage their staff in social justice. Sometimes engagement means challenging the *status quo*.

Challenge the Status Quo

If schools [are the] great equalizer, they must identify issues of equity and social justice. Social justice: if a school isn't doing that, it is simply replicating the status quo. (Gray)

Challenging the *status quo* means challenging the hierarchical power within the school. “It’s so unequally distributed in the school. Like the school itself, it holds a great amount of power. The teachers hold huge amounts of power and the principal—it’s incredible” (Idella). To build the capacity necessary for social justice in their schools, school leaders need to focus their energies on their staff. “My influence is over staff, not students; so, I devote my practices mainly to staff.... The awareness with the staff is the overwhelming key” (Gray). The first step in challenging the *status quo* is building an awareness of the privilege and power inherent in society. “It’s developing the awareness of staff of how the system works, because the vast majority of staff have passports, like me” (Gray). From this awareness, many teachers may find it difficult to challenge the vision of social justice because it is about what is right for the students. “I’m a firm believer that, when people see the inequity, the overwhelming mass majority will develop a passion and a strength to fight for these kids that wasn’t anywhere near [as] strong before” (Gray).

However, one obstacle to building the capacity for social justice with some staff is a deficit mindset. “A fixed mindset, I think that’s really an impediment to any kind of positive social justice outcome because they have kids pigeonholed and they don’t actually even recognize it in themselves” (D’Andre). School leaders agree that, under these circumstances, they must directly confront the attitudes and beliefs around privilege and power in the school, with staff, in order to model and be explicit about a vision of social justice. “Getting staff to buy into [a vision of social justice] is done by changing the mindsets” (Evans). Principal D’Andre concurs, “Whatever I can do as an administrator to challenge that belief....”

“After you build up some social justice advocates on staff, then have those [courageous] conversations” (Gray). Courageous conversations are those dealing with privilege, power and politics, through dialogue. Their goal is to change attitudes and beliefs through a respectful yet challenging approach that seeks to understand where the teachers’ values lie with respect to social justice by “having challenging conversations in a respectful way

and leaving people with their dignity intact” (Lewis). A courageous conversation or critical discourse begins by first seeking to understand the perspective of each staff member. This stance of understanding is to “recognize that each person who is in the building is bringing with them [their own experiences/mindset] and how do I incorporate what they’re bringing?” (Evans). This understanding provides a starting point for building capacity by, first, initiating an examination of the attitudes and beliefs around privilege and power in the school and, then, by raising awareness of and challenging the dominant beliefs that underpin the issues of classism, racism and able-ism.

Principals recognize that challenging the *status quo* is both exciting and stressful. Principal Idella calls it a “messy business.”

And so all of a sudden I’m starting to uncover all these, you know, attitudes and beliefs that have existed in the school for years and years, and all this messiness started coming out in these sessions. We had some difficult conversations, like, I brought up the piece on my beliefs that the school is power, and the power you hold as teachers. The privilege and power that we hold is much different than the children walking in the door. So I laid it right on the table...then that’s when [the teachers start saying], “Are you trying to say that I am privileged?” And it was messy.

However, as Principal Idella observes, it is sometimes only by getting people upset that a leader effectively challenges the *status quo*: “In my third year of my first principalship, I understood that, if people don’t get upset, there’s going to be no change” (Idella).

Exercise Critical Instructional Leadership

Teachers may need encouragement to understand that how they teach can perpetuate practices that marginalize. School leaders must hold teachers accountable for curriculum, for their pedagogy and, ultimately, for the climate in their classrooms. The principals in this study embrace a fulsome definition of student achievement in terms of social justice outcomes: high academic achievement, critical thinking, high social and emotional intelligence, and lastly, student empowerment and responsiveness to injustice. “I think it’s my responsibility mainly to make sure to support people in the instructional program as part of a team” (Lewis), in a way that is responsive to all student needs. This goal is achievable, school leaders claim, through teachers working from a culturally relevant approach (Gray).

Instructional leadership, from a critical perspective, requires engaging teachers in what Ladson Billings (1995, 2014) describes as deconstructing the curriculum through a lens of cultural responsiveness and relevance—“helping staff to see, to think critically about the curriculum in terms of who’s missing, what is absent and whose story is being told or not told” (Mackenzie). Then, once it is deconstructed, at every opportunity teachers must introduce a social justice perspective into the curriculum. As Principal Idella tells her staff, “I want you to infuse social justice throughout the curriculum” (Idella).

Critical instructional leadership also requires that teachers focus on a pedagogy that encourages critical thinking. One approach is to prepare lessons from a more equitable perspective where social justice issues are integrated across the curriculum to pose to students’ critical questions such as “Who says this is the way things ought to be? Who benefits from this decision? Who is being marginalized? Are there other points of view?” (Hadley).

Teaching Confederation as part of Canadian history provides an illustrative example. “When we’re teaching Confederation...who are the missing voices...? Ask those probing questions... Promote an environment where it’s okay to ask those questions” (Idella). In order to engage teachers in inculcating a culturally responsive pedagogy and relevant curriculum, principals must challenge current pedagogy and curriculum. Principal Idella continues with the Confederation example, “The way in which we structure the conversations that we have with our students continually makes Europe superior to all those who are not [white Caucasian], right?” (Idella). In this process of supporting social justice efforts, school leaders acknowledge the need to remain sensitive to how teachers react when their practices are questioned. “Some [teachers] will say ‘Why are you now telling me all of the things [pedagogy and curriculum] I’ve learned are wrong?’” (Mackenzie).

The principals in this study recognize that critical instructional leadership is about providing both a venue for, and the opportunity to, critically examine how teachers have always taught and what they have taught. In doing so, teachers can then to make the changes that result in them viewing pedagogy and curriculum through a social justice lens. Similar to challenging the status quo, principals often face difficult resistance: “It’s hard, because teachers have been attached to the same thinking for a very long time” (Mackenzie).

Shape and Preserve Respectful Relationships

School leaders claim *the* key to social justice leadership practice is shaping and preserving respectful relationships with those who are marginalized and those who have power. First, and foremost are relationships with students.

Relationships [with students] are so incredibly important.... I learned a long time ago I had to build relationships [with them].... I haven’t suspended a student for two years now.... That’s the same way I treat the staff, the parents, the community, the superintendent. Every staff member is a unique individual in this building.... Getting to know them helps with moving the school forward. (Anderson)

Inherent to how schools are socially constructed is a hierarchical structure. Principals attest that shaping and preserving relationships in such a context is challenging. Principals claim that respect—meaning power is acknowledged and distributed—is the foundation to building what the school leaders see as “horizontal” relationships with students, staff and parents alike. In such relationships, dialogue is used to critique commonly accepted “truth” and knowledge. Respect in relationships grows through “connecting with people and trying to be realistic with them” (Lewis) as well as seeking to understand, through dialogue, where they position themselves on the matter of social justice.

Principals recognize that teachers hold the power to be responsive to student and parent needs and are aware that staff can thwart or stop leadership efforts towards social justice. Engaging staff is a balance between courageous conversations and the fear of isolating teachers and not moving towards collaboration in a positive way. In reaction, school leaders find it helpful to turn their attention to shaping and preserving relationships with staff in order to advance social justice in their schools. “Providing opportunities for staff narratives,” is a start, suggests Principal Gray. For Principal Collins, “I use fireside chats as a strategy.... My communications strategy is generally oral and one-on-one...to get a sense of who they are as individuals, their values as educators” (Collins). However, Principal Collins adds a caution by explaining the lesson she learned about the importance of dialogue and respect in shaping and preserving relationships with staff:

It takes a lot of time to build relationships.... I tried to cut corners and realized—I thought, “Damn, I’m actually going to have to earn this [relationship]”.... I was humble and made an apology.... I told them my story about being raised and growing up just a few blocks away, in the same circumstances that our children are in here at this school.... They gave me a second chance. (Collins)

Honour Voice

Social justice leadership is giving people who are marginalized, whose voices are not heard, giving them an opportunity to be heard. (Hadley)

Empowering voice is a social justice leadership practice that school leaders engage in when building capacity and empowerment for social justice in their schools. Student capacity-building and empowerment are established when responding to student voice. Principals who are socially just consider student voice an integral aspect of student achievement. Principals in this study advocate for student voice, especially for those students whose school experience leaves them feeling disenfranchised. What is needed are “opportunities for students to express how they feel about schools, what they want from schooling, where they see themselves in the future” (Hadley). For example, the goal for Principal Idella is “making sure that we’re listening to what is going on with our students and that we’re valuing their belief system.” Principal Jaabir very aptly describes the importance of not only engaging student voice but also empowering a robust student voice on social justice issues. “You want this young person to take ownership, to build their capacity as a leader, because you’re building a leader who is going to go out there and do amazing things” (Jaabir). Or, as Principal Kelly said, “The onus is on us, as educators, to plant the seed of critical inquiry with the kids.”

School leaders believe that parents are key stakeholders in their child’s success. Parent capacity and empowerment—parent engagement—stems from eliminating a deficit model of the role of parents and replacing it with a model that distributes the power inherent in the roles of teachers and principals in schools. Principal Idella points out that “the number one barrier for a parent is the power of the building” (Idella). Principal Hadley is a strong advocate for parent voice:

Communicating in positive ways with families, getting to know their concerns, getting to know their needs...what their dreams are, what they value, how they see themselves. Giving people who are marginalized, whose voices are not heard, giving them an opportunity to be heard. For example, people who might have a deficit mentality and see parents disinterested or disengaged.... dig deeper and find out why, because often there are valid reasons. Nobody is sending their children to school to fail, so having that conversation where concerns are heard...what you do is form alliances with people who do not have a voice, who you need to be working closely with the school. (Hadley)

Principals seek parent voice in a variety of ways. A very effective way is taking time to engage parents in conversation and then including them in meaningful dialogue. “We spend a lot of time listening to parents and integrating their voice[s]. They see the school as a powerful advocate for their child” (Gray). Another way to engage parent voice is through surveys such as “perception surveys to ask students and parents how they feel about the school” (Hadley).

Tied into voice—the distribution of power—is advocacy. Principal Florence argues, “You have to be willing to advocate for those who you see being disadvantaged by the system—including the parents and the community” (Florence). Advocacy extends to students and families through “helping children and families who may not be able to [advocate for themselves] without someone intentionally making those opportunities available to them” (Hadley).

“A social justice leader possesses advocacy” (Florence). Advocacy includes advocating for staff. “Demonstrating what you expect and doing the same with them..., the staff needs that too. They need to feel respected and accepted” (Lewis). Principal Hadley suggests, “What needs to happen is that capacity needs to be built and people need to be empowered in such a way that even if the designated leader, the principal of the school, isn’t there, the social justice work can continue.” Principals claim that advocating for staff voice is not just ensuring all voices are sought, engaged and listened to, it is also about purposefully seeking, engaging and listening to those voices that may disagree with you. Principal Idella suggests that, in this way, advocacy is about respect:

I mean, even if it’s a view that I disagree with, because that’s the key part too—is making sure that you’re supporting leaders that aren’t like you...analytical deep thinkers.... I still highly respect them.” As some of the school leaders in the study point out, those staff members who disagree openly are voices that challenge our own thinking. Isn’t that exactly what social justice leadership is all about? (Idella)

Capacity and empowerment stem from what Principal Norman describes as “a more equitable manner of leadership.” Principal Collins, from an urban elementary school, explains how she builds capacity and empowerment with her staff:

I tell them, whatever is going to happen here, we are going to do it together.... I question how I can support them and their vision/take on the school; then, I share school data, successes and where to grow. I support conversation to move forward. (Norman)

From an urban secondary school, Principal Evans, provides his example:

Social justice is when I build capacity in my staff by including them in the decisionmaking process in every aspect of the school. If I can take all of those pieces that each person brings and bring them into this picture of my school, then the outcome will be more socially just. (Evans)

Principal Florence, also in an urban secondary school, explains her approach to enacting school-based capacity and empowerment. “Work with others who are prepared to help you to find the resources and the strategies and the supports in order to carry out your work to accomplish those [social justice] goals.”

In term of honouring voice, these examples emphasize that when school leaders acknowledge and distribute power equitably, capacity and empowerment are built amongst staff because having their voices heard *is* empowering. This is true for both elementary and secondary schools. As Principal Idella previously stated, “One of the most important pieces of social justice leadership is listening. You have to really listen to people and then listen some more and then some more and then some more.” Principal Evans suggests that honouring voice is not only listening, but also understanding the narrative behind the voice. He recognizes, as do most of the school leaders in this study,

that every voice brings its own experiences and mindset into the school setting. In this way, each voice is rich with experience. The sum of the voices is a mosaic of voice that is much more powerful together than individually, to take action against injustice.

Discussion and Implications

A significant aspect of this qualitative study is the voices of its participants. Their narratives, along with their range and wealth of experience in Canada's largest, and most diverse province, Ontario, can lead to a better understanding of the patterns of principal success in promoting equity and social justice. Their views offer a context and some generalizations for those reading this article. What their voices do not reveal, however, is how they came to examine the power and responsibility their position affords them in influencing the variations in the patterns of student success or failure. Behind these voices lies praxis—a dynamic exchange that combines reflection and action. The way in which principals use reflection to describe their understanding of privilege and power to inform their practice and vice versa is important to understanding how principals engage and sustain their leadership for social justice.

Principal Idella voices the sentiments of the principals in this study in saying that “reflection is a huge piece of being a leader” because it is the disposition that encourages principals to think carefully and to consider ideas so that their practices do not replicate the status quo. Or as Principal Florence points out, “It [reflection] is about weighing it out ... Where are you going to invest your social justice capital in order to have the greatest impact in your sphere of influence?” Reflection is a disposition eloquently described by John Dewey (1910):

Reflection is turning a topic over in various aspects and in various lights so that nothing significant about it shall be overlooked — almost as one might turn a stone over to see what its hidden side is like or what is covered by it (p. 57).

What does reflection mean from a critical perspective? Freire (1998) describes the phenomenon as “critical consciousness.” He claims that through critical consciousness one is able to critique truth and knowledge and examine the status quo through (re)consideration that asks: Who is being included/excluded? Whose reality is represented and whose is marginalized? Like Freire's “critical consciousness,” Foster (1986) contends that leadership is grounded in a “critical spirit.” This grounding ensures that leaders do not situate themselves in fixed ideas or self-serving causes espoused by others. Similarly, Kincheloe (1999) promotes an individual's consciousness of him- or herself (self-reflection) to gain an understanding of how and why his/her political opinions, worker role, religious beliefs, gender role, and racial self-image are shaped by the dominant perspective.

The literature suggests that a reflective disposition influences how truth and knowledge are critiqued. Not only is a critical reflective disposition important in influencing how principals engage in social justice work, it is vital to sustaining their social justice leadership. This finding is central to the examination of the research question “What strategies or practices do principals develop and engage in to do their social justice work in schools?” Education leaders are bombarded with a daily multitude of decisions and choices. “Engaging in social justice through a critical lens is examining what we do in our own context daily” (Mackenzie). Practically speaking, this quote demonstrates that educational leaders need to activate reflection or reflective practice because a critical

consciousness is an effective tool to address and incorporate competing demands—especially as they support social justice practices.

While this article helps to redress the scant Canadian research regarding concrete social justice leadership practices by sharing the voices and experiences of Ontario school leaders, it has broad implications for school leaders, researchers, and policy makers overall. Social researchers have compiled widespread evidence that many conditions may set the circumstances for amplified marginalization of students and families accessing public education. Extensive research on educational leadership over the past three decades conclusively demonstrates that student achievement is closely linked to school leadership. Social justice is similarly linked.

For me, social justice is looking at all of those social historical pieces and looking at them from a very critical perspective and engaging in an opportunity to critically examine the way in which society's perspectives have been constructed and how to re-think that.” (Hadley)

Giving voice to principals who provide evidence and concrete examples that social justice is indeed achievable—not only theoretically, but also in the actual practices of principals in schools—lets practicing and future principals know that *they* are responsible for, and can actively contribute to, variations in student success in their schools.

What is needed in future research then, is how to teach, mentor and coach school leaders in critical pedagogy so that they reflect on how and why knowledge about society and education is constructed the way it is, and why some constructions dominate while others are suppressed or oppressed. Principals and those who aspire to leadership need to examine how neutrality in education is impossible. To this end, other researchers might build upon how to set the conditions for those leaders who have not experienced marginalization nor examined the power their social position affords them in influencing the role of student success, to have the opportunity to do so. In this way, they can see that they are responsible for the variations in the patterns of student success or failure across racial, gender, language, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing conditions.

This article has implications for policy makers in education who manage the impact of the growing diversity in schools. If policy makers are earnest about social justice in schools, then educational leadership policy needs to reflect this intention. First, equity and social justice need to be explicitly stated and embedded throughout policy processes and documents. Next, policy makers need to consider, through a critical perspective, the educational leadership essential to enacting social justice in schools. They then need to consider how to ensure principals and those who aspire to leadership in schools have an understanding of how their privilege and the power afforded to them through the role of principal is pivotal to change and student achievement. After all, whether we are school leaders, researchers or policy makers, most of us can agree that social justice in public education is a worthwhile endeavor and that all students deserve to be successful.

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