

School Leaders' Contribution to Social Justice: A Review

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this review is to examine what is known as well as what we still seek to know in terms of principals' potential contribution to social justice in their schools. **Design/methodology/approach:** This review provides an evaluative report of the current knowledge in the literature related to the influence of principals on social justice at the school building level. **Findings:** The current review reveals that there is solid evidence of the significant impact of school leaders on student learning. This impact constitutes the conceptual basis for social justice school leadership, where school leaders ascertain that all students are provided equal opportunities for quality education. However, the available knowledge regarding the optimal way to prepare social justice school leaders is still limited. **Research implications:** In as much as recent literature does not provide satisfactory answers to the question of how to train social justice school leaders, workable approaches to developing leaders who are effective in achieving social justice, equity, and excellence should be explored. **Originality/value:** In today's Western school systems, non-White, LGBT, poor, or differently-abled students often lag behind their peers in academic achievement and acquisition of higher education while leading in school dropout rates. The review seeks to understand how school principals can bring about a real change in this undesirable situation, creating a social justice educational system.

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In today's Western schools, white, straight, middle-class, and physically-able students reach higher levels of achievement, drop out less, and have greater chances of attaining a higher education than students who do not possess these characteristics (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Sweet, Anisef, Brown, Walters, & Phythian, 2010). Educational inequality constitutes a significant policy concern, because quality education may be seen as a dimension of well-being in its own right, or at least as a fundamental component of one's capacity to function and flourish, which often translates into better health, a longer life, and higher earnings (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006; Mitchell, 2014).

Among various school-related factors, leadership is of great importance: "Leadership has very significant effects on the quality of school organization and on pupil learning... there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership" (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). School leadership can thus play a major role in creating a learning climate that provides all students with equal opportunities regardless of race, class, gender, physical ability or disability, sexual orientation, and other potentially marginalizing characteristics.

This review aims to examine what we already know as well as what we wish to know about school leaders' contribution to social justice. Initially presenting findings relating to school leaders' great impact on students' scholastic achievements, this article proceeds to explore how school principals can become social justice leaders through utilizing their significant influence to ensure that all students receive equal learning opportunities. The paucity of literature specifically addressing the preparation of such leaders is discussed in the last section. A review of the available knowledge reveals that pragmatic approaches to developing social justice school leaders are still necessary.

School Principals' Influence

In light of school leadership's pivotal role in improving student learning, and its greatest influence being sensed particularly in schools with the greatest need, it is imperative to speedily find the way to optimally fulfill its potential for providing equal opportunities in school learning. Leithwood et al. (2008) noted that "school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning" (p. 27). Bryk and others (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010) disagreed, arguing that "school leadership sits in the first position" (p. 197). In any case, the link between school leadership and improved student learning has been empirically proven in recent years.

The consideration of principalship as a powerful force motivating school effectiveness has been justified by solid evidence, showing that effective school leaders

significantly improve student performance, while ineffective principals have a similarly large negative effect (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012; Clark, Martorell, & Rockoff, 2009; Coelli & Green, 2012; Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Hallinger & Ko, 2015a; Jacobson & Bezzina, 2008). One of the largest in-depth studies of educational leadership conducted by Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) has affirmed that school leaders' importance cannot be overemphasized:

In developing a starting point for this 6-year study, we claimed, based on a preliminary review of research, that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. After six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim. To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership (p. 9).

Why is school leadership of crucial importance? Louis et al. (2010) opined that the potential of most school variables, considered separately, to impact student outcomes, is at most quite small. A significant effect can occur only if individual variables combine to comprise a critical mass. It is the principal's responsibility to create the conditions under which that can transpire by generating synergy across the relevant variables, thus unleashing the potential hidden in the organization's latent capacities. The principal can also foster a synergy across the various school's stakeholders, such as district personnel, parents, and teachers, who all strive for students' success by coordinating their efforts and activating their respective strengths. Put differently, "the school principal... orchestrates the collaborative process of school transformation" (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 203).

In addition to examining *whether* school leaders influence student learning, recent research also explored *how* they generate improvement. Research findings show that principals impact student performance mainly in indirect ways (Murphy, Neumerski, Goldring, Grissom, & Porter, 2016), by influencing teachers' teaching strategies (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010) and shaping learning environments (Louis, 2008; May & Supovitz, 2011; Murphy & Torre, 2014). Aiming to pinpoint specific leadership practices that improve teaching and learning, researchers have found principals' efforts to be effective in providing quality professional development, ensuring various school programs' coherence, and developing a positive learning climate, which in turn impact classroom instruction and student outcomes (Giles, Jacobson, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007; Gimbert & Fultz, 2009; Jacobson, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Beyond specific practices, school leadership approaches appear to possess the potential for the most significant influence on student learning. Principals' deep and direct involvement in teaching and learning manifests in the instructional leadership approach (Hallinger & Wang, 2015b; May, Huff, & Goldring, 2012). Instructional school leaders are those principals who become intensely involved in curricular and instructional issues, which in turn directly affect student achievement (Glanz, 2006;

Neumerski, 2012). The instructional leadership approach may be defined as “the effort to improve teaching and learning for PK–12 students by managing effectively, addressing the challenges of diversity, guiding teacher learning, and fostering organizational learning” (Brazier & Bauer, 2013, p. 650). This results in high quality instruction, which is a prerequisite for students’ improved achievement levels (Blase & Kirby, 2009; Stein & Coburn, 2008).

As mentioned, the links between principals’ instructional leadership and students’ achievements have been clearly established through research (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). Interestingly, the effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was found to be three to four times as great as that of transformational leadership, where leaders inspire, empower, and stimulate teachers (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

An additional school leadership approach that may considerably improve student learning is distributed leadership, where the number of people involved in making decisions related to the school’s organization, operation, and academic aspects is significantly increased (Lumby, 2013; Robinson, 2008). This style of leadership increases the organization’s opportunities to benefit from more of its members’ capabilities (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Malloy & Leithwood, 2017). Moreover, members’ enhanced participation in decision-making is prone to foster a greater commitment on their part to the organization’s goals and strategies. This greater commitment is likely to lead, albeit indirectly, to ameliorated student achievements (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009). The adoption of a distributed approach, under the right conditions, can contribute to organizational development (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Spillane & Coldren, 2011).

School principals can utilize their great influence on teaching and learning to ensure that all students are provided equal learning opportunities, regardless of potentially marginalizing conditions. As aforementioned, by organizing their schools to advance all students’ equitable learning, principals become social justice leaders.

Social Justice School Leaders

Recent years have produced many studies on social justice in school leadership (Oplatka, 2014). From the vantage point of such leadership, social justice concepts should be realized in schools so that they provide equal opportunities and treatment for all students, without any discrimination or favoritism whatsoever (Capper & Frattura, 2007; Wang, 2015).

At the same time, a school is also a means of promoting social justice in the extra-school world, because by providing equal opportunities and warranting that no talent is wasted, the school can contribute to the future assignment of its graduates to the academic and social fields that fit their talents and aspirations, regardless of their family background, social status, or financial situation (Beachum & McCray, 2010; Bogotch & Shields, 2014). A key role is played by schools in terms of raising active supporters of social justice. This is implemented by schools that enable their students

to recognize and question social injustice issues, encouraging them to become social justice agents who partake in activities for promoting this core value (Jong & Jackson, 2016; Meister, Zimmer, & Wright, 2017).

Inequalities exist in most contemporary schools in the Western world, where non-White, gay, lesbian, poor, differently abled students tend to become lower achievers and drop out of school in greater numbers. They are also less likely to reach higher education than their White, straight, middle-class, and physically able counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Sweet et al., 2010). Hurting mainly the marginalized, particularly the poor and non-White students, recent accountability-based reforms have not been helpful in alleviating the situation. The abovementioned marginalized students often find themselves in schools with particularly limited resources, learning via inappropriate methods, with teachers who would prefer to be elsewhere if they had a choice (Fabricant & Fine, 2013; Hursh, 2007; Ryan, 2016).

The premise of social justice school leadership is that all students can succeed academically, without exceptions or excuses. This belief motivates social justice leaders to transform school environments into spaces where all students thrive, even under minimal material conditions, though it appears that the situation is hopeless. At the same time they also engage in seeking and discovering solutions for problems that generate and reproduce societal inequities (Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Theoharis, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, Theoharis, 2009). Students from diverse groups with a wide range of needs are supported by principals who have adopted this sort of orientation (Brooks, Normore, & Wilkinson, 2017; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014), that is, who strive for both equity and excellence (Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Jean-Marie, 2008).

From a practical perspective, social justice leaders explore differences in academic success as they pertain to students' race, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood, income of parents, or home language (Johnson & Avelar La Salle, 2010), and invest efforts in eliminating inequities in school policies, procedures, and practices (Brown, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008).

Assignment of students to classrooms so that the proportion of students from every demographic group in each classroom matches that of their proportion in the school is another important tactic in social justice educational frameworks (Johnson & Avelar La Salle, 2010), in addition to promoting teaching practices that are inclusive of varied types of students' as well as their families' perspectives and experiences (Shields, 2004; Kose, 2007; 2009). Advocating inclusive education (Lewis, 2016) translates into bringing services to students in their usual classroom rather than sending them out to a special resource room, as this involves extracting them from their natural environment (Frattura & Capper, 2009), and "counter the sorting mechanism of schools" (Villegas, 2007, p. 378).

Generally, social justice school leaders see exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, as actively removing students from their school communities and exacerbating feelings of isolation and resentment (Losen, 2015). Thus, they attempt to meet the need for a safe environment while also addressing institutional inequities (Hollie, 2013; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway,

2011), advocating restorative justice in schools (Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016; Halverson & Kelley, 2017), which is “an approach to discipline that engages all parties in a balanced practice that brings together all people impacted by an issue or behavior” (González, 2012). In other words, restorative processes’ primary aim is to repair the harm caused by a specific incident through the active involvement of all stakeholders in discussion regarding what has happened, and reaching a decision on a suitable reaction (Normore, 2017)

Social justice school leaders take action in the managerial aspect by working for inclusive decision making and policymaking processes, help staff members to critically reflect on their actions and practices, and ensure that representatives of various community groups are meaningfully included in school processes (Anderson, 2009; Furman, 2012; Hoffman, 2009). They make a point of treating diverse families and communities fairly and equitably by being both attentive and responsive to their needs, rather than only to those of the dominant group (Villegas, 2007). They transform beliefs and values by challenging, deconstructing, and changing teachers’ negative beliefs and misperceptions about diverse students, families, and communities (Theoharis, 2007).

Ryan (2016) termed this sort of activities “implicit activism,” meaning social justice activism that attracts minor attention only. Explicit activism, which attracts more attention, may be too much to expect from school leaders due to their demanding role. They may also understandably feel unable to champion social justice which at times may contradict entrenched value systems, violating the culture of their organizations or offending powerful stakeholders. Supporting social justice initiatives might thus relegate school leaders to marginal positions within their organizations.

Because it is widely agreed that social justice school leaders do make a beneficial contribution to their schools, the question that remains to be answered is how they are to be prepared so that they become such leaders. Quality preparation would obviously make for quality social justice school leaders, yet the available knowledge regarding the exact contents and procedures of such a preparation is still relatively meager.

Preparing Social Justice School Leaders

Policymakers, university faculty, and educators are concerned about current principal preparation programs (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Gutmore, 2015). Also researchers and field personnel have expressed their doubts as to the sufficiency of traditional approaches to preparing and licensing aspiring principals (Duncan, Range, & Scherz, 2011; Oplatka & Waite, 2010; Reed & Kensler, 2010), claiming that principal preparation programs produce principals who are not sufficiently qualified nor capable of running schools successfully (Lynch, 2012; Schechter, 2011; Williams, 2015). The training that principals typically receive has been shown by study after study to be far from satisfactory (Hernandez, Roberts, & Menchaca, 2012; Pannell, Peltier-Glaze, Haynes, Davis, & Skelton, 2015).

A recent report revealed that many university professors believe that their programs warrant improvement, echoing district leaders who are also generally dissatisfied with the

quality of principal preparation programs (Wallace Foundation, 2016). According to Drago-Severson (2009, 2012; Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013), current preparation programs are mostly informational, that is, involving the broadening of learners' theoretical knowledge and skills only: "All too often... we teach leadership development in the same way we teach world history: by presenting just the facts, just the contents" (Drago-Severson, 2012, p. 8). She claims that for preparation programs to be truly effective, they must involve transformational learning, which "relates to the development of the cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities that enable a person to manage the complexities of work (e.g., leadership, teaching, learning, adaptive challenges) and life" (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 11). Thus, in view of the growing criticism of existing preparation programs, figuring out how to better prepare pre-service principals for their future role is an urgent policy concern.

In many principal preparation programs, most diversity-related education is concentrated in a single course and centers on broad societal conditions affecting students, such as discrimination, inequitable school resources and poverty, rather than actually addressing these inequities as they manifest within schools. Teaching social justice is often left to the discretion of individual faculty members, who are not necessarily experts in this field (Hawley & James, 2010), while only token consideration is given to actual social justice concerns (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005).

What, then, would be the ideal preparation course for quality social justice school leaders? The answer appears to be that adequate preparation programs should integrate social justice knowledge, attitudes, and skills throughout the curriculum, instruction, and assessment processes, rather than offering them in a single, add-on course (McKenzie et al., 2008; Zembylas, 2010). Forming social justice school leadership must consist of moving beyond surface-level knowledge to engage prospective principals at the critical or transformative level (Lopez, 2010) using a variety of instructional methods (Brown, 2004, 2006; Theoharis, 2007).

Not only the principal, but also faculty members should develop commitments to social justice which "require[s] faculty to rethink underlying assumptions, actions and policies, roles and relationships, pedagogical approaches, and levels of preparedness that challenge current modes of operation and force faculty to answer why and for whom" (Byrne-Jimenez, 2010). Preparation programs should provide faculty members with professional development in the area of social justice (Rusch, 2004), and make human resource practices diversity-conscious, hiring more faculty of color (Young & Brooks, 2008).

Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian (2006) have proposed a practical framework for preparing school leaders to become social justice leaders. Their framework's horizontal dimension describes what principals must believe, know, and do as social justice leaders, including three domains: critical consciousness, knowledge, and practical skills focused on social justice. To achieve these goals, the vertical dimensions of the framework—curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment oriented toward social justice—are to be employed appropriately. Guerra, Nelson, Jacobs, and Yamamura (2013) pointed to programmatic elements that may assist the development of social justice

leaders during their preparation, including: developing awareness of their identity, reading literature that highlights inequities in schools, participating in intense classroom conversations where their thinking is challenged both by instructors and peers, and leading and implementing action research projects.

The existing research on the preparation of social justice school leaders reviewed in this section is significant albeit limited in scope. It provides only general guidelines for social justice leadership training, leaving much to be desired.

Conclusion

Principals' great impact on student learning is clearly proven in the literature. As school leadership is the second most important school-based factor in students' academic achievements (Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010), or perhaps even the first (Bryk et al., 2010), the rationale for social justice school leadership is obvious: principals must utilize their influence to ensure that all students are provided equal opportunities for quality learning, irrespective of race, gender, religion, national origin, ability or disability, sexual orientation, age, or any other potentially marginalizing characteristic (Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Theoharis, 2009).

True social justice school leaders proactively assure that all their students thrive, even under unfavorable conditions (Brooks et al., 2017; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). How such leaders are to be prepared for the task is the big question. What is the optimal training for producing social justice school leaders? Because recent literature, partially reviewed in this article, does not provide satisfactory answers to this question, workable approaches to developing leaders who are effective in achieving social justice, equity, and excellence, are still necessary, as they can be most useful for those who wish to improve contemporary school systems.

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