

Defining the responsibilities of principals in promoting equity: Insights from the Israeli school system

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Abstract

Contemporary school principals are tasked with promoting equity within their schools. The importance of this endeavor is clear; however, there is a need for greater clarity regarding the specific responsibilities involved. Addressing this need is the goal of this study. Data were collected from 21 principals of elementary schools in Israel using semistructured interviews. Data analysis included four stages: sorting, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. The findings illustrate how the framework of strong equity, comprising the four Rs—redistribution, recognition, representation, and reframing—can be applied to school leadership to encompass the key responsibilities that principals have in promoting equity. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords

Equity, school leadership, principals, the Israeli school system

Introduction

Today's school principals are increasingly called upon to promote equity within their schools (Canlı and Demirtaş, 2022). They must critically examine how factors such as gender, race, national origin, sexual orientation, native language, and other historically and currently marginalizing characteristics influence the design and effectiveness of their learning environments (Gay, 2018; Theoharis, 2024). Moreover, they must guarantee “excellent educational opportunities and outcomes for each student, especially students of color, those living in low-income circumstances, students eligible for English language learning services, and others historically underserved in public school systems” (Honig and Honsa, 2020: 192) and “challenge oppressive forces such as racism, ableism, and classism in schools” (Irby et al., 2020: 101).

Promoting equity in schools is crucial for principals as it ensures all students, regardless of background, have equal access to opportunities and resources, leading to improved academic outcomes and a more inclusive school environment (Theoharis, 2024). By addressing individual differences,

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principals ensure that students receive the specific support they need to achieve equitable outcomes, even if the type of support varies from one student to another (Levinson et al., 2022). Additionally, it fosters a culture of fairness and respect, positively impacting teacher morale and community trust (Moral Santaella, 2022). Principals who promote equity in schools have a profound impact on student achievement, school culture, teacher satisfaction, and the broader community, ultimately contributing to a more just and equitable society (Gümüş et al., 2021).

The necessity of the principal's efforts in promoting equity is well acknowledged. However, there is a need for greater clarity regarding the concept of equity in education. Ainscow (2020: 126) claims that the term equity in education "can be confusing" since it "may mean different things to different people." Levinson et al. (2022: 1) asserted: "The lack of a clear definition of equity in the education field means that individuals and groups can all claim to be 'working for equity' when they actually have very different and even opposing aims and values concerning schools, children, learning, and structures of advantage and disadvantage." Remarkably, the specific duties required of a principal to achieve the goal of equity in the school remain unclear (Radd et al., 2021; Wang, 2018). The role of the principal in fostering equity encompasses a broad range of tasks that lack a well-defined framework. Hence, this study aims to address the following research question: What responsibilities do school principals have in promoting equity?

The present study was conducted in the Israeli school system, which caters to approximately two million students (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2023). The education system in Israel faces distinct challenges related to equity. According to the PISA international student assessments, Israel demonstrates some of the largest disparities within the OECD (2019) between top-performing (95th percentile and up) and low-achieving (5th percentile and below) students. This academic performance gap is closely tied to socioeconomic and ethnocultural divides within Israeli society. Significant socioeconomic disparities exist between communities of high and low socioeconomic status, between central and peripheral regions, and between the Jewish and Arab sectors (Arar, 2019; Dadon-Golan et al., 2019; Halevy-Feldman and Setiawan, 2020; Resh and Blass, 2019). To lay the groundwork for this study, the following sections will discuss educational equity in general, with a particular focus on strong equity, and provide an overview of the Israeli context.

Theoretical background: Leadership for educational equity

Social justice leadership has emerged as a central focus in recent educational leadership and management research (Gümüş et al., 2021). Researchers consistently emphasize the pivotal role of principals in promoting equity within their schools (Wang, 2018). The imperative to promote equity is underscored by empirical evidence, which shows that White, heterosexual, middle-class, and physically able students generally achieve higher academic success, have lower dropout rates, and are more likely to attain higher education compared to their peers who lack these attributes (Blanden et al., 2023; Kyriakides, 2020). Therefore, principals are called upon to prioritize promoting social justice within their schools (Theoharis, 2024).

In particular, principals are required to address two critical areas of inequity: outcomes and belongingness (Celeste et al., 2019; Pearman et al., 2019). First, principals should focus on closing achievement gaps by creating an environment where all students can achieve academic proficiency, regardless of their background (Brooks et al., 2017; Wang, 2015). This involves encouraging teachers to maintain high standards, foster a growth mindset, and utilize diverse approaches and resources tailored to each student's characteristics, mitigating unconscious biases in assessments (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2020; Gümüş et al., 2022). Second, principals must work toward

closing gaps in students' sense of belonging (Flores and Bagwell, 2021; Muñiz, 2019). They should provide all students with a positive learning environment (Johnson and Constant, 2021); advocate for inclusive education, where students of all backgrounds and abilities learn together (Amor et al., 2019; Messiou, 2017); and address inequities in discipline by reducing punishment gaps and promoting practices that (Dutil, 2020; Oxley and Holden, 2021).

The ontology of social justice and equity in education examines the structures, systems, and relationships that influence access, inclusion, and fairness within educational environments. It views inequities as embedded in social hierarchies and institutional practices, impacting students' experiences and identities (Boyce et al., 2023). The epistemology, meanwhile, focuses on understanding and validating knowledge from marginalized perspectives, challenging dominant narratives, and using knowledge to drive transformative change (Kayumova and Dou, 2022). Together, these perspectives aim to uncover and address underlying inequities in education, promoting a more inclusive and just system for all students. This approach not only seeks to understand inequities but also advocates for reform to better serve diverse student populations. To promote equity, principals must focus on both "understanding the inequities that persist in schools and taking action" (DeMatthews, 2015: 145). First, principals must thoroughly investigate and identify the hidden inequities within the everyday management of the school and reflect on why and how the school may be unfair to certain students (Canlı and Demirtaş, 2022; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). This investigation is important because "leadership without an understanding of systemic inequity can reproduce oppression" (Bertrand and Rodela, 2018: 14). Second, principals must actively work to replace existing unequal structures with more equitable ones (Capper and Young, 2014). There is a significant need for "the exercise of altering these arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions" (Goldfarb and Grinberg, 2002: 162).

Successful principals demonstrated a strong social justice orientation, effectively combining transformational, instructional, and collaborative leadership to rally their school communities in a collective effort to turn around the challenges faced by disadvantaged schools, striving for excellence through equity. Their identity is marked by optimism, a hopeful outlook toward the future, and a realistic yet aspirational approach to understanding and addressing the realities around them (Moral Santaella, 2022). Practically, principals must embrace several vital practices. These include prioritizing equity leadership and adopting a transformative approach, preparing for equity by understanding and valuing diverse identities, developing equity leadership teams, building an equity-focused system by identifying needs and planning for systemic change, and ensuring the sustainability of equity initiatives by continually assessing progress and making necessary adjustments (Radd et al., 2021). Through transformative leadership, leaders can practice equitable and socially just leadership to foster welcoming, inclusive schools where all students, including those who are minoritized or economically disadvantaged, feel valued, respected, and academically challenged (Shields and Hesbol, 2020).

The importance of school principals in promoting equity is well recognized. However, the specific roles and activities involved in achieving this goal have not been clearly defined. According to Jurado de Los Santos et al. (2020), "Equity in education should not only be seen as compensation or readjustment of common goods in order to alleviate initial limitations, but should also go beyond this" (p. 2). The conceptual framework selected for analyzing the data in this study is the strong equity framework, introduced by Cochran-Smith and Keefe (2022) within the context of teacher education. This framework will be detailed in the following chapter.

Conceptual framework: Strong equity

Cochran-Smith and Keefe (2022) distinguish between “thin” and “strong” equity. While thin equity focuses solely on redistribution, aiming to provide individuals with fair or enhanced access to educational resources, strong equity incorporates four key elements: (1) redistribution, which focuses on reallocating educational resources to achieve equity; (2) recognition, which involves acknowledging, respecting, and valuing the diverse backgrounds, traditions, and perspectives within the school community; (3) representation, which ensures that minoritized students and their parents have a voice in shaping norms, deciding what knowledge is valued, and influencing curriculum priorities; and (4) reframing, which entails reexamining common perspectives related to equity in education. These elements are detailed below, along with their application in educational leadership.

Redistribution

Redistribution involves reallocating educational resources to achieve equity. These resources can include teaching time, state-of-the-art facilities, advanced technology, and innovative programs. Redistribution can be approached in two main ways: providing equal educational opportunities for all students and addressing the unique needs of each individual.

According to the first approach, equity aims to deliver equitable access to education for all students, ensuring that every student has access to the same quality of education, resources, and opportunities, regardless of their background or circumstances. At the outset of its report on equity in education, the OECD (2018) defines the term as follows:

Equity in education means that schools and education systems provide equal learning opportunities to all students. As a result, students of different socioeconomic status, gender or immigrant and family background achieve similar levels of academic performance in key cognitive domains, such as reading, mathematics and science, and similar levels of social and emotional well-being in areas such as life satisfaction, self-confidence and social integration, during their education. Equity does not mean that all students obtain equal education outcomes, but rather that differences in students' outcomes are unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which the students have no control.

From this perspective, the essence of educational equity lies in offering all students access to an equivalent standard of education to guarantee that each student has an equitable chance to succeed and realize their full potential. This approach claims that if all students are given equal opportunities, they will achieve equitable results, meaning that educational achievements are distributed relatively evenly among all students, irrespective of any potentially marginalized attributes they may possess (Levinson et al., 2022).

According to the second approach, equity differs from equality, as illustrated by a well-known cartoon (see Figure 1). Providing children with equal opportunities (the same number of crates) represents equality but does not ensure equal outcomes (being able to watch the baseball game). Equity, however, recognizes that due to unequal starting points, individuals may require different types of support to achieve similar outcomes (Levinson et al., 2022). From this standpoint, the essence of promoting educational equity lies in the disproportionate distribution of resources, allocating to each individual the specific support they need to thrive, thereby facilitating equal opportunities for success for everyone (Buchholtz et al., 2020).

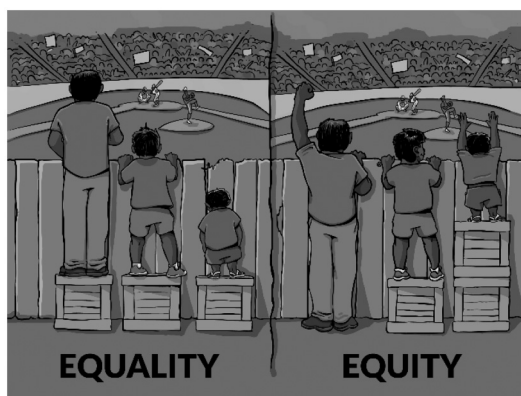


Figure 1. Equality versus equity (Froehle, 2016).

Recognition

Fraser (1998) asserted that justice requires both the redistribution of resources and the recognition of cultural differences (Blacksher, 2012; Keddie, 2012). Recognition involves acknowledging, respecting, and valuing the diverse backgrounds, traditions, and perspectives of individuals within a community. Since people come from various cultural contexts, each with its unique customs, beliefs, and practices, recognition entails actively appreciating these differences to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued for their unique contributions. Recognition fosters mutual respect, promotes cultural awareness, and enhances social cohesion by celebrating diversity and promoting equity, striving for a difference-friendly world where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect.

Under such recognition, educators “need to recognize and regard as assets—not deficits—the cultural values, experiences, and knowledge traditions of minoritized students, families, and communities rather than assuming that assimilation into already-existing, so-called ‘shared’ goals are the fundamental purpose of their education” (Cochran-Smith and Keefe, 2022: 23). For example, it can be implemented through culturally responsive teaching, which appreciates and honors the cultural backgrounds of students as essential to their learning process, aiming to make learning more relevant and effective and empower students by validating their cultural identities (Flores and Bagwell, 2021; Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive teaching is characterized by practices such as designing and implementing a curriculum that reflects and respects the diverse cultural backgrounds of all students; creating a classroom atmosphere that is respectful, inclusive, and supportive of every student; and having educators understand and respect their students’ cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences while being aware of their own cultural biases (DeMatthews and Izquierdo, 2018; Muñiz, 2019).

More broadly, culturally responsive school leadership aims to ensure that not only teaching but the entire school environment is responsive to the needs of minoritized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). In culturally responsive school leadership, school leaders actively promote and sustain an educational environment that acknowledges, respects, and values the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and staff. This involves developing a clear vision and mission for the school that incorporates the values of cultural diversity, advocating for and implementing policies and practices that

promote inclusion, providing ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers and staff to enhance their cultural competence, and demonstrating an understanding of and respect for the diverse cultural backgrounds of the school community (Hartung and Reimer, 2019; Marshall and Khalifa, 2018).

Representation

Fraser (2009) went on to elaborate “a three-dimensional account of the ‘what’ of justice, encompassing redistribution, recognition, and representation” (p. 6). For her, redistribution is the economic dimension of justice, recognition is the cultural dimension, and representation is the political dimension. According to Cochran-Smith and Keefe (2022), the issue of representation has to do with the “lack of representation of minoritized students, families, and communities in the establishment of norms and practices about what knowledge is valued, whose epistemologies are privileged, and what is deemed central or marginal in the curriculum,” because “equal access to a faulty curriculum or a faulty set of goals, established without the representation of some groups, is not justice” (pp. 23–24).

Representation addresses two types of political injustices. First, it tackles “ordinary-political injustices,” which occur within defined political communities when biased decision-making processes undermine the political voice of certain members, preventing them from participating as equals in social interactions. Second, it addresses “meta-political injustices,” which arise when the division of political space into separate entities distorts fundamental issues of redistribution, recognition, and representation.

Ordinary-political injustices are relevant to education when skewed decision-making processes compromise the participation and representation of certain groups. For instance, when educational policies are developed without meaningful input from rural stakeholders, it can result in significant challenges for rural educators. These policies may overlook the unique needs and circumstances of rural schools, leading to ineffective or impractical implementations. Consequently, rural educators may struggle with inadequate resources, support, and training to effectively teach their students (Rude and Miller, 2018).

Meta-political injustices may be relevant to education in the context of how school district boundaries are drawn. If these boundaries are set in a manner that segregates students based on socioeconomic status or race, it can lead to significant disparities in access to educational resources. While electoral redistricting periodically restores interdistrict population equivalence, school redistricting should aim to dissolve within-district concentrations of wealth and poverty. This approach can promote equitable education by addressing systemic inequities and reinforcing social and economic equality (Saiger, 2010).

Reframing

Cochran-Smith and Keefe (2022) argued that strong equity involves reframing the common frames related to equity in education. These frames have a significant, though often invisible, impact on various aspects of education. They influence how students experience learning, shape societal views on teachers and their roles, and affect the development and implementation of educational policies (Ayers, 2016). When educators adopt a perspective of strong equity, they focus explicitly on unpacking, interrogating, and unlearning such powerful frames. Through reframing, educators can work toward more equitable practices that recognize and address systemic inequalities.

For example, colorblindness and meritocracy are two influential frames that need to be reframed. Colorblindness is the idea that racial differences should not be acknowledged or considered, implying that ignoring race will lead to equality (Richards, 2020). However, in practice, colorblindness can obscure and perpetuate systemic inequalities because it fails to address the specific needs and challenges faced by marginalized racial groups. This approach overlooks the historical and social contexts that contribute to disparities in educational outcomes, thereby maintaining the status quo (Brown et al., 2023).

Meritocracy is the belief that success is based on individual merit, effort, and abilities and that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. This frame assumes a level playing field and disregards systemic barriers that can disadvantage certain groups (Ho, 2021). By promoting the idea that all individuals have the same opportunities, meritocracy ignores the structural nature of inequality and reinforces existing disparities within a discourse of individualism and equal access (Au, 2016).

Reframing aims to dismantle such pervasive frames and promote a more just and inclusive educational system. By actively engaging in the reframing of dominant perspectives, educators critically examine how the existing frames impact students' learning experiences, societal perceptions of teachers and their work, and the policies that manage and evaluate teachers, students, and schools. By doing so, they can create a more equitable environment that supports the diverse needs of all students. This approach not only challenges existing inequities but also seeks to transform the educational landscape to ensure equal opportunities for success for everyone (León et al., 2024).

Overall, thin equity in an educational setting assumes that redistribution, which provides individuals with better access to educational resources, advances equity. Although redistribution is a vital component of educational equity, Cochran-Smith and Keefe (2022) argue that it is an incomplete pursuit of equity if the systems and structures that have produced the inequities are not challenged. The four Rs (redistribution, recognition, representation, and reframing), which represent “interrelated and mutually reinforcing” (Cochran-Smith and Keefe, 2022: 21) elements of equity, serve to ground the analysis of data and allow the identification of the responsibilities of principals in promoting equity. The data was collected within the context of the Israeli school system, which is presented in the following section.

Research context: Equity leadership in the Israeli school system

The present study was carried out within the context of the Israeli national school system, accommodating close to two million students across about 5500 schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2023). The Israeli school system is divided into three levels: elementary education for grades 1–6 (ages 6–12), middle school for grades 7–9 (ages 12–15), and high school for grades 10–12 (ages 15–19), with education being mandatory from kindergarten through 12th grade (Blass, 2018; Halevy-Feldman and Setiawan, 2020).

The development of equity leadership is seldom emphasized in the preparation and professional development of Israeli principals. Training programs often lack comprehensive modules on promoting equity in diverse school settings, leaving principals insufficiently equipped to address the challenges posed by socioeconomic and ethnocultural disparities. As a result, principals' equity perspectives are deeply rooted in their personal values and educational beliefs. Their formative experiences and convictions shape their vision for equity within their schools (Arar, 2019).

National education policies do not prioritize equity, creating a significant gap in the promotion of social justice within schools. There are no policy-driven initiatives or structured incentives to encourage the development of a more equitable school environment. As a result, the responsibility

for advancing equity largely rests on individual principals, who are guided by their own moral and ethical convictions. In the absence of policy support, efforts to create equitable educational opportunities depend heavily on the personal values and commitment of these school leaders (Sabbagh and Resh, 2018).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of educational equity, Israeli educational research has yet to thoroughly explore the role of principals in promoting equity within their schools. (Feniger et al., 2021). The limited existing research tends to focus on schools with unique student populations. For example, Sarid and Binhas (2023) examined the perceptions and practices of principals integrating migrant and refugee children into the Israeli formal education system. They identified three key dilemmas: balancing equal-opportunity policies with cultural diversity, navigating the role of schools as both protected spaces and extensions of the broader social reality, and managing the tension between full assimilation and the recognition of specific cultural identities. Additionally, existing research often emphasizes the impact of national social justice issues on schools. For instance, Pinson (2022) investigated how right-wing populist Israeli organizations and politicians are shaping educational discourses, policies, and curricular changes to delegitimize liberal-democratic values. Her study presents three examples illustrating the responses of academic institutions to these efforts, highlighting the partial acceptance of these changes in recent years. Moreover, the paper reveals how the boundaries of political discourse have been redrawn and examines the role of education policy and institutions in undermining left-wing critiques.

Several researchers have explored social justice within the Arab sector of the Israeli school system. Arar (2019) examined how Arab principals perceive and implement social justice, highlighting their role in promoting equity through tools like language and cultural resources. In 2021, Arar studied a Muslim-majority high school, focusing on gender equity and the shifting patriarchal attitudes among students influenced by global communication. The findings emphasized students' role in challenging traditional norms. Arar (2021) also found that while teachers and students valued participation in school decisions, obstacles like time constraints and limited leadership support hindered meaningful engagement. Waked and Moshel (2023) analyzed ethical dilemmas faced by female Arab teachers, torn between professional ethics and cultural norms. They identified strategies such as equal treatment, customized teaching, and compromise to navigate these challenges. However, these studies' relevance to the broader Israeli school system is limited due to the distinct differences between Jewish and Arab sectors.

In several recent articles, Author explored the integration of instructional leadership and social justice leadership among Israeli principals. He identified four interrelated perspectives on the relationship between these two forms of leadership: (1) instructional leadership and social justice leadership have divergent foci; (2) instructional leadership inherently contributes to social justice; (3) social justice leadership defines the teaching approach required by instructional leadership; and (4) social justice leadership shapes the purpose of instructional leadership (Shaked, 2024). Additionally, he found that instructional leaders infused a social justice perspective into the three key dimensions of instructional leadership—defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and developing a positive school learning climate—to address three primary areas of inequity within the school: outcomes, belongingness, and discipline (Shaked, 2023).

The existing literature on social justice in Israeli schools mainly focuses on schools with unique student populations, the impact of national social justice issues, Arab schools, or the integration of instructional leadership with social justice leadership. As a result, it does not directly address the question of what responsibilities school principals have in promoting equity, which is the central

motivation for this study. Furthermore, international research, as reviewed above, also falls short of providing a definitive answer to this question. This gap underscores the importance and significance of the current research.

Method

Participants

The participants of this qualitative study were principals of elementary schools in Israel. The study utilized a purposive sampling approach intended to select “information-rich” cases. This method is considered more effective than random sampling in qualitative research (van Rijnsouwer, 2017). To this end, the researcher contacted nine superintendents from all six Israeli school districts, who received a concise explanation of equity and were asked to suggest principals who exemplified equity promotion. Due to significant differences between the Jewish and Arab sectors (Arar, 2019), this study focused exclusively on principals from Jewish schools. Principals from the Arab sector will be explored separately.

Each superintendent recommended 2–3 principals, resulting in 23 principals being considered. Two declined to participate, leaving a total of 21 participants, comprising 14 women and 7 men. The average age of the participants was 50.7 years (range: 39–57), and they had an average of 7.8 years of experience as principals (range: 2–15 years). Regarding their educational qualifications, all participants except one held a master’s degree. All participants acknowledged that their involvement was voluntary. The superintendent who had referred them was not informed about their participation in the study. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality (with pseudonyms employed) and provided written consent based on an explanation of the study’s procedure.

Data collection

Data collection was based on Zoom interviews designed to explore the responsibilities of principals in promoting equity. The questions included: How are equity considerations integrated into your principalship? Can you provide specific examples of initiatives you have implemented to promote equity in your school? How do you ensure that your school’s policies and procedures support equity? Can you describe a situation where you had to address an issue of inequity in your school? What specific actions did you take to resolve it? The semistructured nature of the interviews allowed for adaptation of the preprepared questions to accommodate newly emerging insights (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This approach enabled dynamic interactions, making the interviews more like casual conversations than structured Q&A sessions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. On average, the interviews lasted about an hour. In two cases where uncertainties arose during transcript analysis, supplementary interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 15 min.

Data analysis

The data analysis included four phases: sorting, coding, categorizing, and theorizing. Initially, the data were sorted to identify statements associated with the responsibilities of principals in promoting equity. This phase was integral to the analysis, as each decision regarding which statements to include stemmed from analytical discernment (Miles et al., 2014). During the coding phase, these

statements were assigned short descriptors (2–5 words) related to the responsibilities of principals in promoting equity (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The coding approach was data-driven, which did not begin with a predetermined set of codes but instead allowed concepts to emerge from the text during analysis (Saldaña, 2021). In the categorization phase, similar codes were grouped into clusters. Examining these clusters allowed for the identification of patterns, facilitating the formation of broader, interpretative categories. In the theorizing phase, the goal was to develop a theory that could explain the relationships between the different clusters, providing an understanding of how the various groups of codes form a cohesive whole greater than the sum of its parts. This process required multiple rounds of recoding and reclustered, making data analysis nonlinear. Ultimately, the strong equity framework (Cochran-Smith and Keefe, 2022) was identified as the most suitable for organizing the collected data. Consequently, the Findings section is structured according to this framework.

My perspective as a researcher in equity leadership is profoundly shaped by both my personal and professional experiences. With 17 years of experience as a school principal in various socio-economic communities, I have gained firsthand insights into the complexities and essential role of social justice leadership in educational settings. These experiences have not only deepened my understanding but also reinforced my belief in the critical importance of equity in education. My academic research in this field has further strengthened these convictions over the years. Moreover, my extensive familiarity with the Israeli education system, grounded in both my direct administrative experience and comprehensive research, has heightened my sensitivity to the nuanced aspects of social justice leadership, especially within the unique context of Israeli education.

Findings

This study seeks to conceptualize the responsibilities of principals in promoting equity within their schools. Data analysis found that the four Rs of strong equity—redistribution, recognition, representation, and reframing (Cochran-Smith and Keefe, 2022)—can be applied to school leadership to classify these responsibilities, which are described and illustrated below.

Redistribution

Qualitative data analysis revealed that the study participants promoted equity by redistributing resources across various areas. They allocated financial resources to ensure that all students, particularly those from low-income families, had access to necessary learning materials, such as textbooks and workbooks (Etty); equitable access to technology, including computers, tablets, and internet connectivity (Rita); and opportunities to participate in extracurricular programs, such as sports, arts, and academic clubs, regardless of their socioeconomic status (David). Additionally, they allocated financial resources to provide support to underserved or disadvantaged students (Lily) and to create programs that directly address gaps in achievement and opportunity (Zipora) and assigned classroom aides based on equity considerations (Tammy). They also provided nutritious meals to all students, with programs in place to support those who may not have access to adequate food at home (Noah), ensured equitable access to transportation services (Alma), and maintained and improved school facilities to provide a safe, clean, and conducive learning environment for all students (Jasmine).

As previously mentioned, redistribution can be approached in two primary ways: allocating resources equally to all students or providing additional resources to some students to meet their

unique needs. Most of the study participants emphasized the importance of offering additional resources to underserved or disadvantaged students to ensure they have the same educational opportunities. However, in some instances, the focus was on allocating resources equally. For example, the study participants promoted equity by redistributing human resources, specifically the teaching staff. Jack, for instance, advocated for the equal distribution of effective teachers across various classes. He explained:

When I became the principal of this school, I realized that the teacher assigned to the immigrant class was underperforming. It was explained to me that she had previously taught regular classes, but after receiving complaints from students' parents, she was transferred to the immigrant class, where the parents were less likely to understand the situation. This situation was extremely frustrating to me. I chose the more challenging solution: dismissing her despite her tenured status.

Firing a tenured teacher is indeed a formidable challenge, especially for a novice principal. However, Jack opted to address this challenge directly rather than tolerate inequity. He ensured that the more effective teachers were distributed fairly among students from different backgrounds and with varying needs, without discrimination against underprivileged students. In this case, the redistribution was not only intended to create more equity by providing additional resources to immigrant students but also to correct existing inequities.

Recognition

Interviews with the study participants suggested that they employed recognition to promote equity by eliminating structures and practices based on the assumption that the backgrounds of specific student groups make them inferior. Rina described a change she made in a school that catered to students from both an urban area with generally lower socioeconomic backgrounds and a suburban area with higher socioeconomic standings. This change reflected her opposition to viewing urban students as inferior based on their backgrounds:

Before I took over as principal of this school, they used to sort children into classes based on "levels." But, funnily enough, all the suburban kids always ended up in the top classes while the city kids were in the lower class. The so-called "weaker" group had classes downstairs and did everything separately. Some of the older staff used to say that the high-performing students wouldn't want to study here if we mixed things up. But I put an end to that nonsense when I stepped in.

Like Jack above, Rina uncovered inequity within the school upon assuming the role of principal. She did not hesitate to make a change immediately upon taking office. (It should be noted that although she was a new principal at this school, she already had experience serving as a principal in two other schools.) This change occurred about seven years before the interview. However, she continues to view this episode as a defining contrast between her leadership style and that of his predecessors.

Another way to promote equity through recognition was found when the study participants worked to ensure equity in the role models shown in the school. Lily said:

Last summer, we hung pictures of inspirational figures around the school. I insisted that not all the figures be white men. It was important to me to include individuals from various countries of origin and to represent both men and women, even though it took some effort to find them. I want students to understand that role models come from all backgrounds and genders.

Lily promoted the understanding that greatness and inspiration come from people of all origins and genders because she believed in the importance of diversity. She felt that students should see role models who reflect their own backgrounds and experiences, helping them feel valued and motivated. By showcasing a diverse range of inspirational figures, she aimed to foster an inclusive environment where every student could aspire to achieve their best.

Representation

The interviews conducted for the current study reveal that the participants implemented representation to promote equity by ensuring diverse involvement when consulting parents about the school's mission and programs. They recognized that the majority of active parents were those whose home culture aligned most closely with the school's norms and values. Consequently, principals made a concerted effort to consider the beliefs, goals, and interests of culturally diverse families. Yael emphasized:

Regardless of their income or education, all parents want the school to be effective, so I want to hear all voices. Some parents may not readily agree to participate in discussions about the school's vision and programs, but I work hard to engage families from different backgrounds.

Yael claimed that to genuinely reflect the community's diversity, it was essential to engage all parents, not just those who already felt comfortable within the existing school culture. This approach helped her to ensure that the school's mission and programs were shaped by a wide range of perspectives and experiences, thereby fostering a more equitable educational setting.

The study participants also promoted equity through representation in the school's middle leadership and senior management team. This approach aimed to reflect the diversity of the teaching staff in decision-making positions, thereby fostering a more equitable leadership structure. For instance, Alon emphasized the importance of gender representation by ensuring that the proportion of female teachers in these leadership roles matched or exceeded their proportion in the overall school staff: "It is unacceptable for a school where most teachers are females to be led primarily by males." Moreover, the study participants believed that by prioritizing equitable representation, the school could create a leadership team that better understood and addressed the needs of its diverse student populations. As Diana said: "When our leadership reflects our student body, we're better equipped to create policies and programs that resonate with all students."

Another aspect of representation concerned the proportion of different student groups in special education classes and low-ability groups. The study participants believed these classes should reflect the diversity of the overall school population. This interpretation of representation is not related to the political dimension of equity but is instead associated with reframing, which will be discussed in the following section.

Reframing

Interviews with the study participants pointed to their efforts to promote equity in the school by reframing common frames related to equity in education. For example, Ravit reframed colorblindness, referring to the ideology of ignoring racial and ethnic differences to treat all individuals equally. She identified biased assessments among teachers when assigning students to special

education classes and claimed that while the assignment process was allegedly colorblind, in practice, the special education classes had a substantial proportion of Black students.

You know, it's interesting. I've noticed that when it comes to assigning students to special education classes, the criteria often seem to be influenced by the student's skin color. Although it's never stated explicitly, Black students are much more likely to be placed in special education. We really need to take a closer look at who is being put in these classes.

Ravit observed that although the students' race was not explicitly stated, teachers recommended special education placement for black students to a greater extent instead of focusing solely on students' needs and abilities. For her, colorblindness concealed biases against particular groups. By highlighting these biased practices, she emphasized the importance of scrutinizing and correcting the criteria used for placing students in special education, thereby promoting a more equitable and individualized approach.

Another area in which the study participants reframed colorblindness was the discipline policies and practices. While the study participants viewed the management of student behavior as a crucial component of the school climate, they disagreed that a policy of colorblindness would hide discrimination within it. Maya asserted:

A zero-tolerance policy has its merits in establishing a safe and orderly school environment by firmly conveying that certain behaviors won't be tolerated. However, if this zero-tolerance approach results in students with specific characteristics facing harsh punitive consequences like suspension and expulsion, I don't favor it.

To address student behavior using an equity approach, Maya emphasized the importance of considering whether the school's disciplinary policy is aimed at exercising authority over students or fostering their positive and comprehensive human development. Consequently, she advocated for proactive and preventive strategies in school discipline, which differ from control-oriented punitive measures primarily intended to ensure student compliance.

Another belief that the study participants reframed to promote equity concerned the subject matters deemed more suitable for female students. They emphasized offering female students equal opportunities in math and science, arguing that stereotypes can lead to lower expectations from teachers, reduced opportunities to participate in advanced courses, and a lack of encouragement to pursue careers in STEM fields. Such biases can undermine female students' confidence and limit their academic and professional prospects, perpetuating gender disparities in these areas (Samuel). Additionally, they provided female students with equal opportunities to play soccer and other sports, rejecting the notion that girls are not as interested in these activities as boys (Tammy).

Discussion

The current study aims to conceptualize the responsibilities of principals in promoting equity within their schools. Data analysis indicates that the four Rs of strong equity (Cochran-Smith and Keefe, 2022) can be applied to school leadership, highlighting four key responsibilities for principals. The first responsibility is redistribution, which involves allocating various school resources to ensure fair or improved access to educational opportunities. The current study suggests that redistribution

addresses not only financial and material resources but also the equitable distribution of teacher quality. This is “defined as both providing well-prepared and effective teachers to all schools and students, including those traditionally without access” (Cochran-Smith and Keefe, 2022: 22). Teacher effectiveness encompasses not only the ability to develop students’ literacy and numeracy skills but also the capacity to understand, relate to, and respond to students’ social and emotional needs, thereby enhancing their sense of well-being. The second responsibility is recognition, which involves eliminating structures and practices rooted in assumptions of inferiority associated with specific student backgrounds. This study indicates that recognition addresses characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and the distinction between urban and suburban students. The third responsibility is representation, which focuses on ensuring diversity in the school’s decision-making processes. The present study highlights representation in the context of the school’s middle leadership and among engaged parents. The fourth responsibility is reframing, which involves reshaping prevalent perspectives related to equity in education. This study found reframing particularly relevant to the concept of colorblindness, which is the approach of ignoring background characteristics to treat all individuals equally (Richards, 2020). The study participants considered colorblindness to be detrimental to achieving equity.

The four responsibilities are related to four dimensions of social justice: redistribution is the economic dimension, recognition is the cultural dimension, representation is the political dimension, and reframing is the perceptual dimension. Moreover, the first responsibility, redistribution, and the third responsibility, representation, primarily require practical changes in decisions, policies, and structures. Once a principal commits to these responsibilities, they have “only” to identify practical ways to implement them effectively. Conversely, the second responsibility, recognition, and the fourth responsibility, reframing, necessitate a shift in mindset. This involves recognizing that diverse backgrounds are valuable assets students bring to the school and understanding that certain ideologies, such as colorblindness, may perpetuate inequity.

Figure 2 illustrates the framework of strong equity for school principals, encompassing four key responsibilities: redistribution, recognition, representation, and reframing. Each responsibility corresponds to a dimension of social justice: redistribution aligns with the economic dimension,

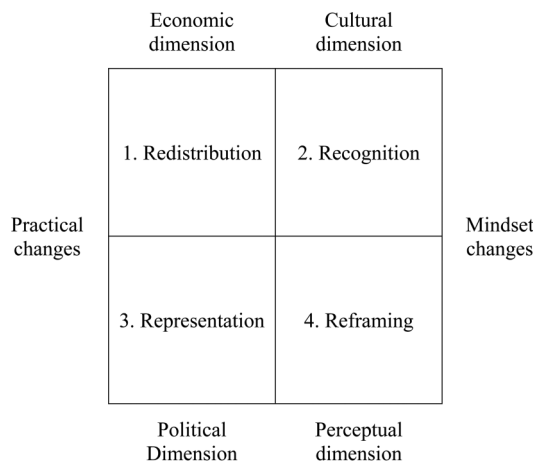


Figure 2. The four Rs of strong equity for school principals.

recognition with the cultural dimension, representation with the political dimension, and reframing with the perceptual dimension. Redistribution and representation primarily necessitate practical changes, whereas recognition and reframing require mindset changes.

The four responsibilities were not found to the same extent among the study participants. The redistribution responsibility was most frequently mentioned. When equity includes only the responsibility of redistribution, it is considered thin equity (Cochran-Smith and Keefe, 2022: 22), which attributes the cause of inequity solely to the unequal and unfair distribution of educational resources and opportunities, thereby suggesting that the solution lies mainly in redistributing these educational goods and services. While the redistribution of educational resources is beneficial and indeed a crucial component of strong equity, it is not sufficient. Equity requires more than just redistribution; it necessitates challenging the systems and structures that perpetuate inequity, recognizing the diverse needs and backgrounds of learners and communities, and including the voices of marginalized and minoritized groups in establishing educational values and goals for all students.

However, this study demonstrates that strong equity applies to school leadership. The frequency of redistribution can be explained in several ways. One possible explanation is that not all elements of strong equity may be equally applicable in school leadership. While redistribution can be applied in many areas of school operation, other elements of strong equity may be relevant only to specific aspects of school life. Additionally, redistribution is more intuitive, whereas other elements of strong equity require a higher level of awareness. Another contributing factor could be the Israeli context, where equity leadership development is rarely emphasized in the preparation programs and in-service professional learning of Israeli principals. Training programs often lack comprehensive modules on promoting equity in schools, leaving principals inadequately equipped to address this challenge. Furthermore, national education policies do not emphasize equity, resulting in a significant gap in the promotion of social justice within schools. There are no policy-driven initiatives or structured incentives to support the creation of a more equitable school environment (Arar, 2019; Sabbagh and Resh, 2018). This gap in training may explain why Israeli principals predominantly exhibit thin equity. Furthermore, the limited research on how Israeli principals actively promote equity in their schools (Feniger et al., 2021; Pinson, 2022; Sarid and Binhas, 2023) may also contribute to the narrow implementation of strong equity practices.

Turning to practical applications, it is advisable to introduce the framework of strong equity to current and aspiring principals. This framework should be incorporated into educational leadership programs for aspiring principals and mentoring programs for new principals transitioning into instructional leadership roles. The need for explicit discussion of strong equity remains relevant throughout a principal's career and should be a recurring topic in professional development meetings for in-service principals. Additionally, in evaluating principals, superintendents should include criteria based on principals' promotion of strong equity. Thus, the study's findings highlight the importance of cultivating an understanding of strong equity among all stakeholders involved in the field of educational leadership.

Limitations and future research

This study provides new insights into the critical role principals play in promoting equity; however, it has several limitations. First, the study was conducted within a specific context—the Israeli context. While the conceptual framework may be applicable globally, local context will likely shape specific applications and examples. Future comparative research should investigate how principals in various countries integrate instructional leadership with a social justice

orientation. Understanding these differences can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for developing strong equity leadership. Second, the data relied on self-reported information, which may be affected by participants' subjective perspectives and recall accuracy. To improve research outcomes, future studies could incorporate direct observations and interviews with teachers to gain a deeper understanding of principals' equity promotion practices. Additionally, this study did not explore potential relationships between principals' perceptions of equity promotion and their personal characteristics, such as gender, experience, and education. Future research, including a larger number of participants, should aim to uncover any possible associations among these variables.

Conclusion

Principals play a pivotal role in promoting equity within their schools. The primary focus of this study was to provide a clearer understanding of the specific responsibilities involved. The findings add to the existing body of literature by illustrating how the framework of strong equity, defined by the four Rs—redistribution, recognition, representation, and reframing—can be effectively applied to school leadership. *Redistribution* involves reallocating educational resources to achieve equity. *Recognition* entails acknowledging, respecting, and valuing the diverse backgrounds, traditions, and perspectives within the school community. *Representation* ensures that minoritized students and families have a voice in determining norms, valued knowledge, and curriculum priorities. *Reframing* involves reshaping common perspectives related to equity in education. This framework outlines the essential responsibilities that principals must undertake to effectively promote equity in their schools. The study recommends incorporating the framework of strong equity into principal training, mentoring, professional development, and evaluations to ensure its ongoing emphasis throughout a principal's career and among all educational leadership stakeholders.


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