Beyond the Rhetoric:
Exploring the Concept of Social Justice with Principals through Dilemma Analysis

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Introduction

Social justice has become an educational buzz word, often spoken of in utopian terms with increasing interest in how it should be enacted by leaders and through school policies and procedures (Bogotch, 2002; Gerwitz, 1998; North, 2006). However, as a concept that encompasses a wide range of orientations, claims, debates, and dialogue, it has been criticized as a “highly political, fluid, and slippery” (Griffiths, 2003, p. 41) discourse that is used by “educators, educational researchers, and educational policymakers [who] frequently employ this catchphrase without offering an explanation of its social, cultural, economic, and political significance” (North, 2006, p. 507). Trend (1992) also raises concerns that social justice has been “accused of romanticizing political struggle while doing little to alter power imbalances within school itself” (p. 25). Apple (2006) calls this “romantic possibilitarianism” (p. 53) because discussion stops at the rhetoric of dreamy alternatives and focuses too little on analysis and action.

Interest and research pertaining to social justice within educational leadership has emerged in the poststructural era of educational administration, a time marked by recognition of the tenuous nature of meaning and characterized by a focus on values, human agency, social construction, documentation of lived experience, and the moral exercise of power in leadership (Heck & Hallinger, 2005; Maxcy, 1994; Miron & Elliott, 1994). Poststructuralism challenges essentialist thinking and positions the economic, social, cultural, and political aspects of any particular context under scrutiny. Concurrently, globalization has required school leaders to provide meaning, purpose, and community to increasingly diverse school populations with “pressures of accountability, the reality of fiscal constraint, [and] the persistence of political interference” (Shields, 2004, p. 110). These influences on school leadership render it complex and rife with contradictions that originate in evolving socio-political notions of education (Brill,
A growing awareness of injustices such as achievement gaps, academic streaming, unequal allocation of resources, cultural chasms, and a disproportionate focus on the behavioural challenges of minority students has required educational leaders to interrogate the underlying causes and imagine leadership that successfully influences equitable, inclusive, and democratic educational experiences for all children (Apple, 2006; Brown, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Shields, 2004). Accordingly, Heck and Hallinger (2005) maintain that “an increasing number of scholars are approaching educational leadership as a humanistic and moral endeavour rather than a scientific one” (p. 229). While the work of many scholars is constructed on a theoretical framework based on “the application of moral, transformative, and socially just leadership conceptualizations and practices” (Dantley & Tillman, 2010, p. 20), not all of them assign “social justice” as the qualifier; for example, moral leadership (Fullan, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1992), transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Leithwood, 2007), progressive leadership (McKenzie et al., 2008), and critical leadership (Bates, 2006; Foster, 1989; Freire, 1970). These leadership theories embrace the tension which is an inevitable by-product of examining “the dis-junction between ideal and reality, privilege and oppression, surface change and the dismantling of structural barriers” (Taylor, 2003, p. 4).

Conceptualizations of educational leadership have evolved from an emphasis on patriarchal, authoritative, and functional understandings of management to instruction, communities of practice, and justice (Brien & Williams, 2009; Bush, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2005). This shift has occurred through paradigm changes in leadership theory which have more recently focused on critical practices and visions rooted in the concepts of relational pedagogy and social justice. Regard for hierarchies of power has also shifted to distributed models of leading. These shifts, however, conflict with the value that is placed on post-welfarism accountability through achievement outcomes, standardization, the cultural emphasis on
individualism, and an ethic of production (Apple, 2006; Blackmore, 2006; Gerwitz, 1998; Leithwood, 2007; Stevenson, 2007). Many critics have therefore come to the conclusion that traditional leadership theory and practice cannot support social justice because it “obviates the possibility of establishing a caring ethic by reifying traditional bureaucratic structures in schools, where the goals are control, standardization, and bureaucratic maintenance–the antithesis of situation-specific, holistic, relationship-building caring” (Marshall, 1995, p. 490). Heck and Hallinger (2005) note that any change will require a different set of intellectual tools that aptly reflect a shift in the purpose of educational leadership. However, as long as educational leaders are “caught inside the tensions created by the cultural images and power of having to be perceived publicly as a strong leader, while intellectually and morally recognizing the worth of others, inside and outside of schools” (Bogotch, 2002, p. 154), change will be slow-going.

**Researcher’s Positionality**

Interpretive inquiry recognizes the subjectivity of the researcher and the subsequent impact that background, history, context, and prior understandings have on the researcher’s interpretation. Consequently, it is important to outline my positionality as the researcher.

I found myself at a crossroads in my fifth year of administration, frustrated by the unrelenting contradictions and demands to which I invested time and attention, combined with a subtle but persistent feeling that there must be more to my leadership purpose as it related to matters of justice. The management versus leadership conflict that I was experiencing had reached a pinnacle of angst on three levels: the desire to envision authentic learning opportunities versus the demands of being an enforcer, system builder, cultural and equity promoter (Brill, 2008); the ideal of creating spaces for meaningful communities of learners versus the reality of standardization, accountability, and resistance; and the philosophical ideas about society, learning, and education versus the lived experiences of what Maxine Greene
(1978) calls “patterned behaviour and assigned roles” (pp. 42-43).

These concerns have resulted from my engagement in a variety of dilemmas and decision points that have increased consciousness about my beliefs and prompted a desire to more closely analyze my day-to-day practices through a critical lens of how I came to be socialized as a leader. Posner (2009) describes this aspiration as authentic leadership which manifests itself in the ability to communicate “beliefs through … words and actions that uniquely represent who [I] am” (p. 4). Authentic leadership is a concept that acknowledges the connection between values and behaviours which is evident in the ability to resist contextual pressures (Branson, 2007). Leaders who function with this type of clarity and congruence have been empirically shown to be “confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and high on moral character” (Branson, 2007, p. 226). Furthermore, authentic leaders have a defined cognitive awareness which “acknowledges their physical and cognitive limitations, to be aware of the propensity for their thoughts to be influenced by personal desires and inaccurate information and to account for the interdependency of their actions with the lives of others” (Branson, 2007, p. 226).

For these reasons, I have come to the conclusion that in order to be self-assured and focused as a school leader, I need to “live deliberately” (Lyons, 2010, p.xii) through a defined sense of identity and an articulated vision for what decisions I make and why. Posner (2009) affirms that “clarity of values provides the confidence to make the tough decisions [and] to act with determination” (p. 4). This notion is also supported by the research findings of Komives et al. (2009) which indicate that “striving for congruence and internal confidence” (p. 20) is a synthesizing phase in the higher stages of the identity development of leaders.

By the nature of leading in a single-administrator school, I have generally embarked on these reflective exercises and dilemma analyses independently, save for the incidental conversation with an administrative colleague which is often hurried and without the depth and
breadth required to dissect the important influences on decision making. In search of a process for reflecting on these tensions, my coursework and research in the Ph.D. in Education cohort focusing on transformative teaching, learning, and leading led me to critical theory and its focus on power, structures, inequity of systems, and a social change vision. The has helped me to understand some of the influences on my socialization as a leader. My research on social justice leadership has also helped to clarify the how and why of social justice in education, namely that social justice is embedded in the practices of enhancing access and agency-building in education and from changes that occur in society as a result of how we instruct and support students in justice-oriented actions and advocacy. Studying transformative practices has helped me to understand how decision points, policies, and practices support and hinder equity, democracy, and relationships. To assume that others might share my enthusiasm for this topic and process would be presumptuous; however, I know from personal and professional relationships and the evidence embedded in the literature that school principals experience isolation and challenges in their roles and a lack of time to contemplate, process, and reflect on decisions. Combs, Miser, and Whitaker (1999) recognize this sentiment in their observation that “in the midst of this chaotic and diverse climate, effective school leaders search within themselves to find the ‘why’ of their own and others’ work. Without a broad purpose to guide this work, they find themselves grinding out responses to daily encounters without any sense of integration or meaning” (p. 148).

Social justice leadership has become an increasingly topical and relevant subject for local administrators. In recent years, there have been two large social justice conferences as well as the ongoing media coverage of the development of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights which endeavours “to promote respect for others and to encourage reflection and dialogue” (Canadian Museum for Human Rights, 2010). Founded in my own processes of trying to reconcile how social justice principles are embedded in my leadership practice through my coursework, I was
prompted to seek an understanding of how other principals conceptualize this nebulous concept and what their perceptions are of how it influences their decision making in deli

m as.

In recognition of my theoretical sensitivity which has been developed through my personal and professional experiences and prior knowledge in this topic, it was necessary to bracket my values and perspectives throughout the research process.

**Purpose of the Study**

Using a qualitative interpretivist approach including inductive and emergent processes, this research sought to understand how principals conceptualize social justice and how their understandings influence decisions made when confronting a dilemma. For this research, study participants engaged in reflective practice through a series of three group dialogue sessions that examined the social justice tensions within the leadership practices of school leaders embedded in the analysis of leadership dilemmas. This study utilized Marshall’s and Rossman’s (2011) understanding of a dilemma as a “situation wherein the participant has had to make ‘difficult or heart-wrenching choices’” (p. 191). Each principal considered his/her own dilemma(s) of leadership practice as it related to conceptualizations of social justice. Reflective discussions of professional practice were employed to facilitate the conditions for principals to think reflexively about the tensions inherent in leadership decision making. This study also included two sets of semi-structured interviews that focused on individual reflective practice and participant understandings of what constitutes socially just leadership practice before and after the group dialogue sessions. At the time of writing this paper, analysis was not complete; however, it should be noted that discourse analysis and dilemma analysis procedures will be used.

This interpretivist inquiry was guided by an epistemology that recognizes the subjectivity, social construction, and situatedness of knowledge whereby meaning is negotiated and renegotiated through interaction and dialogue (Creswell, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991;
Willis, 2007). These theoretical underpinnings suggest an unpredictable and nonlinear process of learning that requires an awareness of the internal and external influences on relationships and experiences as well as a shift in the “principles and practices that inform relationships, curricula, pedagogy, organization of schools and their connections with and recognition of the communities they serve” (Armstrong, 2011, p. 9). Accordingly, the research process needed to account for (a) the nature of differences among people in attributes, abilities, aptitudes, aims, needs, and values (Griffiths, 1998) and (b) the importance of reflexivity and dialectical processes for sense-making. Through social constructivism and situated learning, participants became more knowledgeable others to one another, where reflection, dialogue and co-construction of ideas through dilemma analysis was used as the vehicle for scaffolding and constructing meaning out of experiences.

**Research Questions**

The research questions were designed to engage participants in dialoguing about how the values and philosophy of social justice leadership are and are not evident in the decision points and dilemmas that they have experienced. As it pertains to the deconstruction of those dilemmas, the following research questions were examined:

Research Question 1: What constitutes a “social justice leadership dilemma” for school leaders?

Research Question 2: What influences impact the decisions that school leaders make when facing a social justice leadership dilemma?

Research Question 3: What are school leaders’ understandings of the concept of social justice, and how do these understandings influence the decisions made by school leaders confronting a dilemma?

**Significance of the Study**

Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) asserts that “shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.” This is echoed in
the work of educational scholar, Theoharis (2007) who says that decades of “good” leaders have perpetuated injustices in schools. Marshall (2004) argues that misunderstandings of what constitutes social justice may be attributed to a lack of self-awareness and skills that hinder well-meaning administrators to move beyond “simplistic management or quick fixes to address complex educational dilemmas steeped in an array of social, political, and cultural contexts” (p. 7). However, Cooper (2009) acknowledges that school administrators know enough to identify what the injustices are and to engage in the discourse of trying to solve them. The challenge, he explains, lies in a lack of self-awareness that can “devalue and unwittingly denigrate students’ culturally-relevant knowledge, home culture, and language” (p. 699). Griffiths (2003) describes this as the DKDK zone: “don’t know what you don’t know” (p. 142), and she cites “a lack of recognition of one’s own privilege” (p. 142) as the largest obstruction to authentic awareness. In light of the explanations about why such an optimistic approach is tremendously challenging for leaders, Gerwitz (1998) wonders what conceptualizations of social justice will “usefully inform the direction and content of collective action” (p. 477). Further, Griffiths (2003) questions whether the discourse of social justice can “survive an encounter with real people” (p. 25). This study intended to provide a platform for principals seeking this clarity through the vehicle of articulating and constructing knowledge about the concept of social justice.

Interest in the concept of social justice leadership has prompted researchers to ask what socially-just schools look like (Bogotch, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1997), what constitutes just educational practices (Alemán, 2009; Apple, 2006; Gerwitz, 1998; North, 2006; Ryan & Katz, 2007; Taysum & Gunter, 2008), how leaders are leading with a social justice agenda (Hoffman & Burrello, 2004; Kose, 2009; Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007), and how leadership development programs should reflect social justice values (Brown, 2004; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe & Orr, 2010). Empirical studies which highlight how societal inequities are
reproduced in schooling have also been broadly examined in the literature (Apple, 2006, 2008; Basu, 2004; Buras & Apple, 2005; Gerwitz, 1998; Manteaw, 2008). While most studies delineate attributes, philosophies, and theory about social justice leadership, none of these outline a process for principals to examine and analyze the dilemma-embedded decision points of those who are oriented towards social justice leadership. Most of the research on social justice leadership has also focused on effective schools and their practices as the unit of analysis as opposed to the dilemma analysis of leaders who examine their own and others’ knowledge and understanding of justice as it relates to the decisions that they make. Beyond the theory and concept of this research, this research provided time and space for school principals to individually and collectively debrief their own and others’ dilemmas and to allow them to interrogate their beliefs, question institutional routines, and more consciously examine what shapes, limits, and determines decisions they make when facing a leadership dilemma.

Dissemination of the results of this study in the form of publications and conference presentations will contribute to the growing knowledge base on socially-just leadership practice and how differing conceptualizations of social justice influence the decision making of principals, potentially leading to improved and critiqued practice.

**Delimitations of the Study**

This study focused on the context of social justice from the perspective of two groups of five principals each, one group from public schools and one group from Catholic schools in a large urban centre in Western Canada. The main criteria for selection of participants included a motivation and willingness to engage critically about their leadership practices, specifically as they relate to (a) dilemmas that cause tension and angst and for which there are no clear-cut answers and (b) conceptualizations of social justice dilemmas. The group dialogue consisted of two separate sessions of two hours each and one combined, two-hour session. One-hour, semi-
structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant before the group
dialogue sessions began and again at the conclusion of the group dialogue sessions.

Limitations of the Study

Since the purpose of interpretivist research is to reflect understanding (Willis, 2007), this
study did not seek to discover universal theory. Accordingly, the findings of this study will not
be generalizable because of the limited sample of participants selected from only one geographic
context. The subjectivity of the researcher’s selection of participants was a limitation of the
purposive sampling procedure since bias can impact selection and affect the validity of the data.
Additionally, the researcher’s experience as a school principal is recognized as an influence such
that her own preconceived notions of social justice and experience with decision making in
leadership dilemmas may have shaped the analysis of the research. Finally, the data for this
research relies on self-reporting which is subject to bias, and participants may avoid truthfulness
due to the emotional risks of problematizing their practice. These factors may impact the
findings of the research.

The small scale and intimate nature of this work was intended to garner rich and varied
descriptions that would (a) contribute to a knowledge base about social justice conceptualizations
which influence principal decision making when confronted by a dilemma and (b) resonate with
other school leaders in similar contexts who face the complexities of decision making and
grapple with like dilemmas. The researcher’s theoretical sensitivity, which has been gained
through experience as a school principal and her encounters with social justice dilemmas,
enhanced her insight and ability to dialogue with participants, probe for data, and interpret the
findings. Since the small size of the groups lent itself to relational processes and the time
commitment was achievable for busy principals, this study enabled participants to engage in
purposeful and focused reflective practice in which they learned about and processed their
understanding of and practice in social justice leadership. Accordingly, data collection and analysis focused on the methodology of reflecting understanding. This study did not intend to examine the subsequent changes in social justice leadership practices following the research, nor did it aim to study the impact that said leadership practices have on improving the justice within the participants’ schools. Though the scope of the study did not include directly influencing change in principal practice, the design of the study and its findings facilitated possibilities for change.

**Research Frameworks**

Grounded in an interpretation which Fay (1987) describes as the capacity of humans to “create themselves on the basis of their own self-interpretations” (p. 47), the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological underpinnings of this research are hinged on a belief that humans are active beings who have the capacity for intelligence, curiosity, reflectiveness, and wilfulness, but who sometimes exercise these dispositions unconsciously; nevertheless, they have the capacity to transform themselves. Fay defines these characteristics as follows: intelligence—the ability to alter beliefs and behaviour based on new information about the world; curiosity—the disposition to seek out information about one’s environment in order to provide a fuller basis for one’s assessments; reflectiveness— the disposition to evaluate one’s own beliefs and desires on the basis of some criteria; and wilfulness—the disposition to be and to act on the basis of one’s own reflections (p. 48). Further to this, Robinson (1994) outlines how humans are externally limited by social, cultural, and organizational structures and forces and internally limited by beliefs, attitudes, and values. Research within this epistemological standpoint sees “individuals [as] knowledgeable and creative agents who, in forging relationships and constructing various selves, significantly shape the societies and organizations they inhabit” (Collinson, 2003, p. 542).
Situating Social Justice within Educational Leadership

Historically, social justice was a concept that referred specifically to power imbalances among social classes. In the 1970s and 1980s, the term broadened to include gender and race and the introduction of equality as an “organizing concept” (Griffiths, 2003, p. 41). The terms anti-discrimination and affirmative action were introduced in the 1980s, particularly as they related to increasing activism in social movements (Blackmore, 2006; Griffiths, 2003), and by the 1990s, the qualifier social justice was reinvented to include wide-ranging categories of injustice; for example, Young’s (1990) depiction of the five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Delineating between distributional justice and relational justice also dominated much of the literature (Gerwitz, 1998; North, 2006), and these concepts were allocated as different spheres of justice that incorporate cultural, participative, and economic aspects (Fraser, 1997; North, 2006). Other scholars have also explored the notion of pluralistic versus individualistic justice as it pertains to “socially constructed agreements to emerge around specific problems, solutions, and courses of action” (Bogotch, 2002, p. 154).

Griffiths (2003) concludes that there is a lack of an agreed terminology that muddles both the theory and the practice of social justice, and she advises that since critical ideas about social justice are transient, “it is necessary to keep casting about in a critical and thoughtful way … to [prevent] theory from ossifying and becoming permanently embedded in an out-dated set of examples and contexts” (p. 45). She has crafted one of the most accessible working definitions of social justice:

… a dynamic state of affairs that is good for the common interest, where that is taken to include both the good of each and the good of all, in an acknowledgement that one depends on the other. The good depends on mutual recognition and respect and also on a right distribution of benefits and responsibilities. It includes paying attention to individual
perspectives at the same time as dealing with issues of discrimination, exclusions, and recognition, especially on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality, special needs, and social class. (Griffiths, 2003, p. 54)

Defining social justice leadership in education is an equally elusive endeavour because it is a temporal concept that is dependent on the circumstances, opportunities, and resources of any given context (Bogotch, 2002; Gerwitz, 1998; McKenzie et al., 2008). Many scholars agree that this concept is difficult to define because essentializing it—applying one meaning that can be commonly applied to all contexts and persons—implies a concrete, structural-functionalist paradigm that may fall prey to “adjustment philosophies marked by ‘fix-it’ literature” (Maxcy, 1994, p. 159). Accordingly, Brooks and Miles (2008) insist that social justice leadership “rejects the rationale-technical and efficiency-focussed conceptions of leadership that form the balance of the field’s traditional knowledge base” (p. 106). Social justice leadership, therefore, resists the temptation to “materialize and concretize in measurable products what is essentially a relational state of affairs” (Maxcy, 1994 p. 159). Rooted in the epistemology of social constructivism, social justice leadership demonstrates an unwavering value for human capital which prompts interrogation about and action against the contradictions, inequity, exclusion, oppression, and marginalization in schools in order to challenge hegemonic structures that are institutionalized in the norms and practices of schooling (Bogotch, 2002; Brown, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Gerwitz, 1998; Taylor, 2003; Theoharis, 2007; Young, 1990). More akin to a “disposition” (Cooper, 2009; North, 2006), social justice leaders champion a “discourse of interdependence, an ethic of otherness, and a politics of recognition” (Gerwitz, 1998, p. 477). In their examination of academic achievement and inclusive practices, social justice-oriented leaders underpin their practice with a regard for relationships, democracy, and empowerment which is realized through their decision points, allocation of resources, and concern for the
achievement potential of all students (Cooper, 2009; McKenzie et al., 2008; North, 2006).

Dantley and Tillman (2010) identify five common themes among the literature on social justice-oriented educational leadership, namely:

- A consciousness of the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of schools;
- The critique of the marginalizing behaviours and predispositions of schools and their leadership;
- A commitment to the more genuine enactment of democratic principles in schools;
- A moral obligation to articulate a counterhegemonic vision or narrative of hope regarding education; and
- A determination to move from rhetoric to civil rights activism. (p. 23)

Shields’ (2010) describes the disposition of social justice leaders as people who demonstrate “an awakening of global curiosity; the ability to establish strong dialogic relationships; a transformative approach to leadership; and a willingness to take a stance as a public intellectual (p. 138-139). This is supported by the literature which highlights the need for school principals to build strong relationships through which to practice critical reflection and cooperative inquiry in order to hone the capacity to identify what shapes, limits, and determines how they cope within a complex system of competing demands. Starkly demarcated from anything managerial, these descriptions of social justice leadership are intended to generate a democratic community through reflection and action that is embedded in both political change efforts and day-to-day critical practices. Although the specifics about what social justice actually looks like are context-specific—which is in keeping with the constructivist framework of the theory—there are several pragmatic offerings among the literature that include guiding principles, descriptions, and prompts to support the social justice leader as outlined in the paragraphs following.
Griffiths’ (2003) framework for social justice is built on a foundation of “listening, talking, consultation, cooperation, respect, and value accorded to people” (p. 59). With an appreciation that her offering may be interpreted as “cosy” or “soft” (p. 59), she insists that leaders for social justice must consistently incite discomfort by asking challenging questions about learning, personal identity, difference, self, and evidence.

Brill (2008) explains that social justice leadership is enacted in the principal’s role as an “equity promoter” (p. 51), particularly as it relates to being an advocate to address power imbalances and inequity regarding data on student achievement, discipline, teacher hiring practices, allocation of resources, and the engagement of different parent communities. In his study of 246 narratives of principals, he noted that equity dilemmas about racism, sexism, homophobia, and discrimination based on religion, language, socioeconomics, or age were frequently experienced. Poignant narratives about the risk-taking and courageous conversations in which principals engage are documented as examples of what social justice leadership looks like in practice, and Brill notes that such practices are evident in the school leader’s role as an enforcer, system builder, and instructional leader.

Theoharis (2007) and Kose (2009) also acknowledge how important the principal’s role is in the cultivation of equitable cultures, structures, processes, curricula, and assessments. Building an ethos of social justice is an important consideration of the social justice leader who resists the temptation to engage in individualistic, heroic, and martyred justice (Bogotch, 2002) in order to raise student achievement, re-center and enhance staff capacity, and strengthen culture and community (Theoharis, 2007). As delineated in Table 1, Theoharis advocates for deliberate practices that take “good” leadership to a new level because “decades of good leadership have created and sanctioned unjust and inequitable schools” (p. 253).

Table 1
### Characteristics of a Good Leader versus a Social Justice Leader

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good Leader</th>
<th>Social Justice Leader</th>
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<tr>
<td>Works with subpublics to connect with community</td>
<td>Places significant value on diversity, deeply learns about and understands that diversity, and extends cultural respect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaks of success for all children</td>
<td>Ends segregated and pull-out programs that prohibit both emotional and academic success for marginalized children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supports variety of programs for diverse learners</td>
<td>Strengthens core teaching and curriculum and insures that diverse students have access to that core</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitates professional development in best practices</td>
<td>Embeds professional development in collaborative structures and a context that tries to make sense of race, class, gender, and disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds collective vision of a great school</td>
<td>Knows that school cannot be great until the students with the greatest struggles are given the same rich opportunities both academically and socially as their more privileged peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowers staff and works collaboratively</td>
<td>Demands that every child will be successful and collaboratively addresses the problems of how to achieve that success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks and builds coalitions</td>
<td>Seeks out other activist administrators who can and will sustain her or him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses data to understand the realities of the school</td>
<td>Sees all data through a lens of equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands that children have individual needs</td>
<td>Knows that building community and differentiation are tools to ensure that all students achieve success together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works long and hard to make a great school</td>
<td>Becomes intertwined with the life, community, and soul of the school</td>
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McKenzie and Locke (2010) marry instructional leadership with the aims of transformative leadership in a more specific model called instructional leadership for social justice. Supported by research which indicates increased teacher effectiveness when principals are involved daily in teaching and learning with teachers by promoting and participating in teacher learning and development (Robinson et al., 2008), this paradigm supports equity consciousness and high quality, equity-oriented teaching skills through direct involvement and
inquiry with teachers which is built on a belief that (a) all children—regardless of a child’s race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, learning differences, culture, language, religion, and so on—are capable of high levels of academic success; (b) the adults in schools are primarily responsible for student learning; and (c) traditional school practices may work for some students but are not working for all children (Skrla, McKenzie & Scheurich, 2009, pp. 82-83). Overall, the general tenant of this philosophy is about building relationships that enable leaders to facilitate meaningful conversations that challenge educators to be reflective and responsive in their teaching practices. Simultaneously, leaders must engage in reflective practice about their own biases, positionality, and lived experiences in order to challenge themselves about how their actions impact the cultivation of just cultures, structures, processes, curricula, and assessments.

Reflective practice is a conscious and deliberate vehicle through which learners process experience in order to learn from it and change their practice (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere & Montie, 2006, p. 27). Robinson (1994) adds that interrogating the beliefs, attitudes, and values that constrain and conflict practitioners is a critical aspect of framing and reframing “puzzles, events, or problems of practice” (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 8).

Summary

Since just before the turn of the century, scholars have been trying to define the actions of social justice leadership. This is fitting, particularly because the criticism of social justice leadership is that it is mostly rhetorical. Yet, Fullan and Hargreaves (1998) assert that there is no ready-made answer to the ‘how’ question. Singular recipes for success grabbed from gurus, ‘bells and whistles’ workshops, or the latest management texts create dependency. Even when you know what research and published advice tells you, no one can prescribe exactly what you have learned and all the unique problems,
opportunities and peculiarities [your school] contains. You have to beat the path by walking in. (p. 83)

This is consistent with Bogotch’s (2002) insistence that “there can be no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices” (p. 153). Articulating an understanding of this nebulous concept through the vehicle of lived experiences is an important step that must precede misinformed action that reduces solutions to fix-it strategies which underestimate the complexity of equity dilemmas.

This study offered a unique approach to examining the understandings of school principals through reflective practices embedded in the analysis of a) how principals conceptualize social justice and socially-just leadership practice, and b) their understandings of the tensions inherent in leadership practice and decision-making when they are faced with leadership dilemmas. While there is a theoretical consensus that transformative leadership has the potential to address injustices perpetuated in schools, wide-spread changes in practice that bridge the gap between theory and effective responses to injustices are sparse (Griffiths, 2003). Public intellectualism in the form of increased scholarship, research, and teaching; higher profile throughout the profession; collaboration between researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners; and initiatives in the field will be necessary elements for the praxis of leadership for social justice to be realized (Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Heck & Hallinger, 2005; McKenzie & Locke, 2010). Apple (2008) echoes this sentiment in his assertion that leadership to promote educational policy and practice that bears witness to contradictions, inequity, and exploitation in schools will not lie in the hands of the “unattached intelligentsia” (p. 259).
References


