TEACHERS’ CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN A CONTEXT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:
PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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Introduction

Efforts to improve schools have been the focus of countless local and government reform initiatives, research studies, and public critiques during the past twenty-five years (Earl, Torrance, Sutherland, Fullan, & Ali, 2003; Louis, Toole, & Hargreaves, 1999; Spillane & Louis, 2002). Now, at the beginning of a new century, education researchers in many parts of the world continue to concentrate on expanding their knowledge of how to make schools better (Apple, 2000; Gale & Densmore, 2000; Levin, 2001). Several scholars and practitioners have identified the school as the key unit of change and have stressed that school improvement must enhance student learning and strengthen the school’s capacity for managing change (Earl et al., 2003; Fullan, 2003; Hopkins, 2002; Reynolds, Teddlie, Hopkins, & Stringfield, 2000; Spillane & Louis, 2002). However, the majority of school reforms have not adequately considered principles of social justice (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000; Hatcher, 1998; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Thrupp, 2001) and have been criticized for their “lack of attention to issues of equity and diversity” (Reynolds & Griffith, 2002, p. 21). Hargreaves (1998) aptly captures the essence of this critique of school reform. He remarks that, “until recently, there has been little attention to how systemic social inequalities and power imbalances do not just surround the school and its community as part of the change context, but permeate the politics of change within the school itself” (p. 291).

The impetus for this research evolved from a desire to further examine aspects of change internal to the school. The purpose of the research is to investigate teachers’ conceptions of social justice and the impact of their conceptions upon the design and implementation of school improvement initiatives aimed at helping students at risk of not fulfilling their educational potential. This research attempts to answer the questions:

1. How do teachers conceive of social justice as it relates to their students?
2. How do these conceptions influence the teachers’ involvement in school improvement initiatives and their teaching practices?
3. What is the nature of the school improvement initiatives which were designed and implemented by the teachers?
4. How do these initiatives attempt to address distributive and cultural injustices?
The Context of the Study

The literature regarding school improvement uses terms such as “change,” “reform,” “improvement,” and “restructuring” interchangeably, even though the meaning of these words can vary substantially. Louis, et al. (1999) comment, "Change (defined as doing something differently) may occur without any improvement (defined as progress toward some desired end)” (p. 251). They also remind us that change is not the same as implementation even though the accomplishment of predetermined goals is considered by some to indicate reform. Spillane and Louis (2002) argue that school improvement must be about improving students' learning opportunities. Hopkins (1998) agrees, stating that school improvement is about raising student achievement through focusing on the teaching-learning process and the conditions which support it. It is about strategies for improving the school's capacity for providing quality education in times of change. It is not about blindly accepting the edicts of a centralized polity, and striving to implement these directives uncritically. (p. 1037)

Several recent education reforms have tended to conceive of change initiatives as separate from the social and political contexts of the school (Hatcher, 1998; Thrupp, 1999; Weiner, 2002). This approach reflects a view in which reforms are seen as generic change process techniques that employ generalized models and concepts which rarely acknowledge the impact of culture or socioeconomic status on school processes (Hatcher, 1998; Thrupp, 1999). School reform programs frequently convey a notion of school culture that refers only to the “official” culture of the school and exclude the identities, cultures, and experiences of the students. This type of “monoculturalism” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997) stands in sharp contrast to more egalitarian models of education reform which centre equity and cultural recognition over assimilation (Dei et al., 2000; Fraser, 1997; Young, 1990).

Models of school reform and improvement which portray education as technocratic and objective contribute to the notion that schools are socially neutral, meritocratic institutions which counteract social inequalities (Hargreaves, 1998; Torres, 1998). The effect on students of the failure of schools to address existing social inequity has been examined critically by a number of writers (Apple, 2003; Connell, 1993; Dei et al., 2000; Fine, 1989; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Reynolds & Griffith, 2002; Thrupp, 2001; Torres, 1998). These authors argue that egalitarian school reform has been replaced by a “decontextualized approach to
improvement issues and a rather diffident stance to the politics of reform” (Thrupp, 1999, p. 165). School reform and improvement programs may thereby actually increase social inequity instead of providing a more egalitarian education.

Social justice is generally considered to involve the principles and norms of social organization which reflect society’s responsibility to create structures that protect the dignity of individuals and provide equal consideration to all people according to their needs, talents, and choices (Groome, 1998; Miller, 1976; Vincent, 2003; Young, 1990). Traditional philosophical theories of justice have confined social justice to the realm of distributive justice, which deals with the morally proper distribution of benefits and burdens among society’s members. Some critical theorists (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003; Fraser, 1997; Young, 1990) argue that a plural conception of social justice is more appropriate, because a pluralistic view is concerned not just with the distribution of goods and resources, but also with social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. This latter view of social justice describes cultural or recognize justice (Fraser, 1997), and involves the recognition of a “politics of difference” (Young, 1990). School improvement programs based upon conceptions of social justice which include both distributive and cultural perspectives may be more capable of recognizing the identities, cultures, and experiences of the students and, therefore, create more egalitarian models of education. As the people who are in daily contact with students, teachers and their conceptions of social justice will necessarily play a pivotal role in the design and implementation of any school improvement program, especially those programs which aim to rectify social injustices.

In the one hundred and first Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Joseph Murphy (2002) summarizes the work of many education scholars in order to present a “framework for rethinking school administration” (p. 66). He describes this framework as “a powerful combination of three key concepts—school improvement, democratic community, and social justice” (p. 66). The research described in this paper reflects two of Murphy’s key concepts. This study explores aspects of the relationship between teachers’ conceptions of social justice and the establishment and sustainability of school improvement programs aimed at helping students fulfill their educational potential. The interpretations and examples provided by this research will add to existing knowledge and could potentially outline future directions for educational leadership and school administration which are rooted in Murphy’s concepts of school improvement, democratic community, and social justice.
Mortimore and Whitty (1997) report a strong negative correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school achievement. School improvement programs which are aimed at simply raising standards will not adequately address this problem, since there is a “crucial distinction between absolute and relative levels of attainment” (Hatcher, 1998, p. 268). Furthermore, as pointed out by Fraser (1997) and Cribb and Gewirtz (2003), tensions exist between the distributive and the recognitive/cultural conceptions of social justice. These tensions are sometimes acknowledged, but “attempts to engage adequately with their practical consequences are few and far between” (p. 19). The present study examines the experiences of teachers in one school as they grapple with the practical ramifications of redressing inequity and injustice for their students.

Methodology

This study utilized qualitative methodology based upon a constructivist paradigm which assumes that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds (Merriam, 1998). A single case study design (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) employing a historical case study was used in this research to develop a rich, in-depth understanding of the situation. Historical case studies typically involve “descriptions of institutions, programs, and practices as they have evolved over time” (Merriam, 1998, p. 35). Yin (2003) describes the unique advantages of the historical case study as involving “its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence–documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (p. 8).

Context

The case study described in this paper is being conducted over a six-month period, which began in February 2005. The school selected for this study is a secondary school located in a large urban centre within Manitoba. The school, which in this study will be called Rothman High, has a population of 500 students in Senior 1–Senior 4 (Grades 9-12) with 32 staff members. It is located in an older residential part of the city and serves a community which is diverse both socioeconomically and culturally. Since 1998, the staff at Rothman has collaborated with a school improvement network called the Manitoba School Improvement Network.
Program (MSIP). This nonprofit organization supports whole-school improvement as a vehicle for improving secondary schooling, with a particular emphasis on students in high-risk situations. Since the purpose of this study was to investigate teachers’ conceptions of social justice and to ascertain the impact of their conceptions upon the design and implementation of school improvement initiatives, selecting a school which had a history of developing school improvement programs through MSIP seemed appropriate.

**Data Sources**

In order to understand social justice and school improvement from the *emic* perspective of the principal and the teachers (Gall, et al., 2003), the data collection strategies employed in the study consisted primarily of focus group interviews (Gall, et al.; 2003; Mertens, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) and individual interviews (Stake, 1995; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The participants in the study included the principal of Rothman and four teachers systematically selected from an alphabetized list of the 32 staff members. Specific information about each of the participants is provided in Table 1.

Thus far in the study, one focus group interview and five individual interviews have been conducted. The first focus group interview was conducted prior to any of the individual interviews and involved all participants. The individual interviews occurred after the initial focus group interview. All interviews were audiotape recorded, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants (Gall, et al., 2003). Validity of the case study findings was enhanced through the use of procedures such as triangulation (Gall, et al., 2003; Mertens, 1998; Stake, 1995), member checking (Gall, et al.; 2003; Janesick, 2000), and the interpretive validity criteria described by Gall, et al. These criteria include notions of usefulness, contextual completeness, researcher positioning, and reporting style.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study followed an emergent design, utilizing a constant comparative method (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), so that some data analysis occurred while the data collection was still in progress (Charmaz, 2000; Gall, et al., 2003). Analysis of the focus group and individual interviews, documents, and field notes began with line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2000; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), and the documents were analyzed according to the
criteria for the interpretation of textual material suggested by Hodder (2000). The coded data were then organized into meaningful segments (Gall, et al., 2003) or categories (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). These categories were examined to identify themes or concepts and to develop propositions which assisted in interpreting the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Reflective analysis (Gall, et al., 2003) was used to make sense of the data.

Table 1
Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Years at Rothman</th>
<th>Teaching Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Law, History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Preliminary Findings

There are two themes which appear dominant in the data. These are: (a) teacher conceptions of social justice and (b) social justice actions. These themes, and relevant sub-themes and categories, are presented in Table 2.

Within the theme teachers’ conceptions of social justice, three sub-themes emerge. These include: (a) teacher conceptions of distributive justice; (b) teacher conceptions of cultural justice; and (c) teacher uncertainties regarding formal definitions of social justice. Detailed study findings regarding teacher conceptions of distributive justice are presented in the next section of this paper.
Table 2
Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ Conceptions of Social Justice</th>
<th>Social Justice Actions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher conceptions of distributive justice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Distributive justice</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understandings of rights</td>
<td>Regarding student rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understandings of needs</td>
<td>Regarding student needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understandings of desert</td>
<td>Regarding student desert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of conflict</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher conceptions of cultural justice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cultural justice</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Understandings of cultural justice</td>
<td>Democracy of emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understandings of cultural injustice</td>
<td>Active trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for cultural justice</td>
<td>Negotiated authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher perpetrated cultural injustices</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uncertainty of definition</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democracy of systems</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and routines</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Devolved responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democracy of scale</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Affirming differences</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In describing how to determine what each person is due, Miller (1976) describes three criteria which can serve as guidelines. These involve distributing goods and resources according to criteria involving an individual’s rights, deserts, or needs. Miller (1976) states that the rights in question “may be legal rights, institutional rights, or certain types of moral rights, such as the rights one derives from a promise or other nonlegal agreement” (p. 26). These rights are not dependent upon an individual’s behaviour or personal qualities because they usually are derived from publicly acknowledged rules, established practices, or past transactions. The conception of justice based on rights is sometimes referred to as conservative justice because it is concerned with “the recognition and protection of legal and other customary rights” (p. 25). Conservative justice deals with preserving the status quo of a social order over time.

The actual distribution of rights within a society can itself be assessed from the point of view of justice. How is it determined who is entitled to which rights? A widely accepted condition which is used to settle this question relates to the concept of desert. Desert involves the ideal of justice which aims to ensure that “the benefits people enjoy and the harms they suffer should be proportional to the goodness and badness of their lives—as closely as the contingencies of life allow” (Kekes, 2003, p. 45). Desert is dependent upon the actions and personal qualities of the individual and may be measured according to factors such as moral virtue, productive efforts, or capacities.

In addition to the notions of rights and desert, the concept of need can also be used to determine the distribution of goods and resources. Need refers to a lack or deficiency, which, if not remedied, will result in injurious consequences to the individual.

Miller (1976) points out that these three guidelines for distributive justice represent conflicting values. Rights and deserts, and rights and needs, “are contingently in conflict, since we may strive for a social order in which each person has a right to that (and only that) which he [sic] deserves, or to that (and only that) which he [sic] needs” (p. 28). However, in reality, the actual distribution of goods does not correspond solely to either of these criteria. Deserts and needs also conflict since no society is able to distribute goods according to the demands of both desert and need.

The criteria of rights, deserts, and needs are each viewed as sufficiently important aspects of justice that one cannot be utilized to the exclusion of the other two in developing a theory.
of justice. As a result, many social justice theorists have searched for a guiding principle or set of principles not only which would give some weight to each of these three criteria but which would also provide clear direction in cases of conflict. The set of principles provided in the contractual theory of justice developed by John Rawls has gained broad acceptance as a model of social justice (Gale & Densmore, 2000; Kekes, 2003; Miller, 1976; Young, 1990).

In his book *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls (1999) states that because “each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override . . . justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others” (p. 3). Rawls based his contractual theory of justice upon theories of social contract previously devised by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. The general conception of justice proposed by Rawls holds that primary goods in society, such as liberty, opportunity, income, wealth, and the bases of self-respect, should be distributed equally unless the unequal distribution of these goods would be of advantage to the least favoured. Rawls provides two principles of justice which further elaborate his theory:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all;
2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
   (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and
   (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (p. 266)

Rawls conceived of social justice as providing “a standard whereby the distributive aspects of the basic structure of society could be assessed” (p. 8). He proposed that his two principles of justice would serve in the role of “assigning rights and duties and in defining the appropriate division of social advantages” (p. 9).

**Teachers’ Understandings of Rights**

Miller (1976) refers to rights as being legal, institutional, or moral in nature. The principal of Rothman High, Joe Miller (a pseudonym) reveals an understanding of the legal
right of students in Manitoba to attend public school when he refers to the attendance policy in force at Rothman:

We have a separate policy for kids who are below the age of sixteen. We report attendance out on those kids, and the expectation is that they continue in their classes. From sixteen and beyond, there’s a process which most high schools follow, in which there is a phone call home after so many absences, a letter after so many more, a meeting, and perhaps a contract around staying in the class. If the student persists in the skipping, they could be withdrawn, and no-credited in the course . . . if you were challenged on withdrawing a student from a course just based strictly on attendance, then you probably wouldn’t have a leg to stand on. (Personal interview #1, lines 121-129)

An example of the understandings teachers have regarding the moral right of all to receive an education is captured in this exchange between Science teacher Frank Spence (pseudonym) and myself:

Researcher: Do you think that all the kids who come to this school, or any school for that matter, are entitled to, or deserve, the same type of education?
Frank: Oh, for sure, there’s no question in my mind. (Personal interview #1, lines 363-367)

In response to the same question, Pierre Peloquin (pseudonym) responded:
Well, I believe they are entitled to it, but whether they get it or not is the next question. (Personal interview #1, lines 251-252)

The comments of the teacher participants responding to my questions regarding the meaning of social justice revealed their opinions about the ideal distribution of educational opportunity. Ruth Caldwell (pseudonym), who taught Law and Social Studies, described her frame of reference as:

Like justice in society, social justice or fairness, or equity or equality. (Personal interview #1, lines 432-433)
Joe Miller referred to social justice as:

*Equity, equity of opportunity, so that there is more of a level playing field for kids in terms of opportunity and advantage.* (Personal interview #1, lines 142-143)

### Teachers’ Understanding of Needs

The teachers interviewed for this study revealed a deep understanding of the nature of the students attending Rothman High. They described several processes used at the school to gain this understanding including strategies such as a) visiting the neighborhood feeder schools to assess the Grade 8 students who would be starting Senior 1 at Rothman the next year; b) presentations by administration, school counselors, and resource teachers at staff meetings to familiarize all teachers with the needs of the students; and c) subject area and grade group meetings among teachers to discuss student needs.

Miller (1976) refers to need as a lack or deficiency which may result in injurious consequences to the individual if not remedied. Pierre described a situation in which he felt the needs of a student had not been met by the staff at Rothman High:

*We had a kid last semester. We had no idea that he was closer to a special needs kid than a mainstream kid, because no file came along with him. So, he sat in a 30S Lit. class last semester . . . I questioned his abilities. I thought, “Well, you’re just a lazy kid.” The kid was not lazy, it was just the fact that he wasn’t understanding. So, are we meeting those needs? No, that was poorly done on our part, in the sense that these kids fall through a crack.* (Personal interview #1, lines 253-259)

Science teacher Louise Mah (pseudonym) described the actions of school personnel to address student learning needs:

*I’m sure they would respond to a need if they perceived it. If there seems to be an inequity or an imbalance, between groups, it will become apparent, and it will be addressed.* (Individual interview #1, lines 527-528)
Teachers’ Understandings of Desert

Miller (1976) describes certain criteria of desert as being dependent upon the actions and personal qualities of the individual. Within education, this context of desert is evident in the awarding of grades and scholarships congruent with the actions of the individual student. Capacity is another of the criteria for the determination of desert, and it is this criterion which dominated the teachers’ conversations regarding this topic in my study.

Louise described some of her students who were encountering learning difficulties at the school:

They had failed; they were repeating the course. They were struggling learners, and they had reading disabilities. I had one [student] in a grade nine class who was reading at a grade three level. So, they had identified learning problems, and a history of not being successful. (Personal interview #1, lines 421-424)

Joe Miller talked about the accommodations his school makes in order to meet the needs of all students. He stated:

You have to give some kids more resources and more support than other kids, or it is inherently unfair (Personal interview # 1, lines 165 - 167)

Joe expanded upon this thought as he recalled a conversation he had as a young teacher with a former superintendent:

Her daughter was in high school at the time, and I had her as a student. She said to me, “Look, I really don’t care how you teach Susan, she can learn at the bottom of a coal skuttle. What I care about is how you reach those kids who are not like Susan, who don’t have the same advantage in terms of learning.” It’s ways to help support and bring up kids who have those difficulties, so that they’re on a similar plane as the Susans of the world. (Personal interview # 1, lines 151-157)
Awareness of Conflict Among the Criteria of Rights, Needs and Desert

The teachers I interviewed for this study revealed an understanding of the conflict inherent among the criteria of rights, needs, and desert. Pierre described the tensions that resulted from trying to fulfill the right of all students to one-on-one time with the teacher, while also attempting to meet the needs of those students requiring additional help.

As a classroom teacher it is frustrating for us, because we know that I need to be with that kid more often than I am, but if I have 30 other bodies in here, we’re stretched thin as well. (Personal interview # 1, lines 319-321)

Pierre continued on, describing a student who was receiving assistance from a teacher’s aide:

it’s an educational assistant to be in there with him, helping him to read the material that the teacher is asking him to read.
Researcher: So, that’s an example of a kid who is going to get more resources than the others.
Pierre: To a certain extent.
Researcher: Is that socially just?
Pierre: Yeah, because we are meeting his needs. On the other hand, because he’s getting more, are the others losing out? Maybe.
Researcher: I asked you earlier if you thought every student should get the same in terms of educational resources, and you said yes.
Pierre: Of course they should, but is it reality that they do? No, it isn’t.
Researcher: So some are entitled to more because…
Pierre: I wouldn’t say they are entitled to more, they need it probably, you know. And can we meet those needs as a public school system? I don’t think so. (Personal Interview # 1, lines 269-290)

Ruth passionately described her frustration at situations occurring in the school which arose from conflict between the competing criteria of rights and desert:
You get a student who is busting her butt, making all the effort, doing the homework, coming on spares, squeaking by with a C, but earning it. Then you get the student who is belligerent, mouthy, gets kicked out of class, hangs around after class, drops in the learning centre for a couple of classes, and gets rubber stamped a 50. Is that justice? No! (Personal interview # 1, lines 458-462)
References


