

Social Justice Leadership—Theory and Practice: A Case of Ontario

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Abstract

Purpose: This study is to investigate how principals promote social justice to redress marginalization, inequity, and divisive action that are prevalent in schools. **Research Method:** This study employs a qualitative research design with semistructured interviews. Twenty-two elementary and secondary school principals were interviewed in the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, Canada. **Research Findings:** Principals who are social justice advocates exercise their influence by focusing on people in an effort to build a socially just community. Their people-centered leadership practice focuses on: putting students at the center, positioning as a social justice leader, developing people for social justice, building school climate through social justice, and fostering positive relationships with families and communities. Social justice leadership is grounded in a very proactive way in bringing about the changes that such a paradigm demands. **Implications:** This study generates discussions among participants on the dynamics associated with social justice practice and helps practitioners navigate tactically entrenched power structures for the well-being of their students. It also deepens our understanding of social justice leadership by providing empirical evidence how social justice advocates take risks and innovative approaches to social

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change that embraces the value of democracy, inclusion, representation, and difference.

Keywords

educational leadership, social justice, equity, people-oriented approach, theory and practice

It is not so much what you believe in that matters, as the way in which you believe it and proceed to translate that belief into action.

—Lin (1941, p. 8).

Amid increasingly diverse student populations and constraints from high-stakes policy initiatives, social justice has become a major concern for many principals in Ontario schools. Issues concerning race, class, poverty, gender, special education, and school safety were identified by principals as the most salient in their schools (Wang, 2015, 2016). These issues are ingrained in every aspect of education and place the challenge of, and demand for, change on the shoulders of school principals. Responding to this situation is a paramount concern for school principals who see social justice as central to their leadership. A growing body of leadership research (e.g., Bogotch & Shields, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Potter, Torres, & Briceno, 2014; Taysum & Gunter, 2008) calls for educational leaders to be social justice advocates by examining current social and educational arrangements, and taking actions to promote school initiatives and practices that support justice and equity. Such social justice endeavors involve recognition of the unequal circumstances of marginalized groups with actions directed toward eliminating inequalities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). However, to date, studies have offered limited information about the actual practices and challenges of social justice leadership in schools (Furman, 2012). The purpose of this study is to investigate how principals promote social justice to “address and redress marginalization, inequity, and divisive action” (Carr, 2007, p. 3) prevalent in the public education system, particularly in Ontario, Canada. The thick descriptions of the cases with 21 school administrators presented in this study provide practical suggestions and strategies on promoting equity and inclusiveness in schools, which may empower more principals to facilitate conversations about equity and inclusion and engage in social justice initiatives. The study specifically explores, (a) how school principals position themselves as social justice advocates, (b) how they engage different stakeholders to promote social justice, and (c)

what factors hinder or facilitate their social justice endeavors in schools. The findings illustrate how school leaders exercise democratic, transformative, and inclusive leadership by mobilizing various stakeholders, including students, teachers, and parents.

Literature Review

Contemporary educational leadership embraces a broader concept of social justice that includes not only fairness, equity, participation, and empowerment but also democracy, social transformation, inclusion, critical approach, and ethical/moral care. Social injustices facing school principals may be addressed through democratic participation in decision making, transformation of inequitable social arrangements, inclusive practices in response to diversity, and critical awareness in leadership practice, respectively. These practices are consistent with the five leadership perspectives (critical pluralist, transformative, moral/ethical, feminist, and spiritual/cultural) that Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) recommend for social justice advocacy in schools. The five leadership models reframe social justice in the overarching frameworks of care and relationship in principals' work (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005), and offer strategies for promoting social justice through democratic, transformative, moral, and inclusive leadership. These strategies are specifically addressed in the literature review along the following topics: (a) democratic inclusion for social justice, (b) transformative and ethical/moral leadership, and (c) social justice leadership: theory to practice.

Democratic Inclusion for Social Justice

Leadership perspectives that assume democratic values are of great importance in the pursuit of social justice in schools. The critical pluralist model (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005), for example, accentuates the need for authentic democratic participation in decision making and policy formation to ensure all voices are heard and valued. This model involves different stakeholders such as teachers, students, and parents, and in particular fosters greater student engagement and democratic values. Critical democratic engagement is realized through developing students' knowledge, skills, values, dispositions, and actions that are called for by a reconstructive conception of democracy (McMahon & Portelli, 2010).

Democracy and social justice are integrally interconnected and should not be considered apart when applied to the school setting (Furman & Shields, 2003). In the educational field, there are three competing theories of democracy (liberal, social, and participatory democracy), each embedded in national

cultures and beliefs (Riley, 2003). These theories hold different expectations for the composition of school communities and practices of school leadership. Social democracy places great emphasis on equality of educational opportunity which is equally supported by liberal democracy (Howe, 1992), but social democracy also aims for equality of outcome in education. As an alternative to modern political ideologies, participatory democracy emphasizes the need for individuals to become more engaged in political process. But the crucial elements of these theories are the rights-based, participatory and presentational discourse of democratic practice in schools (Gardner & Crockwell, 2006). Such practice of democracy requires educational leaders to adhere to democratic ideals in the daily operation of schools and to address the learning needs of the marginalized, subordinated, and underrepresented.

Young (2006) argued that “a democratic process must first ensure that members of relatively disadvantaged groups have opportunities to express their experiences, needs, and opinions in situations where differently situated others can hear” (p. 100). In schools where social exclusion deprives people of their right to fully participate in school and community practices and activities, inclusion becomes the core concept of the social justice agenda. Ryan (2006b, 2012) has a two-pronged view of inclusive leadership: to include all stakeholders such as school administrators, teachers, parents, and students in policy and decision making, and to promote inclusive practices to address their diverse values, beliefs, and cultures in schools. According to Ryan (2012), inclusive leadership promotes not only a dialogical, collaborative, reciprocal and horizontal relationship but also an equitable, caring, and fluid relationship among various leaders. Such relationships are thus essential in promoting justice and equity.

Ryan (2006a) examines and unveils the complexity of inclusive leadership in diverse schools and provides a number of distinct inclusive practices. These practices include advocating for inclusion, educating participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasizing student learning, and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision- and policy-making strategies, and incorporating whole school approaches (Ryan, 2006a, 2006b). The inclusive practices recognize social injustice in communities and schools, and aim to understand, critique and amend them (Ryan, 2006b). Ryan also illustrates how inclusive leadership can work effectively by moving away from viewing leadership in terms of individuals, or as a form of hierarchy based on positional power. His framework of inclusivity promotes collaborative approaches that aim to address the division between the advantaged and the disadvantaged by engaging different stakeholders. The approach is achieved by examining the conditions in which we live and deciding how to change them (Foster, 1986). This twin concept of critique (to critique the

social conditions) and possibility (to change them) also lays the groundwork for transformative leadership (Shields, 2010).

Transformative and Ethical/Moral Leadership

Leadership involves the “transformation of values” (Foster, 1989, p. 41), accomplished through a collective enterprise. What matters is how principals transform their beliefs and values into practice to address social values such as democracy, inclusion, justice, and equity. Transformative leadership is “deeply rooted in moral and ethical values in a social context” (Shields, 2004, p. 113). It promotes and leads changes in personal growth, real-life experience, institutional arrangements, and educational communities through a collaborative, ethical value base (Kose, 2011). It assumes that “leadership involves relationship, influence, and some notions of virtue or rectitude” (Dantley, 2003, p. 3). The ethical dimension to transformative leadership has been particularly emphasized by Astin and Astin (2000) who claimed that the goal of such leadership is to promote harmony and sustainability, and enhance equity, social justice, and quality of life. To move toward this goal, transformative leaders assume an agenda that takes critical reflection, dialogue, trust, and interaction as the essential elements of their leadership practices. Through critical reflection and dialogic leadership, the transformative leaders essentially commit themselves to creating conditions that enable less advantaged groups to have equitable access to knowledge and opportunities.

The key component of such commitment is that transformative leaders must be inclusive in their thinking and approach, as asymmetry of power and access to resources makes some the majority and others the minority. These patterns of social inequality, which occur at all levels of society, result in the physical, social, political, cultural, and economic marginalization and/or exclusion of minoritized populations (Ryan, 2006a). The essence of transformative leadership is to question conditions of inequity, oppression, and marginalization in schools and bring about positive change within schools and their broader communities (Mafora, 2013). This transformation needs to be carried out in deeds not words.

Social Justice Leadership: Theory to Practice

Leadership is seen as a way to translate democratic ideals and inclusive notions into concrete practices and redress injustices to meet the needs of diverse groups (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Furman & Shields, 2003; McKenzie et al., 2008; Ryan, 2012; Shields, 2004). However, increased expectations and policy constraints imposed by the accountability system have posed

new challenges to social justice leaders (Wang, 2017). Thus far, social justice leadership practices have been criticized as rather limited in their focus. In reviewing social justice literature, Furman and Gruenewald (2004) identified a strong emphasis of social justice leadership on the achievements and economic well-being of students from marginalized groups. The findings focus on creating equal opportunities for students and suggest a micro-perspective on the process and outcomes of education (Berkovich, 2014; Capper & Young, 2014). Social justice also focuses on specific student groups defined by race and social class (Capper & Young, 2014), which implies that social justice practice is context-related and comes with different goals and priorities (Author, 2016). Additionally, there is a lack of attention to the attitudes, beliefs and mind-sets of those who are working closely with students (Boske & Diem, 2012; Elliot, 2008). Social justice efforts become largely an intraschool activity and do not go beyond schools (Berkovich, 2014).

In contemporary times, social justice leadership is replete with complexities, contradictions, and challenges (McKenzie et al., 2008). These are mostly manifested in unjust intraorganizational policies and culture (Berkovich, 2014). When school leaders are asked to lead without appropriate or adequate resources (Anyon, 2005) and with underperforming and inexperienced teachers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012), their challenges become even more demanding. Numerous barriers constrain social justice work in schools, including the segregation and exclusion of disadvantaged and disempowered social groups (Berkovich, 2014). Other barriers are the momentum of the status quo, obstructive staff attitudes and beliefs, privileged parental expectations, deficit thinking about marginalized groups, an emphasis on “technical” leadership, and the cost or burden to individuals engaging in transformative leadership (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007).

Conceptual Framework

Democratic inclusion, transformative, and moral leadership approaches are instrumental in dealing with the injustices that are interwoven with diversity in schools. Such approaches focus more on moving away from individual domineering manner and branching out into collegial leadership, eventually empowering other individuals for social change. Foster (1989) argues that

Leadership, in the final analysis, is the ability of humans to relate deeply to each other in the search for a more perfect union. Leadership is a consensual task, a sharing of ideas and a sharing of responsibilities, where a “leader” is a leader for the moment only, where the leadership exerted must be validated by the consent of followers, and where leadership lies in the struggles of a community to find meaning for itself. (p. 61)

Foster's (1989) argument implies that leadership is about people and relationships. It is in relationships that we come to engage others' perspectives and predispositions and build alliances to work against oppressive structures existent within schools (Dantley, Beachum, & McCray, 2008). Social justice leadership is about how to engage in democratic, inclusive, and transformative practices to change social structures and influence all stakeholders to collegially promote justice and equity in schools. Such leadership resides not in the individual but in the relationship between individuals oriented toward social vision and change (Foster, 1989). Using Foster's thinking as a framework, this study presents evidence on how social justice leaders exercise their influence by focusing on people (e.g., students, teachers, and parents) in an effort to build a community that has "a strong sense of belonging, of collective concern for each individual, of individual responsibility for the collective good, and of appreciation for the rituals and celebrations of the group" (Noddings, 1996, pp. 266-267). Unlike previous studies, this work adds empirical evidence on actual social justice practices that builds on holistic and morally grounded relationships. Such relationships are a fundamental feature of principals' social life (Foster, 1989).

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore principals' social justice perceptions and practices. Qualitative research methods are valuable in providing rich descriptions of complex phenomena (social justice leadership practices in this case), and illuminating the experiences and interpretations of such phenomena by actors with differing roles and stakes (Merriam, 1998; Sofaer, 1999). This qualitative study was based on social constructivism—the view that "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2014) was used to select particularly relevant cases (Patton, 2014) that yielded in-depth insight into social justice issues. A list of principals was generated through discussions with colleagues, and initial emails were sent out to them detailing the purpose of the study and qualifications for participation (e.g., if they had a social justice agenda in their schools and if they self-identified as social justice advocates). Given that the study intended to understand how principals positioned themselves as social justice advocates, no definitions and characteristics of a social justice leader were provided to principals during recruitment. Twenty-two principals who self-identified as social justice advocates during the initial email correspondence were selected for the study. Principals' work experience, gender, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as school types, and school district were taken into consideration. A variety of characteristics

Table 1. Profiles of Participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	School type	Grades	DSB	Comments
Dora	F	Secondary	G 9-12	TDSB	International baccalaureate programs
Elaine ^a	F	Secondary	G 9-12	TDSB	Academic applied; visible minority ^a
Ella	F	Junior high school	G 7-9	TDSB	Inner city school, model school for inner city project; transient/mobile school
Freda	F	Elementary	K-8	YCDSB	Catholic school
Hilda	F	Middle school	G 6-8	Peel	Promoted to be superintendent
Ida	F	Elementary	K-5	Peel	Public school
Kate (VP)	F				
Lily	F	Secondary	G 9-11	Peel	International students included
Molly	F	Secondary	G 9-12	Peel	Nonsemestered school
Paul (VP)	M				
Paula ^a	F	Elementary	K-6	Peel	School Effectiveness Leader at the DSB; visible minority ^a
Sara	F	Secondary	G 9-12	Peel	
Sonia	F	Elementary	K-5	Peel	
Andy	M	Secondary	G 7-10	TDSB	Self-contained special needs school
Dan	M	Elementary	JK-8	HWDSB	Worked as principal at GTA schools
Dean	M	Secondary	G 9-12	TDSB	Semester school
John	M	Secondary	G 9-12	TDSB	Three track school: high-performance program, the international baccalaureate program, regular high school program
Roderick ^a	M	Secondary	G 9-12	TDSB	Academic collegiate; Hispanic descendant ^a
Ron	M	Secondary	G 9-12	TDSB	Collegiate
Sean	M	Secondary	G 9-12	TDSB	Inner city school
Dirk	M	Secondary	G 9-12	TDSB	Composite school

Note. F = female; M = male; DSB = District School Board; VP = vice principal; TDSB = Toronto District School Board; YCDSB = York Catholic District School Board; Peel = Peel District School Board; HWDSB = Hamilton–Wentworth District School Board; GTA = Greater Toronto Area. This table is generated at the time of data analysis and some participants are no longer holding the same position or at the same school as they were during my research interviews.

^aThe *Canadian Employment Equity Act* defines visible minorities as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.”

was sought to present varied perspectives and practices of school principals.

Twenty principals and two vice principals (VPs) from 19 schools participated in the interviews. (The VPs had been invited by their principals to clarify answers to some interview questions and share their thoughts on the research topic as part of their mentoring experience.) Table 1 provides a general introduction to all the participants presented pseudonymously.

Onetime hour-long semistructured interviews were conducted with each principal to help uncover the meanings of principals' experience in their own words and illustrate how they lived up to their social justice values and advocacy in their daily practices (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). At the end of each interview, some participants were asked to refer the researcher to colleagues who they believed also advocated for justice and equity. Through this networking technique (Merriam, 1998), 22 participants were selected and interviewed for the research project. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (except one principal who preferred not to have his interview recorded and data collected from his interview was not considered in the verbatim analysis). Transcripts were sent to participants for verification and further clarification. Interview transcripts were coded with the aid of NVivo by searching for meaningful patterns across and within cases (interviews). Free codes were generated to capture emerging themes, which were then organized according to the research questions.

Research Findings

Evident in this study is how principals live up to their social justice advocacy in terms of becoming, being, knowing, and doing. The findings demonstrate how social justice theories can be translated into practice, and how obstacles to social justice can be overcome and create opportunities for social justice advocacy. Following the conceptual framework, this section presents evidence on how principals mobilize and engage stakeholders to promote democratic, transformative, and inclusive ideals in their schools. It also shows how social justice leadership is exercised through developing people and relationships: *social justice leadership positioning, student-centered leadership, developing people for social justice, and building a positive school community with social justice* (Figure 1). Obstacles and facilitators are also discussed.

Social Justice Leadership Positioning

Holding a leadership position, in this case, principalship, does not make one a leader—it only provides an occupational platform. Internal and external

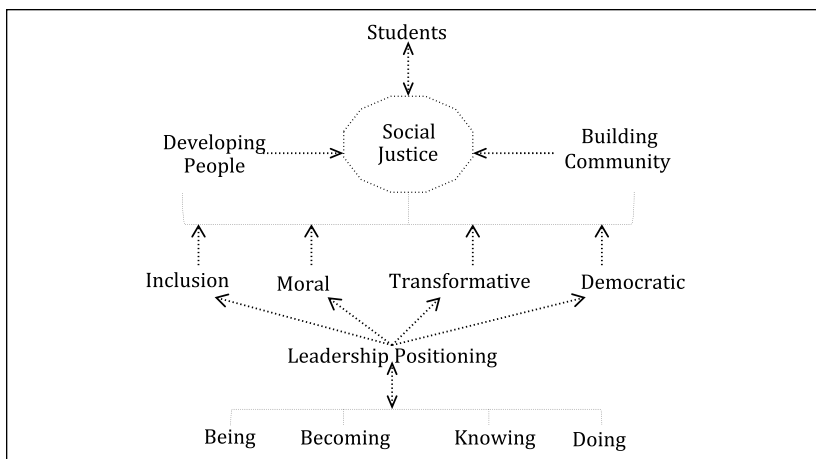


Figure 1. Social justice leadership chart.

positioning is crucial in establishing a leader's professional identity. A principal's work is boundaryless (Gronn & Lacey, 2004) and full of uncertainties, which makes positioning of leadership more fluid and exploratory. For social justice leaders, positioning themselves in terms of what they say, their modes of expression and the way they act has to be carefully scrutinized and properly delivered. Principals' positioning determines the manner in which teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders interact with them, and eventually affects their successfulness as social justice advocates. Given the complexity of the various socializations, participants (Dan, John, Roderick, Hilda, Lily, and Dora) revealed that they constantly had to position themselves in different roles, such as being an initiator, a cheerleader, a facilitator, or simply, a leader.

In addressing gender issues, for example, elementary school principal Dan emphasized that "the principal has to be the starter, does not have to be the finisher or the doer." Dan initiated programs and clubs for girls in his school. Secondary school principal John positioned himself not only as an initiator, introducing new programs and events on social justice issues, but also as a cheerleader, encouraging and influencing students to be committed to their goals. Secondary school principal Roderick also recognized that cheering from the sidelines contributed to galvanizing students into taking action against injustices.

Principals often had to decide whether they should be leading or managing. This has also been identified by Foster (1989) as one of the concerns for

school leaders. Secondary school principal Dora expressed the struggle of positioning herself as a leader rather than a manager. According to Dora, “managing” focuses on resources allocation while “leading” focuses on influencing others. Positioning as a leader is an ongoing process during which one has to constantly reinforce the concept of being a leader. In doing so, participants (Dan, Dean, Hilda, Ida, Molly, Paul, Paula, and Sara) acknowledged that they had to develop their leadership skills and knowledge through continual self-learning, and had to lead by modelling, educating, and problem solving using various techniques. They also pointed out that leading is more of a collective effort than an individual’s work, and that sharing the leadership was a critical step in earning the acceptance and respect of teachers, students, and staff members, which in turn enabled the principals to influence and direct the behaviors of these stakeholders in order to achieve social justice goals.

Student-Centered Leadership

Schools are organizations where a few adults—principals, teachers, and other staff—serve a larger young population, namely the students. Knowing what students think and what they need is critical in providing them with better service. Data in this section show that principals with a social justice commitment prioritize the needs of students, proactively using various approaches to solicit students’ input, educate them on issues of justice, empower them, and work with them to reverse inequitable practices. Participants were cognizant of the fact that students had firsthand knowledge and experience of the injustices within the school. Learning students’ stories and gathering feedback from them was thus an important avenue for exploring issues that existed in the schools. Secondary school principal Sara explained how she embraced the notion of learning from students:

I realize the importance of really getting feedback from the students. The bottom-line is the kids need to be telling you what’s happening in the school. You need to hear what the social justice issues are for them. Then you need to act on those.

Leaders create other leaders (Foster, 1989). Driven by the need for change in the school culture, Sara learned how to transfer a degree of power from herself to the students, and let the students be facilitators. Middle school principal Hilda also endorsed the approach by focusing on students’ needs and encouraging students to become active and engaged participants rather than passive and apathetic recipients:

Kids need to have voice in the process. They need to be a participant in their education, not a receiver. They need to have voice in what they do and how they do it. Because then they love coming to school every day.

Participants (Dora, Freda, Lily, and Sara) employed various ways to solicit students' input, such as meetings, surveys, student government/council, focus groups, and workshops. Through surveys, Sara enabled students to voice issues and concerns arising from their learning and personal experiences and share their ideas and suggestions. Dora, too, believed that students' cooperation and involvement could positively affect school climate. Participants thus used students' input to advance their commitment to justice and equity.

Three participants (Kate, Paul, and Molly) highlighted the importance of educating students on issues of social justice, noting that this would enable them to acquire new understandings and attitudes, and eventually assume greater responsibilities in response to the challenges associated with injustices:

We want students to understand and appreciate the variety of the cultures, backgrounds, and differences that all of our students have. We want them to also understand that social justice goes beyond just our own community and school. We want them to understand that they are part of the global community and there are vast differences across the world in terms of education, poverty, languages they speak, religions they celebrate, etc. We want them to understand these differences and know that they have a moral responsibility to act in a way that would help to improve the conditions in all parts of the world, whether it's within their community by helping out with a food bank or whether it's helping to build a school in another country. (Kate)

VP Kate's comments suggest that educators have a moral obligation to help students understand what is happening in the world, how it affects their lives and the lives of others and, more important, how to actively participate in creating a better world. The notion of responsibility should thus be shared among a number of agents, including students. The educative aspect of social justice leadership intends to have citizens begin to question social conditions and consider alternative ways of ordering their lives (Foster, 1989).

Four participants (Hilda, Ida, Roderick, and Paula) agreed that education should empower students by inspiring a sense of ownership for positive change. According to elementary school principal Ida, "as a principal, if you own it, then others don't. But if you give some of it away, then they will own it." In Ida's view, empowerment means letting go of the control and allowing others to take the ownership so that they can reach their potential in making better decisions and creating a positive school environment. When individuals

are entrusted with that power, they can use it to achieve objectives that are of communal benefit. Underlying this ethical aspect of social justice leadership are democratic values that guide school communities (Foster, 1989). An empowering leadership style was also adopted by Paula, who fostered inclusive practices based on collective actions and a power-sharing culture in the school, thus enabling students to become informed and engaged democratic citizens. Paula emphasized that empowering students was as important as empowering teachers in her elementary school. By empowering students, study participants were able to encourage students to take the initiative to combat various “isms” and thereby positively affect the school environment. Empowering students to contribute to, and take ownership of, their schools is therefore an important part of principals’ leadership practices in implementing social justice.

Developing People for Social Justice

Leadership is “a shared and communal process” (Foster, 1989, p. 39). Participants in this study recognized that leading for social justice cannot be a one-person task but rather involves collective efforts, particularly from teachers. Most participants acknowledged that teachers were their most appreciable assets in the quest for social justice. In light of this, participants placed great importance in developing people—the human resources—for equity and social justice. Strategies they discussed included equitable hiring practices, encouraging staff to take risks, educating and communicating with staff on justice issues, and empowering staff to work collaboratively toward school goals. Both Dean and Sonia agreed that it was crucial for principals to have hiring powers to recruit staff who shared their social justice values as like-minded staff can be significant contributors to social justice work. Elementary school principal Sonia recalled that she managed to diversify staff in her previous school through recruitment to reflect the multicultural student population and create an equitable environment for students.

Principals also need the savvy to identify the talent and capacity of their staff, and position them strategically so that their skills and expertise can come into full play. Secondary school principal Andy pointed out that staff attitude is as significant as their skills, as attitudes underpin actions and determine the manner in which challenges are approached. Managing staff attitude and mind-set can be more complex than dealing with their behaviors. In a school where the entire student population needs special assistance, staff attitude toward students plays a critical role. Andy aptly highlighted how emotional intelligence affects social justice: “I want people who are thinking with their heads about what’re going to be the best for those students and they are

going to be able to have an emotional stand, to be able to do it.” Clearly, positive attitudes, stable emotional and mental health, and teamwork among staff are valuable assets for principals seeking to promote social justice.

Leadership involves “transforming the values of followers so that they too exert leadership” (Foster, 1989, p. 40). Participants (Dora, Ella, and Roderick) found it imperative to develop leadership skills among their staff by encouraging them to conceive new ideas and take risks to implement them. Secondary school principal Roderick offered an example of how he encouraged a teacher to take the responsibility to initiate a gay/straight alliance:

That was very, very surprising for me when this teacher said to me that he [*sic*] is going to start a gay/straight alliance. We knew that we needed to do something in this area, but the teacher said: “Listen, I am going to do this. I am going to take a group of students to a workshop on sexual identity.” I said: “Great, go for it. Thank you for doing that.” Where I think I make a difference is to really encourage staff to take risk, because up to that point, nothing has been done. I said to him: “You know, don’t feel bad if no one shows up. Don’t feel bad, if only two show up. Even if two show up, that’s a success.” I was pleasantly surprised that about 40 students showed up. That showed us that you know what, there was a need here.

Although acknowledging the possible risk of failure in implementing the idea, Roderick nonetheless endeavored to dispel misgivings by supporting the teacher. He also tried to convey to the teacher that *effort* mattered more than *outcome*. What can be noted from this example is that regardless of whether ideas originate from individuals or the principal, the latter needs to encourage staff to take the initiative to bring about positive change.

Two other participants (Paula and John) mentioned having difficult conversations with staff to facilitate social justice work. Through such conversations, they were able to challenge teachers’ implicit biases and deficit thinking that negatively affected student performance. The conversations also raised teachers’ awareness and prompted them to adopt culturally relevant pedagogies that would better meet the needs of diverse students. Such courageous conversations may include a variety of justice issues with the aim of effecting change by generating solutions. Courageous conversations can give people new understanding and the spirit needed to promote social justice agendas.

Empowering teachers is as important as empowering students. Participants (Dora, Ron, and Sonia) demonstrated their leadership by empowering and developing leadership in teachers. Secondary school principal Ron expressed this through an analogy:

You know the jigsaw puzzle. My father . . . taught us as kid: It's always best to do the outside puzzle first, because those are the easiest pieces to find because they all have one square edge on them. So my job is, when I look at a school as a puzzle, is to provide the framework, the outside frame for it. And then my job is to encourage and empower and enable my staff to bring the pieces when you need to the puzzle. . . . So my job is to always be aware of that and help focus on the picture, but we build that picture together.

Two things emerge from Ron's "jigsaw puzzle" theory. First, visionary leaders need to see the big picture and know where they stand. Importantly, they should be able to communicate effectively with their staff, and empower them to take on responsibilities. Second, to work toward their vision, principals need to encourage collaborative work as part of their school culture. Through empowerment, Dora created an environment in which teachers adopted shared leadership and the spirit of collaboration as a way of life, and were able to carry on her legacy to work toward the social justice vision.

Building a Positive School Community Through Social Justice

Building a positive school community may contribute to the academic and social success of every student by uniting stakeholders in a common purpose and fostering an equitable school climate. In engaging in community-building initiatives, participants (Dan, Dean, Hilda, Paula, Sean, and Sonia) found that they not only needed to welcome parents into the school but also needed to reach out to the community. This is particularly true in the neediest communities where families may not have the means to engage effectively in school activities. This was the case at Dean's school, located in a low-income neighborhood in Toronto:

A couple of weeks ago, we went to [community name] and had a meeting with families and students in their community, because it's not enough to say: "You never show up for our parents and teachers night. You never show up." Well, if you don't, what we're going to do about it? Are we going to complain about it? No, we're going to go OUT there to YOUR territory.

Reaching out to the external school community is the first step to establishing relationships with the parent community. However, good community relations are also dependent on trust. Dan pointed out that building trust meant breaking down barriers on a daily basis, and this required patience, care, respect, and love. Parents were unwilling to accept any goodwill from the school in the absence of mutual trust. Trust bonds were thus seen as a useful means of dispelling parents' misgivings and fostering a sense of acceptance.

Sonia expressed a similar view, noting that the only way to win people's trust is to accept them with genuine care and respect for who they are. Building community relationships involves accepting and celebrating difference, and breaking down barriers that hinder the establishment of a positive relationship between schools and parents. A caring community within and around the school is one that draws everyone closer by fostering amicable social interactions among students and families. Such community building was seen by Hilda as a means of social justice by creating a sense of place, ownership, and belonging (Foster, 1989), and thus contributing to the well-being of students and greater equity for all stakeholders.

Obstacles to Social Justice Commitment

While tackling the complex issue of social justice, participants were constantly faced with alarming obstacles to the attainment of their goals. Central to these challenging issues were resources, which comprised facilities, material resources, money, time, and personnel. Such challenges are more salient under the accountability policies that expect principals to do more with less. This predicament calls for principals with social justice commitment to "recognize how our habitus restricts equity and social justice and then to find ways to overcome these constraints" (Shields, 2004, p. 113).

The obstacles that prohibited participants from successfully achieving their goals for justice and equity, however, often originated from principals themselves. Ron shared an example of how principals' mind-sets affect their social justice endeavors:

I think the biggest obstacle I face is thinking outside the box. I think education exists in a box and your thinking 90% of the time is within that box. I don't believe educators really triumph except those who are willing to step outside the box. . . . People will come to me and say: "We see phenomenal changes in behaviour, academics and the whole thing [in your school] . . . You must be busy giving talks on this." . . . When I talk to people, the general response I get is: "Well, that's truly nice. That will work in your school, but won't work in my school." And my responses become: "It won't work or you're not prepared to try and to see if it will work? Because there is a vast difference between these two. Anything you do in a positive vein will make things better. It's not about 'it won't.' It's about 'you won't.'"

Ron's comments show that being a leader requires a mind-set that is open to creative thinking as well as professional and intellectual growth. The absence of these dispositions results in leaders who remain stagnant and lose the momentum for change. The existence of numerous social justice issues

means that principals need to act strategically to respond to the most urgent and important problems in their schools. As Dan suggested, principals need the skills to prioritize social justice issues.

Teachers' mind-set also presents great challenges to principals. A majority of participants identified disbelief and lack of understanding from staff, their attitude, mentality, and values, change of staff, and other related issues as hindering their social justice work. Paula, for example, explained that: "You need to believe that all kids can learn. We just need to unlock that." Based on her training experience from the Ministry of Education, Paula presented an example of what deficit thinking is and how it affects leadership, teaching practices, and students' learning:

In one of our ministry sessions, my ministry colleague showed them Mona Lisa, the picture of Mona Lisa and said: "The kids should be able to answer how and why questions, critical questions about this text." . . . I said . . . "Look at our population in [District]! Are you really going to show them Mona Lisa?" And one of the ministry folks said: "Yeah. Everybody knows Mona Lisa!" I said: "No! You know Mona Lisa as a European Caucasian person. I grew up here. I know Mona Lisa. The chances are our South Asian and Black children don't know who Mona Lisa is." So if you start with Mona Lisa and ask how and why questions, and you ask them to critically think. And they can't do it. What do we as teachers say? "They CAN'T think!" I go back: "If you start with something from their experiences so that you can teach them how to critically think. Then you could move to the Mona Lisa later. But if you start with Mona Lisa right away, it's deficit thinking. They can't do it! Then we say: 'What'd we do?' We dumbed down the curriculum for these kids. We gave them worksheets. We say: 'Go and do your vocabulary. . . . you are not ready to think!' Yet, the problem is not the kids. It's the teachers and these resources that we selected."

In Paula's view, this type of deficit thinking induces teachers to attribute students' academic and social struggles to their "inability" rather than their life experience. Teachers who practice deficit thinking thus become barriers to students and the principal, preventing them from moving forward successfully.

Deficit thinking is endogenous. It also manifests itself in teachers' awareness of social justice issues. Such deficit thinking hinders principal leadership for equity and social justice. Dan pointed out that deficit mentality, embedded in teachers' values and belief systems, was manifested in teachers' daily practices and negatively affected Dan's social justice efforts. Likewise, Dean believed that "The obstacles are fairly deeply embedded middle class values. The middle class values are of conformity, of compliance, of blind acknowledgement of hierarchy. Those values are deeply embedded in some of the teachers." Such mentality is indubitably incompatible with a commitment to

equity. In seeking to overcome the barriers inflicted by deficit mentality, Dan reiterated the importance of taking the time to educate teachers about what is best for students.

Dean also added that lack of imagination, or reluctance to think outside the box, can become a barrier to social justice work. To overcome such discomfort and act innovatively, one must develop openness to uncertainty and ambiguity and be clear and critical regarding the circumstances of his or her influence and the circumstances of his or her followers (Foster, 1989). This openness is in tandem with Wilkinson's (2006) work which posits that great leadership lies in the ability to recognize, explore, and profit from ambiguous and chaotic situations, and lead others in a manner that creates opportunity, innovation, and competitive advantage. Teachers and social justice leaders need to review their attitudes toward and tolerance for ambiguity, as intolerance of uncertainty may impede the ability to spark new ideas and reach breakthroughs in social justice practice.

In addition to staff attitude and mentality that impinges on principals' social justice efforts, a few participants (Ella, John, and Ida) acknowledged that staff changes and collective agreement may also restrict and disrupt their social justice work. Ella expressed concern over staff turnover and the problem of teacher retention, noting how this affected her work. According to Ella, unplanned teacher changes affect the overall capacity of the school and disrupt the efforts to achieve educational equity.

The resistance or barriers varied among principals, particularly for those who were from marginalized backgrounds. For example, Paula recalled how she encountered resistance from her teachers when she was striving to diversify her teaching staff in order to reflect the diversity of her students:

Sometimes what happens was when principals become social justice leaders, they become typecast. They say: for example, "All she cares about is equity and diversity because she is Black, because she is mad at the world." But as a South Asian person, I heard people say about other South Asian principals: "All she cares about equity and diversity because she is brown." But nobody said that about me, because I think I've learned how to play the game. I learned how to negotiate that space and walk that tightrope so that people still take me seriously on student achievement, but still see me as advocating for social justice. (Researcher: How about a White principal who also has a commitment to social justice?) Then he is gay! That's what they would say. In my own school, when I hired whole bunch of South Asian staff, because my students, 300 were South Asians. The comment by some of the teachers was: "I think they are all related somehow!" And I had a courageous conversation with the whole staff, in front of the whole staff, I said: "My predecessor was White. She hired a lot of White staff. Did anybody make a comment that they were all related?"

In schools with diverse student population, the racial remarks about principals, teachers, and students is still highly charged. In addition to challenges in securing employment and career advancement, minority administrators face additional challenges unique to their own respective situations, and this may exacerbate their efforts to advocate for social justice. In Paula's case, how to turn negative work experiences into positive factors became an important part of her administrative work.

Many participants (Dan, Dora, Ella, Freda, Ida, Molly, Sara, Sean, and Sonia) referred to the scarcity of time as a constraint in their everyday work. Although participants struggled to allocate time across leadership domains through prioritizing, they still found it challenging to bear numerous demands for the limited time and ensure a wise investment of it in building their school capacity. They all faced some common issues: disruption of their work curtailed the opportunities to continuously engage teachers; excessive paperwork sapped their time and strength; and teachers' heavy workloads limited the amount of time available for collaborative social justice missions.

In addition to the lack of time, Sara pointed out that the way time is allocated for different events and celebrations could be problematic in achieving social justice. She questioned the usefulness of a month dedicated to a particular theme such as the history of one race. She contended that simply apportioning time to commemorate or promote different events undermined the general social justice ethos. Rather than building a patchwork from different pieces, Sara felt that it would be more significant to tie in all pieces and incorporate them into the school culture.

Financial constraints were highlighted by several participants (Andy, Dan, Dean, Dora, John, and Molly) who stated that one of the biggest barriers was not having sufficient money to defray expenses necessary for social justice work. Money was thus directly or indirectly connected to the success of social justice endeavors. Bound by such restraints, Dan, John, and Molly had to find new ways of redistributing resources in order to maximize benefits and address the most pressing needs of their schools.

Other than the barriers posed by personnel, time, and financial resources, a formidable obstacle to equitable practices in schools is socioeconomic inequalities. Five participants (Ella, Dan, Dean, Hilda, and John) expressed their concerns about student poverty, which posed tremendous challenges to their work. According to Dan:

Poverty brings its own issues, because kids who're living in poverty here are just as smart as every other kid, but their parents are working two or three jobs. They don't have as much time. They are under a lot of pressure at home. And so that's why poverty itself is a barrier unless you get more resources, more

staffing, more opportunities for the children to experience things outside the classroom, because if they just go home, they have to help their mom out or dad out who are working three jobs. They're not going to be able to go out, or to dialogue, to have these experiences that help them grow. So we have to do that during school.

The impact of poverty on students' social integration, academic performance and life chances is intertwined with the complex organizational, ethical, and professional challenges facing leaders who serve high-poverty schools.

Facilitators of Social Justice

Limited resources and increasing demand from the accountability initiatives foreground the importance of relationship building in principals' social justice endeavors. Formidable challenges and obstacles, if tackled with sagacity and savvy, can create great opportunities to promote social justice. A majority of the participants acknowledged that it was the teachers, students, and parents who facilitated school change and contributed to the advancement of social justice. Participants indicated that when teachers, students, and parents offered their complete support and trust, challenges were transformed into opportunities, and the obstacles of limited time, money and other resources became surmountable.

Several participants (Elaine, Dan, Dora, John, Paula, Roderick, Sara, and Sonia) credited teachers with being great facilitators, not only in students' learning but also in the social justice cause. Roderick, for instance, indicated that having supportive teachers who were active proponents of social justice contributed significantly to his ongoing efforts in creating actions around social justice issues in education.

Teachers play a very important role in recognizing and combating inequities in schools, and promoting social justice through their teaching. However, Dan asserted that in order to garner teachers' support for social justice endeavors, it was necessary to inspire and educate teachers to grow into that role. He emphasized that teachers were the most critical group in education and that greater efforts in developing teachers would result in greater possibility of goals being achieved. Understanding the impact of teachers on equity and social justice is vital, and teachers who are critically conscious of diversity in education are great assets for principals with a social justice commitment. Dora pointed out that teachers can be great facilitators for change if they are personally committed to the success of students and are willing to assume responsibility to contribute to social justice. Paula believed that hiring teachers who reflected the diversity of students could also facilitate more equitable practices.

Several participants (Andy, John, Paul, and Roderick) expounded the belief that students themselves are great facilitators in changing the system of oppression. Roderick, for example, indicated that his students were passionate about learning about social justice and active in taking on related responsibilities. An important task for principals, therefore, is to identify students' capacities and strengths, and channel their energy in ways that aim to promote social justice. Through their participation, students not only develop their social and problem-solving skills but also prepare themselves for their civic roles as social justice advocates.

Parents and the board can provide some external support. Dan said having parents share their lived experiences can help infuse social justice values into all major components of the school: "Another facilitator would be parents in the community who would come in and educate you the principal, educate your kids, educate your staff about their life experiences. You bring them in" (Dan).

Substantive support, whether from teachers, students, parents, or boards, is meaningless if principals themselves are not supportive of social justice efforts by different interest groups. Participants (Dean, Dora, Freda, Hilda, Ida, Roderick, Sara, and Sonia) agreed that support from principals mattered as much as (if not more than) support from teachers, students, parents, and boards. Dora reflected on how she supported her teachers to take on new responsibilities and revealed that principals' leadership was a key component in ensuring that a culture of support is embedded within schools. Such support included not only material resources but also a sense of empowerment and caring, which in turn motivated teachers to engage in social justice initiatives. As Ida pointed out: "It takes the team. Obviously the teachers teach these kids all day every day. Administrators support the teacher so that the teacher can support the children, so the children will be successful." Clearly, the principal plays a key role in creating a collaborative-learning environment, a learning community that contributes to nurturing teachers who can dedicate themselves to students' success. It is the principals' responsibility to reconfigure the structure and politics of the school to assist their students in surmounting impediments and accessing new opportunities to be successful.

Discussion and Conclusion

Efforts to better understand the nature of social justice leadership would do well to begin with a focus on the characteristics of leaders and the specific actions that leaders take to achieve their social justice goals. Such is the case of this study which reveals in detail the practices of social justice leaders. Recent studies on social justice and leadership tend to be either theoretical

(Theoharis, 2007) or confined to the American context. This study extends the breadth of current literature by providing a holistic view of principals' social justice endeavors in a Canadian context, where the political, legal, and historical contexts surrounding the challenges and opportunities of diversity differ from those of the United States (Banks, 2009). What is in common in both countries is the marked shift in educational policies that place greater accountability and increasing work demand on school principals to produce outcomes measured by test performance. Such policies, though they "lacked adequate consideration of power relations, democratic participation, and rich, diverse philosophy of education" (Gunzenhauser & Hyde, 2007, p. 490), have posed great challenges to principals who advocate social justice as their moral obligations. "Leadership occurs in a relationship between leader and led" (Foster, 1989, p. 42). In order to negotiate and maneuver the demands from accountability mandates, school principals need to see schools "as a community of agents, not as an organization of members" (Foster, 1989, p. 40) and build meaningful relationships that can transform followers to leaders.

This study indicates that principals implement their social justice beliefs and values in praxis by engaging all stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, and board members) and catalyzing them to be the driving force of the social justice movement. They multiply their influences by producing other leaders (Foster, 1989; Maxwell, 1993). They also demonstrate the courage and willingness to take action to disrupt unjust systemic structures and practices, and this distinguishes them from principals who do not follow a social justice agenda.

Social Justice Leadership: A People-Oriented Approach

Social justice in schools is, first and foremost, concerned with students as they are the focus of the education system. Principals in this study did not simply view students as victims of injustices or passive recipients or beneficiaries of justice work. They provided students with opportunities to analyze how positive change happens and educated students on how they may contribute to such change as both, actors and leaders. Scott (2009) contended that in order to empower students to take ownership of education, there was a need for a fundamental shift: a shift from the concept of education as a service provided for students to the concept of education belonging to students. What separates social justice-oriented principals from other principals is the soliciting of student voice in rectifying policies and practices that perpetuate social injustices in schools. In addressing student-identified issues with subsequent action, principals stressed the importance of taking each opportunity

for a teachable moment to “help students discover and wield their own power as critical and knowledgeable people” (Chapman, Hobbel, & Alvarado, 2011, p. 541). By developing students’ critical-thinking skills and educating them to critique the world and curriculum established by the dominant culture, participants aspired to prepare their students eventually as not only engaged citizens committed to justice and equity but also social justice advocates themselves.

Ashcroft (1987) argues that empowering is a philosophy of education which must balance its commitments to personal growth and to society. In order to make students social justice agents, some participants also emphasized the need to empower students to take responsibility for their academic and social lives and develop a sense of ownership of their education. More important, the effects of student empowerment are not merely confined to the school setting, but extend to other aspects of students’ lives. Through empowering students, participants aimed to instill a sense of power and belonging in their students, which would in turn lead to positive change in both their personal and social spheres. This ongoing enterprise in which agents continually create social structure allows them to identify communities (Foster, 1989).

Maxwell (1993) argues that “the one who influences others to lead is a leader without limitations” (p. 116). Social justice cannot be a reality without like-minded teachers who are willing to work collaboratively with their principals. Teachers are important assets not only in students’ learning but also in enacting social justice and advancing equity and fairness in various dimensions of students’ lives. To create a team that shares social justice values and commitment, principals in this study stressed the importance of ongoing staff development. Developing people, or human resources, involves practicing equitable hiring, getting to know the strengths and weaknesses of the staff, changing staff attitude and behaviors toward social justice, and empowering them to take risks and assume responsibilities.

Hiring for social justice and empowering staff have also been confirmed by Theoharis (2007) as part of social justice leadership practice in enhancing staff capacity. To empower staff is to provide them with professional freedom (Theoharis, 2007), validate them as people, and allow them to take responsibilities in the running of the school. As part of this process, the principal’s role is what Ron described in the “jigsaw puzzle theory,” a strategic leader who has a vision of a bigger picture, is able to communicate his or her vision to his or her team, and can empower his or her staff to piece together the puzzle to reach shared goals of equity and justice.

Additionally, principals in this study found it imperative to invest in the transformation of staff’s mind-sets and attitudes which occasionally pose formidable challenges to social justice endeavors. Studies show that teachers

with a positive attitude toward inclusion are more likely to provide their students with significantly more practice attempts (Elliot, 2008; Ross-Hill, 2009). This rings true to social justice work. Like-minded teachers who share social justice values and beliefs with principals are more likely to be facilitators in assisting principals to promote social justice. In order to reap maximum benefits, study participants contended that it was important to invest in transforming staff's attitudes, to influence staff to embrace initiatives, and to create a sense of collectiveness in the social justice cause. According to Bookchin (as cited in Berkovich, 2014), unless the actions are grounded in a joint effort, individual efforts by principals are unlikely to overcome cemented collective injustices. It is equally important not to problematize the situation by merely focusing on teachers, as it may "detract from the critical examination of systemic factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequities for students" (García & Guerra, 2004, p. 154).

As social justice leaders, it is also critical to apply a systems thinking approach (Forrester, 1973; Senge, 1994) and look beyond individuals to the group, and beyond the parts to the whole by taking into account the structural or institutional climate. As an important part of their social justice agenda, study participants made concerted efforts to foster a positive school climate, which some scholars (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Hart & Bredeson, 1996; Hoy & Hannum, 1997) argue is a necessary component to school improvement and student learning. The focus on students' academic achievement was identified as a social justice challenge facing school principals (Berkovich, 2014). However, school climate should embrace social justice and equity for all stakeholders associated with schools rather than simply for the sake of student achievement, especially if, as Paula stated, achievement is strongly connected to social justice.

The principals' comments underscore the importance of an inclusive, fair and equitable environment in which every student is valued, respected, and accepted regardless of their differences and, school leaders make sure that students' physical, social, and emotional safety is tended to. In terms of teaching professionals, principals can set the tone that they are respected, appreciated, and empowered in the running of the school (Theoharis, 2010). Such endeavors, notably, are geared more toward transforming teachers' mind-set and attitude and developing their capacity for social justice. In order to support learning, principals in the study demonstrated their patience, care, and respect for parents and other community members, and employed various strategies to build trust relationships with them. They did so "by understanding (not judging) families' lives and beliefs, by committing to reaching out and listening to families, and by using persistent, diverse, and native language communication" (Theoharis, 2010, p. 369). No matter what stakeholders are involved, creating a positive school climate in which everyone feels valued, respected, accepted,

and secure has been recognized as a critical component of principals' social justice practice.

Social Justice Positioning and Limitations

There is a need for school principals to constantly position themselves in different roles in order to propel their vision for equity and justice. But even though study participants' goals and vision were similar, their social construction of a public self was quite different. This is also echoed by Moller, Presthus, and Vedoy (2009). How school principals are positioned may affect their interaction with students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Principals in this study described themselves as initiators, cheerleaders, facilitators, active learners, and other social constructs. However, it is this variety of positionings—the result of their individual ability, skills, knowledge, and charisma—that constitutes what a social justice leader is. Nevertheless, principals' social justice efforts, though well-intentioned, seem somewhat limited and fragmented. Participants in this study tended to contextually prioritize justice issues and focus on delivering justice and equity, each in their own way, but with minimal awareness of how institutional norms and practices in systemic structures lead to social, political, economic, and educational inequities. As their strategies were aimed at the institutional rather than systemic level, their social justice leadership initiatives were limited to intraschool impact (Berkovich, 2014). Research to develop systemic leadership approaches to address social justice would thus be beneficial. Such approach needs to deconstruct hegemonic educational policies and practices colonized by the dominant social group and develop a deeper understanding of the contextual, political, and historical dimensions of social inequities among school principals. The Appendix I: Summary of Research Findings and Appendix II: Sample Interview Questions are listed in the online Supplemental Material.

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