Educational Leadership and Policy Approaches to Critical Social Justice

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Not so many years ago, one of us (Jim) received a noteworthy review of his proposal to present a conference paper. One of the reviewers questioned the value of the topic – leadership and diversity. S/he felt that there was little use in writing a paper in an area that had already been adequately covered. The reviewer went on to write that a colleague had previously addressed the leadership and diversity issue, and that there was no point in traversing the same ground. Apparently, the colleague had said everything that needed to be said about leadership and diversity. Now Jim had been working in the area for a number of years, and was familiar with the literature – or rather lack of it – and did not recognize the leadership and diversity expert that the reviewer cited. And try as he might, he could not find any subsequent reference to this particular individual. Although puzzling at the time, the reference to the non-existent expert did not influence the acceptance of the proposal. As it turned out, the paper was accepted, probably due more to the fact that Jim knew the program chair than to the lukewarm sentiments of the reviewers.

This kind of reaction was not unique. We have both received a number of these kinds of responses over the years. We suspect that many others who have worked in diversity-related areas have also entertained similar reactions. The point we are trying to make here is that only a few years ago leadership and diversity was not acknowledged as a legitimate area of inquiry and practice in the field of educational administration. This, despite the fact that schools around the world had been displaying more obvious signs of increasing diversity for some time. Even with the changing context, champions of the traditional canon in education administration saw fit not to acknowledge this diversity, or if they did, believed that such demographic changes did not warrant different approaches to administration and leadership. Instead, they continued to insist that long-standing generic models of administration were more than capable of providing an appropriate basis for the administration of schools. Diversity was but a minor distraction, the complications of which could be solved by a decisive research study or two in the area.
Thankfully, circumstances have changed in the intervening years. Issues of diversity and leadership are now considered a legitimate area of study, at least in some communities of inquiry. This special issue is just one example of this change. There are other testaments as well, including a number of other special issue journals devoted to leadership and diversity (e.g. Educational Administration Quarterly, 2004; Leadership and Policy in Schools, 2006). This shift reflects the tendency of scholars and practitioners in educational administration to take diversity issues more seriously. They are doing so because they recognize the significance of these differences for student experience. More pointedly, they acknowledge that the ways in which these differences are configured – interpreted, valued and judged – can have a decisively positive or negative affect on how students learn in school. For example, differences associated with culture, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, gender, and ability can mean the difference between success and failure, enrichment and impoverishment, and hope and despair for students. In most contemporary schools in the Western world, non-white, female, gay, lesbian, poor, differently-abled students frequently do not have as positive an educational experience as their white, male, straight, middle-class and physically able counterparts. Many of the former tend to achieve at lower levels, drop out in greater numbers and are less likely to attend post secondary institutions than the latter (See for example, Bennett, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1995; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990; Orfield, 1995; Paquette, 1990). Of course, not all students in the aforementioned groups follow this path. But even those who perform well academically suffer from other significant consequences of this differential evaluation. Like their comrades, they are systemically subjected to harassment, exclusion and discrimination both in school and later, when they leave to go out into the working world (See, for example, Datnow, 1998; McFarland, 2001; Lugg, 2003; Orenstein, 2002; Ryan, 2006; Stein, 2002; Tabor, 1992). Difference makes a difference for students and their parents.

The unfortunate way that these differences play out has shaped how many scholars pursue leadership and diversity. Most are not content to be idle or neutral bystanders or merely describe what they study in a clinical or detached manner. They care deeply about what is happening to already-marginalized groups in schools and are determined to do something about it. These sentiments figure prominently in their approaches to inquiry. Many believe that their work in areas like leadership and policy can provide the foundation for action that can rectify these unfair practices. Only comparatively recently, though, have individuals within the field of educational administration come to use the term “social justice” to describe what they do, despite the fact that the term social justice has been around for some time. In the past, those in the field of educational administration concerned about the plight of the marginalized – few as they were – tended to associate with other monikers, like “critical theorist”, “feminist”, “neo-Marxist”, or “poststructuralist.” Many continue to identify with these traditions, but many also now employ the term, social justice, to position themselves in the field of inquiry. In doing so, they distinguish themselves by their uniquely critical approach to social justice, which differs in important respects from classic liberal perspectives, like that of the often cited Rawls (1971).
It is difficult to say why these critically-minded scholars now also identify with the social justice perspective, sometimes more closely than they do with other critical traditions. One possible reason may be associated with the problem of focusing on only one axis of disadvantage, like sexism for example. It is becoming increasingly difficult to understand and do something about sexism without acknowledging the many different ways that it interacts with other oppressive structures like racism, classism and homophobia. It could well be that scholars find the social justice umbrella appealing because it points to a wider scope of study and practice – one that moves beyond a unique focus on just sexism or racism, for example. Another possible reason for this move to social justice is that critical scholars are recognizing and appreciating the similarities they share with their colleagues in the wake of increasing and alarming threats to already marginalized populations in their schools and communities. The social justice platform may be acting as a rallying point for critical scholars, educators and community members wishing to challenge the recent waves of inequitable policies by providing a discourse that enables them to collectively understand and contest wide ranging oppressive practices associated with the current social context.

**Critical Social Justice, Leadership and Policy**

Social justice figures prominently in all of the articles in this special edition, entitled, “Educational Leadership and Policy Approaches to Critical Social Justice”. The articles are based on a number of more-or-less similar assumptions that place them and their authors firmly within a critical tradition, setting them apart from other views of social justice and the scholars and practitioners who advocate for them. Some of the key assumptions of this critical approach to social justice include:

1. **Social institutions are human creations.** Over the years, critical approaches to leadership and administration have drawn on a version of what Fay (1987) refers to as self-estrangement theory. A key element in this perspective is the idea that humans are the architects of the institutions in which they live and work. In the common vernacular, these organizations are “constructed” by men, women and children as they go about the business of living their lives. Of course, they do not construct these institutions from the ground up, nor do they have free reign over how they construct them. Instead, these institutions have histories and the people who are a part of them breathe life into them by drawing on the resources that these institutions circuitously bequeath to them. To paraphrase Marx, people make history but not under circumstances of their own choosing. The other significant point about this perspective is that humans have created imperfect institutions. They can be frustrating, unsatisfying, and exploitative because they routinely provide advantages for some and penalize others. But because these institutions are constructed by humans, humans can also change them. Knowledge plays an important role here. The final piece of this self-estrangement theory says that once people are provided with the knowledge to understand their circumstances, then they will be in a
position to change these dysfunctional institutions so that everyone can live full and satisfying lives (Ryan, 2003).

2. **Societal institutions consistently disadvantage some communities more than others.** Social disadvantage is not an accident. It does not occur by happenstance or coincidence. Rather, there are clearly identifiable patterns associated with it, and they are deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life. This is not to say that they have nothing to do with individuals. They of course do. But what individuals do inevitably occurs within the parameters of social structures that provide both possibilities and limitations for their actions. The most obvious of these structures are those associated with gender, race, class and sexual orientation; sexism, racism, classism and homophobia generate frameworks for practice that both impel and entice people to act in ways that privilege some and disable others. Complicating issues of privilege and disadvantage, though, is the fact that these structures work in multiple, intersecting and contradictory ways. For example, a black male may be simultaneously privileged by sexism and penalized by racism in evolving and often unpredictable ways. This focus on the social structures rather than individuals is one of the things that distinguishes this critical approach from liberal takes on social justice, like the one championed by Rawls (1971). In this critical perspective, injustice is a product of these social structures, and any meaningful change will only come when these structures or patterns change. A preoccupation with individuals can only deflect attention away from these social structures and obstruct meaningful efforts to eliminate these persistent inequities.

3. **Patterns of dis/advantage are not always visible.** These patterns have become so ingrained in the fabric of everyday life that they are often not easily recognizable, particularly by those who benefit the most from them. There are a number of ways of understanding this invisibility. Critical race theorists, for example, point out that racism has become so entrenched in daily life that for many people it has become a normal part of the social landscape. Taylor (2006) maintains that racial inequality and discrimination in hiring, housing, criminal sentencing, education, and lending are so widespread as to be uninteresting, even expected, to most white people. Others point to the invisibility of “race.” Educators routinely fail to acknowledge issues of race, or may insist that their treatment of minoritized students or their parents has nothing to do with it (Anderson, 1990; Shields, 2002; Sleeter, 1993). But whether or not these patterns are visible or acknowledged, they pervade our daily interactions and have a more profound impact on our conduct than do formal laws or policies. And so changes in laws, policies or regulations will not be enough to change injustice. Meaningful change will only occur when people attend to these less visible and more pervasive structures.

4. **Social justice involves more than resource distribution and economics.** This is not to say that the equitable distribution of goods is not a desirable goal. It is. Social justice can only be achieved when goods (as well as rights and responsibilities) are equitably distributed. But
critical social justice involves more than distribution. It is also about recognition. Recognition is important because injustice arises in situations where certain groups are not accorded the same value – the recognition – that others receive. So for social justice to occur those marginalized by virtue of their particular identities – frequently related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation – need to receive the same recognition as others. Achieving social justice, then, requires attention to both distribution and recognition. There is more than one way to understand the relationship between the two elements of social justice, however. Fraser (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) favours a relationship that values distribution and recognition equally. She contends that one cannot be reduced to the other. Honneth (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), on the other hand, treats distribution as a derivative of recognition. For him, the ideal of redistribution is a sub-variety of the struggle for recognition. Whatever the option one gravitates toward, seeing social justice in terms of recognition as well as distribution allows advocates to view the pursuit of social justice as a process rather than strictly an outcome.

5. Social justice is not consistent with the idea of just desert. Much has been written about the concept of justice and desert, most of it by scholars who like to distinguish social justice from “just plain justice” (See, for example, Kekes, 2003). The idea is that justice will be realized in situations where people get what they deserve. So, for example, as the liberal ideal suggests, people deserve to be rewarded for working hard; those people who reap the most rewards will be those who work the hardest. Of course, we know that this does not happen. Hard work may produce results, but there are other things that are frequently more important than hard work, like gender, social class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation relationships. The children of parents living under the poverty line can expend as much effort as they like in school, but chances are that many of them will not receive the same rewards as children from more economically privileged backgrounds who work just as hard. This happens because current rules for rewards are routinely established on uneven playing fields. What may seem like fair rules for desert consistently favour particular individuals and groups. Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of cultural capital speaks eloquently to how this happens in schools. He contends that schools do not have neutral cultures, as many believe. Rather, they are decidedly biased in that they favour some students over others. The odd exception notwithstanding, all the work in the world on the part of those not favored will generally not be enough for them to succeed in school in the same way as those who bring with them the favored cultural capital. Liberal ideals of just desert will not generate equality in a world where official and implicit rules and policies ignore a long-established and ever-present unequal playing field.

6. Social justice favors equity over particular versions of equality. Equality is important for social justice, but an exclusive preoccupation with it can be misleading, particularly if equality and sameness are conflated. Critics of social justice are often guilty of confusing the two terms. Some mistakenly believe that advocates of social justice campaign for sameness, that is, they seek a world where everyone is the same (See for example, Allison, 2004). This could not be further from the truth. A critical social justice perspective explicitly values diversity. By this we mean that various differences among people should be celebrated and valued, not
quashed, ignored, or assimilated. The other way in which equality, that is sameness, is mistakenly associated with social justice is in the treatment of difference. Critical social justice does not advocate treating everyone the same. Equal or same treatment will simply extend already existing inequalities. Instead, critical social justice perspectives advocate that individuals and groups ought to be treated according to need, that is, they should be treated equitably. Equitable rather than equal treatment stands the best chance of compensating for existing unequal differences among people. Advocates of critical social justice seek not a world where everyone is treated in the same way in order to achieve identical ends, but one that is fair, that is, equitable for everyone.

7. Social justice involves all aspects of education. Social justice measures are not simply add-ons that draw attention and resources away from learning and other crucial dimensions of the education process. Advocates acknowledge the importance of integrating social justice practices into all facets of education, including governance and learning. The articles in this special issue testify to the importance accorded the former issues. Others pay particular attention to issues of learning. For example, research over the years has explored which teaching strategies work best to include all groups in learning processes. It has shown that inclusion in the classroom begins when educators honor different ways of knowing and sources of knowledge, allow students to write and speak in their own vernacular and employ culturally compatible communication styles. Educators can promote inclusion in the classroom when they express cultural solidarity with their students, demonstrate that they care about them and hold high expectations for all students (Riehl, 2000). Others have promoted socially just curricula. Connell (1993), for example, advocates for curricula that is designed from the perspective of the marginalized. While these strategies pay particular attention to issues of marginalization in teaching and learning, they do so not just for the benefit of those who are marginalized; they do it for everyone. All students benefit from socially just school practices (Connell, 1993).

8. Social justice calls for hope. Advocates of critical social justice believe in a better future. At the heart of this optimism is the knowledge that the institutions in which humanity works and lives can be changed for the better. People can make these changes because they are also the ones who create and maintain these institutions. For some time now, scholars and educators have dedicated themselves to devising strategies for making changes that accomplish these ends. One of the many ways is by forming coalitions of like-minded people to take action to change socially unjust practices. But these changes will come about not just when formal rules, regulations, policies and laws are changed, although such changes may help. Meaningful change will occur when those more potent informal, taken-for-granted and invisible codes of conduct change. Because these codes are not always easy to recognize, part of the project for change will be educational. Advocates of social justice will have to help others recognize these often-invisible institutional relationships, codes and rules for what they are, and to develop and circulate a critical language – a discourse – for talking about and making sense of them, so that they can then critique and eventually change them.


