
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. He or she 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, and 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 postsecondary institutions than the latter (e.g., see Bennett, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1995; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990; Orfield, 1999; 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 go out into the working world (e.g., see Datnow, 1998; Lugg, 2003; McFarland, 2001; 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 oft-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, such as 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 such as 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 rein 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 humans construct these institutions, 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 do, of course. 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 social structures, rather than individuals, is one of the aspects that distinguish this critical approach from liberal views on social justice, such as the one championed by Rawls (1971). In this critical perspective, injustice is a product of these social structures, and any meaningful change will come only 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 occur only 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 subvariety of the struggle for recognition. Whatever the option one gravitates towards, 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” (e.g., see 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, such as 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 favoured will generally not be enough for them to succeed in school in the same way as those who bring with them the favoured 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 favours 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 (e.g., see 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 honour 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 are 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 only for the benefit of those who are marginalized, but 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 not come about when only 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 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.

In its own way, each of the articles in this issue resonates with some or all of the above dimensions of critical social justice. This is not to say that there are no differences among the articles. There are, but such differences do not stand out like the similarities do. These differences are generally associated with the ways in which the authors integrate leadership or policy into their social justice perspective. This is not surprising, given the relatively short history of the leadership/policy and social justice coupling. This is a relationship that is in its infancy, and the many potential ways it may work itself out have yet to be determined. As will be evident in the following articles, this connection has already begun to evolve. The most obvious change is in the way in which leadership and policy are conceived. In at least four of the articles, leadership and policy depart in noticeable ways from more traditional views. These views allow those interested in social justice to understand its relationships with leadership and policy in ways that will better help them promote the former. We refer to two examples.

The first example concerns the way in which leadership is conceptualized. At least three of the articles depart from traditional models that assume leadership is the property of individuals. The authors take issue with the idea that schools are best served by individuals—often administrators—who exercise this quality we have to come think of as leadership. Of course, there are many reasons for thinking of leadership in these terms, as Rottmann notes. But the practice of individualistic leadership is not always consistent with social justice. As an alternative, James-Wilson, Rottmann, and Ryan point to at least two other ways of seeing leadership. One is in terms of a collective enterprise or process.

Not entirely new, this view acknowledges the difficulties of depending on a single individual—no matter how gifted—to engineer changes for social justice. Instead, they point out that for meaningful and persistent change to occur, it has to include those who are affected by the change and it needs to be embedded in collective rather than individual practice. Thus, everyone, including the marginalized, will have to be involved in planning and executing socially just changes, and these changes will have to be integrated into the way in which the school organization is run. Rottmann also maintains that leadership can be seen in terms of ideas or discourses. In this sense, her approach to leadership parallels Joshee's approach to policy.

Joshee conceives of policy in ways that differ from traditional views. She does not see policy as authoritative statements that wind their way down to lower parts of the organization in often-unpredictable ways—where employees accept, reject, or modify them. For Joshee, the best way to understand policy is in terms of discourse. In the final analysis, policy is just another form of discourse—a set of ideas, statements, and understandings—that provides the fodder from which people make sense of their world. In our complex education system, however, it is never the case that a single discourse shapes our formal policy decisions. Rather, a number of discourses come together in complex and contradictory ways to form what Joshee refers to as a policy web. To understand why certain policy statements come to be passed into law or why and how they are embraced, rejected, or modified by those whom they are intended to guide, we need to recognize these embedded discourses and be able to see how they are woven through this policy web. This discursive view of educational policy implies that attainment of social justice will depend on our ability to understand how current discourses support and constrain our efforts towards this end, and on our capacity to promote those discourses that are most consistent with critical notions of social justice. Success in these endeavours will increase the chances of developing formal and informal policies that work in the interests of those who are most marginalized by current educational structures.

The Articles

The articles in this collection do not all adopt these views of leadership or policy. But they all grapple seriously with the relationship between leadership/policy and social justice. A brief description of these articles follows.

The first article is rooted firmly in the world of practice. It consists

of a conversation among three academics and three school principals about social justice. What appears is an edited version of the original. The conversation revolves around the issue of pursuing social justice in a context of accountability. The participants—De Angelis, Griffiths, Joshee, Portelli, Ryan, and Zaretsky—speak specifically about the challenges for principals of simultaneously promoting social justice and administering inequitable standardized tests. In a sense, the administrators are “caught between a rock and a hard place.” Like many other administrators, they recognize the injustices associated with these tests, but at the same time also acknowledge that they are agents responsible for carrying out the policies of the education system. Doing both at the same time requires that they walk a tightrope. The practitioners talk about how they accomplish this balancing act, managing to satisfy the powers-that-be, and thus keeping their jobs, and at the same time, following their consciences and promoting social justice. Of course, not everyone agreed on how this was to be done. Strategies that they mention include subversion, strategic action, and creative compliance. The conversation piece ends with each of the participants reacting to the conversation.

The second article by Rottmann is one in a series in this special issue that grapple with some of the theoretical dilemmas highlighted in the previous article. In this article, Rottmann analyzes two concepts that educators and scholars frequently speak of together—leadership and change. She outlines the various possible relationships between different dimensions of leadership and change, and spells out the consequences of each connection for the practice of social justice. Rottmann first explores leadership and change approaches. She highlights three approaches to leadership—leadership residing in individuals, organizational leadership, and leading ideas. Change is also classified along three dimensions—actively maintaining the status quo, following current trends, and resisting educational inequity. Rottmann then constructs a grid that combines these six categories and generates nine cells. These cells—manager, problem solver, advocate, bureaucracy, flexible networks, activist collective, rational technicism, neo-liberalism, and critical theory—represent the different potential approaches to leadership and change. Of course, not all of these are consistent with social justice, and Rottmann is careful to point out just how each of these views either support or obstruct it.

The third article is a review of the literature in the broad area of inclusive leadership. In it, Ryan approaches social justice and leadership through the lens of inclusion. He assumes that social justice requires that all members of school communities and their perspectives be included or

represented in important educational activities, and that inclusive leadership practices can assist in attaining this end. For Ryan, inclusion is associated with inclusive leadership practices in two ways—in the process and in the ends. For leadership practices to be inclusive, the process itself has to be inclusive; that is, all members of the school community and their various perspectives need to be appropriately represented in decision- and policy-making efforts. Second, these decision- and policy-making processes must also be organized to promote inclusion on a more general level, both in the school and in the wider community. The article sifts through the various genres of literature, including those that go under the names of teacher leadership, shared governance, participative leadership, student leadership, community involvement, and emancipatory or critical leadership to illuminate both the process and ends of inclusive leadership.

The fourth article, by James-Wilson, concentrates on social justice and teacher leadership. She makes the point that administrators cannot develop socially just practices in schools without the assistance of those who are such an integral part of the education process—the teachers. At the heart of her approach is what James-Wilson refers to as the Teacher Leadership for Equity and Justice (TLEJ) framework. This framework is built upon two other frameworks that revolve around inclusion—Ryan's inclusive leadership and Dei, James-Wilson and Zine's critical integrative approach to inclusive schooling. Using these two perspectives as a foundation, James-Wilson describes a number of practices that are designed to promote equity and social justice. These include (a) rejecting the status quo, (b) managing resources, policy and decision-making, (c) fostering an inclusive culture, (d) supporting educators, (e) empowering communities, and (f) integrating theory, practice, and scholarship. James-Wilson continues to develop the framework as she tests it out with pre- and in-service teachers who are part of the Urban Teaching and Leadership Program (UTL) at the Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development of the University of Rochester where she works.

The fifth article focuses on the complexities of interlocking axes of dis/advantage in the practice of educational administration—race and gender. Drawing on two empirical studies, Wallace documents the ways in which gender and race play themselves out in equity policy in a multicultural state, in the administrative prospects of women educators, and in the race-related discourses of White women administrators. Using Ontario as a case study, she notes how once-promising equity policies have been rolled back and continue to be threatened by neo-liberal practices and policies. Referring to her empirical data, Wallace also illustrates some

of the difficulties that White and non-White women experienced in their attempt to land administrative positions. Finally, Wallace writes about how race is taken up in the discourse of women administrators. What becomes apparent in the article are the complex and contradictory ways that race and gender get played out in policy, in practice, and in discourse.

The sixth article, by Joshee, explores diversity policies in Ontario. Her purpose is to explain the resilience of diversity discourses, and to illustrate the current possibilities for social justice work. In doing this, Joshee approaches policy in a novel way. She does not see policy as many traditionalists do, that is, as authoritative statements that lead people to do things in particular ways. Instead, she prefers to approach policy from a discursive framework. The idea is that in order to understand how the policy process works, we need to be aware of the discourses—ideas, statements, and understandings that help people make sense of things—that are embedded in the policies. Using the idea of a policy web, Joshee identifies six dominant diversity discourses within Ontario policy documents. These include identity-based, equality as sameness, business-oriented, rights-based, equality of outcomes, and social cohesion discourses. She maintains that a formerly common discourse, that of citizenship is missing, that there is no dominant diversity discourse, and that the primacy of economic goals of education is influencing diversity discourses. Joshee concludes that even in the current neo-liberal policy climate, there are unique opportunities to work for social justice in education.

The seventh article documents how three scholars and educators became advocates for social justice and how they translate their passion for it into their teaching. Waite, Nelson, and Guajardo tell their respective stories about how they came to be advocates for social justice. What become apparent in their narratives are the different paths that each has travelled. They begin from different starting points and have different experiences of privilege and oppression—a White male with a fractious history with authority, a White female from comparative privilege whose professional experience subsequently exposed her to the often-invisible side of oppression, and a Latino male who was the beneficiary of his family's wisdom. The authors also illustrate how their personal struggles have informed the ways in which they integrate social justice into their educational administration program. Their ultimate end is to “disrupt the traditional power dynamics of higher education, which serve to privilege some and disadvantage others.” In their efforts to reach these ends, they have introduced a relational pedagogy of caring, respect, and empathy, designed to help prospective teachers and administrators understand

themselves and the organizations in which they work. Among other things, this strategy provides their students with the opportunity to share, reflect on, and analyze their stories.

The final article focuses on professional development. MacKinnon describes a three-day module, offered by the Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium (NSELC), that addresses schooling and social justice. The intention of the program is to help administrators and aspiring administrators understand and confront their own, often taken-for-granted, assumptions and privileges associated with the work they do. As part of this enterprise, the module looks to provide participants with the language to understand and talk about the ways in which “institutional, historical, and systemic forces” limit and promote life opportunities for students and their parents, and help them develop leadership strategies for addressing these inequalities. The module is divided into six areas—(a) foundations, (b) social class and poverty, (c) sex, gender, and sexism, (d) heterosexism and homophobia, (e) race and racism, and (f) the school as a political arena. MacKinnon describes a number of the module’s activities, which are designed to provide participants with a critical understanding of these particular areas.

We hope that readers of this special issue will find it informative and useful. We intend it for both those who are already committed to social justice, as well as those who would like to know more about the topic. The articles are written to sensitize readers to issues of social justice, help them understand related matters, and move them to do something about injustice. We trust that the various ways in which the authors in this issue conceptualize leadership and policy and relate them to social justice will assist readers in this worthy enterprise.

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