Promoting Social Justice in Schools: Principals’ Political Strategies

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Abstract

This article describes a study that explores the ways in which principals use their political acumen to promote social justice in their schools. Employing face-to-face interviews with 28 principals who have worked in variety of schools, the study examines the principals’ efforts to understand their political contexts, the manner in which they employ their knowledge in the strategies that they use, and the ways in which they strategically monitor their actions as they work toward their equity goals. The study concludes that principals need to acknowledge the importance of engaging in political activity in their organizations. More than this though, they need to combine their intellectual and strategic abilities with personal and social qualities like courage, boldness and care if they are to move their social justice agendas along.

It is not always easy to promote social justice, equity and inclusion¹ in schools. Educators who attempt to do so do not always meet with success. This is as true for administrators as it is for students, teachers and parents. There are many reasons for this. To begin with, administrators work in hierarchical systems that make them legally responsible for enforcing policies and practices that may be unfair. Even with the best of intentions, administrators may find themselves in the course of carrying out their jobs unwittingly supporting in both subtle and not so subtle ways various forms of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia (Ryan, 2003a; 2007; Ryan & Rottmann, 2009). More to the point, though, equity-minded educators
regularly face resistance from various constituencies in their school communities (Theoharis, 2007). Some of this resistance is planned and overt (Datnow, 1998). But some is also inadvertent, shepherded along by proponents who do not always realize that their favored reform initiative, program proposal or policy works against already marginalized groups (Ryan, 2003b; Taylor, 2006). Needless to say, equity-minded administrators have their work cut out for them. But if they are to make their schools and communities better places to live, work and learn, then they will have to find ways to counter practices that work against their initiatives.

One way to promote equity, social justice and inclusion in these contested educational environments is to employ political skills. Given the local or ‘micro’ contexts in which they are employed, academics have referred to these skills as ‘micropolitical skills’. Although acknowledging that they can also be employed to advance less desirable social ends, Anderson (1991) and Marshall and Scribner (1991) contend that micropolitical skills can be used to promote socially just goals. Marshall and Scribner (1991, p. 3), for example, maintain that

Educators can use micropolitical skills to plan alterations in resources and manipulation of symbols to reduce inequities and to increase the power and voice of previously powerless groups. Most would express support for making practical use of micropolitical skills, for example, to remedy the exclusion of
women from top administration or to increase the participation of poor and disabled students in extracurricular activities.

In the spirit of Marshall and Scribner’s observation, this article describes a study that explores principals’ use of micro/political skills to promote their social justice agendas. In particular, it examines principals’ political acumen, that is, it explores their efforts to understand their political contexts, the manner in which they employ their knowledge in the strategies that they use, and the ways in which they strategically monitor their actions as they work toward their equity goals.

**Social Justice Leadership**

Scholars in educational administration have only addressed issues of marginalization for a comparatively short time. Initially operating within traditions associated with critical theory, feminism, neo-Marxism and poststructuralism, pioneers in the field like Bates (1980), Foster (1980), and others introduced leadership and administrative perspectives that were designed to enable scholars and practitioners to understand and do something about persistent injustices in schools that revolved around social class, gender, and race (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). More recently though scholars concerned with the plight of the marginalized have adopted the term
social justice, illustrated most obviously in a number of special issue journal editions devoted to leadership and social justice (e.g. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Journal of Educational Administration, Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations*). And while some of these academics may focus on particular issues, many of them also direct their attention to more than one form of marginalization.

Enlightening as it is, much of the more recent literature that addresses leadership and social justice, as Theoharis (2007) observes, tends to be more theoretical than practical in nature (e.g. Blackmore, 2002; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Lugg & Soho, 2006; MacKinnon, 2000; Shields, 2004). Few pieces actually document how social justice leaders, and in particular principals, accomplish their goals. One exception is Theoharis (2007). He describes a number of strategies that principals employ to promote social justice in contexts that actively resist such efforts. But while his work informs the work of practitioners in helpful ways, it does not actually delve into the realm of micropolitics, that is, it does not document the power interactions at the school and district level – not to mention the political acumen that actors employ – that occur as principals attempt to accomplish their goals in the midst of persistent resistance. Other literature that
addresses the advocacy role of social justice leaders and principals (Anderson, 2008; Ryan, 2006a) also does not explore the micropolitical aspects of it. Indeed, Anderson (2009) goes so far as to as to draw a distinction between what he refers to as advocacy leadership and “political activity.” To date, no research has attempted to marry these two perspectives, or actually probe in detail the use of political acumen in the pursuit of social justice. In an attempt to address this gap, this article combines these two perspectives, employing a micropolitical approach that features political acumen to understand how social justice principals accomplish their goals. The next section expands on leadership and micropolitics.

The Politics of Leadership

Research into the politics of education has a relatively short history. Initially, the politics that scholars wrote about five decades ago were quite different than the politics Marshall and Scribner (1991) and Anderson (1991) describe. Mirroring their political science colleagues at the time, researchers conceived of politics in education very broadly as ‘who gets what, when and how’ (Laswell, 1936) and the ‘authoritative allocation of values’ (Easton, 1965). In doing so, they concentrated on large scale
structures of government and education, policy making processes, interest
groups and their pursuits, the alignment of community power, the
recruitment and socialization of politicians for education, the role of state
legislators and courts, among others (Townsend, 1990). What was most
important to these scholars was what happened beyond the walls of the
schoolhouse. Seldom did they venture to look at what happened inside the
school. This changed, however, with the advent of a micropolitical
perspective, and so did the meaning of politics.

Innaconne (1975) was among the first to coin the term, ‘micropolitics
of education’. For Innaconne and other micropolitical social scientists in
education who followed him, like Ball (1987) and Blase (1991a, 1991b),
‘politics’ involved more than just the actions and interests of politicians and
the trajectories of formal policies. Instead, it revolved around ‘the
interaction and political ideologies of social systems of teachers,
administrators and pupils within school buildings’ (Innaconne, 1975, p. 43).
Ball (1987) subsequently characterized these contexts as ‘arenas of
struggle’. Blase (1991a, p. 11) captures nicely the spirit of this perspective
on politics:

Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by
individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations. In
large part, political actions result from perceived differences
between individuals and groups, coupled with the motivation to use power to influence and/or protect. Although such actions are consciously motivated, any action, consciously or unconsciously motivated, may have political “significance” in a given situation. Both cooperative and conflictive actions and processes are part of the realm of politics. Moreover, macro- and micropolitical factors frequently interact.

Explorations of educational leadership from a political/micropolitical perspective in education have a spotted history. Although many studies refer to power and leadership at the school level, few describe the dynamics of these micropolitical relationships (Malen & Chochran, 2008). Many of those that do, treat this sort of political activity critically. A number of the earlier studies in this area (e.g. Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991b; Blase & Anderson, 1995), for example, describe how more powerful school administrators bend less powerful parents and teachers to their wills. More recent studies and reviews (e.g. Brooks et. al., 2004; Blase & Blase, 2002; Ingersoll, 2003; Leithwood et. al. 1999; Malen & Cochran, 2008), confirm the ongoing the power of the principal in these exchanges, even though such interactions may at times be cordial. Studies that explore the ‘positive’ side of the politics of educational leadership, on the other hand, are rare. Moreover, research that examines micropolitical activity designed to promote social justice is non-existent. But successful pursuit of social justice may require that those who are committed to it engage in
micropolitical activity, that is, they may see it, as Anderson (1991), Lindle (1994), Marshall and Scribner (1991) and McGinn (2005) do, as a necessary and positive practice. Indeed principals who want their teachers to be inclusive-minded, require additional resources for their underprivileged students, or see the need to develop equity-friendly district wide policies may have no choice but to play the political game. A key element in this political action is political acumen. Indeed, principals who want to achieve their goals will have to exercise their political wisdom or acumen (McGinn, 2005). According to the godfather of micropolitics, Nicholo Machiavelli (1952, 1997), wisdom is a key pillar in any leader’s political arsenal. Unfortunately, little work has been done in this area.

**Political Acumen**

Despite, his (not always warranted) unsavory reputation, Machiavelli (1952, 1997) has much to offer contemporary leaders. Principal among his useful ideas is the notion of political acumen. Machiavelli believed that leaders could not effectively govern their respective states by brute force alone. Instead they needed to be wise, and they had to use this wisdom in judicious ways. To make his point, Machiavelli (1952, p. 92), observed that

A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect
himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves. Those that wish only to be lions do not understand this.

In the intervening years, scholars have recognized the importance of this fox persona, often according it more value than the lion character (Lukes, 2001). Along these lines, contemporary scholars in education and other disciplines have pursued Machiavelli’s notion of statecraft. With Machiavelli, they believe that it is necessary for leaders to (1) acquire knowledge of the system/environment in which they work, (2) apply the knowledge they have acquired in the strategies that they employ, and (3) strategically monitor their own actions (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Buchanan & Badman, 1999; Deluca, 1992; Kotter, 1985; McGinn, 2005).

The first requirement for a politically astute leader is to recognize the importance of understanding the political environment. Machiavelli himself conceded that this was not always an easy thing to do. This was because much of what was important to know was hidden behind a veil of false convention, perpetrated by those whose interests would best be served by concealing their true intentions. Thus, Machiavelli believed that understanding political reality was not just a matter of collecting obvious facts, but of uncovering meanings that were not immediately visible. To do this, astute leaders needed to pay particular attention to the people with
whom they worked. In particular, they needed to be able to interpret their colleagues’ words, actions and gestures in ways that allowed them to understand the latter’s real intentions, dispositions and passions so that they could predict their behaviour. While contemporary disciples emphasize the necessity of understanding the culture and system part of the political environment, they also acknowledge the inseparability of system and human, and continue to emphasize the importance of knowing the people with which one works. Buchanan and Badham (1999), for example, maintain that when joining an organization the politically astute executive ought to make an effort to find out (1) who is friendly with who, who are enemies, secret liaisons, (2) the real agendas of key resource holders, (3) who controls ‘discretionary’ resources and who to ‘reach’ if you want something done, (4) past and current hot issues, and (5) who to befriend and who to avoid.

Leaders also need to be able to put their knowledge of the political environment to good use in the strategies that they employ. A number of contemporary scholars suggest particular strategies. Bolman and Deal (2008), for example, maintain that politically astute leaders need to develop an agenda, build a base of support, and learn how to manage relations with those who might support or resistant the agenda. Buchanan and Badman (1999), on the other hand, maintain that these leaders must develop ‘power
talking strategies’ and ‘influence tactics’. In education, Marshall and Mitchell (1991) and McGinn (2005) explore the politics of the vice principalship and the principalship, respectively. With regards to the former, Marshall and Mitchell contend that in order to survive in the position, vice principals need to limit risk taking, remake policy quietly, avoid moral dilemmas, refrain from displaying divergent values, be committed (join the club), avoid getting labeled as a troublemaker, keep disputes private, and cover all your bases. McGinn (2005), on the other hand, observes that politically-minded principals develop relationships within and beyond the school community, including central office people, speak political language, and develop networks of support.

While the above suggestions may help leaders get the leverage they need to move their agendas forward, leaders cannot automatically or blindly put them into practice. Instead, they need to apply them in strategic ways, carefully considering what the particular circumstances demand at the time. There is no formula for politically minded leaders to follow. They must understand the situations in which they find themselves and then decide on the best courses of action. In order to cope with the improvisatory and experimental nature of such practice, Buchanan and Badman (1999) feel that politically-minded leaders need to see themselves as *bricoleurs*, using
whatever resources that they have at their disposal as they pursue their goals, including opportunity, luck and accidents of good timing. In these kinds of contexts, self-monitoring is particularly important. Administrators need to be self-conscious, self-aware and self-critical and to learn from experience. McGinn (2005) found that the politically-minded principals in her study considered very carefully the contexts in which they acted, thought about the impact of their actions as they were occurring, and reflected on them after-the-fact. Among the many things upon which administrators might reflect, are the ethical implications of one’s actions. Given the fine line between ethical actions and practical strategies, reflective politically-minded administrators will inevitably consider the ethics of their actions.

The study described in this article explores how school principals display the three elements of political acumen – (1) understanding political environments, (2) applying the knowledge they have acquired in the strategies that they employ, and (3) strategically monitoring their own actions – as they pursue their social justice goals.

The Study

This study was part of a larger study that explored principals’ approaches to inclusion and social justice. It involved three components: interviews of inclusive/social justice-minded principals, a survey of
principals that probed their inclusive/social justice practices, and case
studies of two schools. This article reports on a theme that arose from the
interview portion of the study – political acumen.

Qualitative methodology (Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Merriam, 1998)
was employed for this portion of the study because it was thought to be the
most appropriate way to generate insight into how a variety of administrators
promoted social justice in their schools. Qualitative interviews were
particularly well suited to the study because they are the best way to acquire
an understanding of the complexities associated with the process, and in
particular, the political side of administrators’ work (Glesne & Peshkin,
1992). Interviews also permit the researcher to probe areas that research
participants may not be used to speaking about – like political strategies. In
the end though, interviewing is the preferred data collection strategy in this
case because it allows researchers to ‘get better data or more data at less cost
than other tactics’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 72).

The sample consisted of inclusive/equity-minded school principals.
Participants were chosen on the basis of their desire to promote inclusion,
equity and social justice. The concern here was not with locating
‘exemplary’ administrators, but with recruiting principals who thought about
these issues, and as a consequence, could talk about their efforts (and
struggles). Obviously, as will become evident, not all principals were successful at achieving their equity goals. It was also evident among the study participants that in order to achieve any sort of success in achieving their social justice goals, they had to play the political game. A snowball technique (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990) was employed to locate and approach potential principals. Initially, principals known to be equity-minded were chosen. These individuals, in turn, provided the names of other like-minded administrators. In all, 28 principals were interviewed. As it turned out, virtually all of the principals shared similar views on social justice, equity and inclusion. They were first and foremost concerned with issues associated with not just the differently-abled, but also with other axes of dis/advantage like gender, social class, race and sexual orientation, among others. In this regard, they sought to expose, contest, and overturn the disadvantages associated with these structures. While not all could articulate some of the finer points of social justice that academics illustrate, like for example, the fair distribution of resources (Rawls, 1971) or the recognition of identities (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), these principals nevertheless reflected these principles in the way they talked about their practices. Most also understood that promoting social justice went hand in hand with ensuring the equitable treatment of marginalized groups, that is, they
acknowledged that disenfranchised groups could not be treated in the same manner as privileged groups (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). In order to achieve such ends, many of these principals also favoured the idea and practice of inclusion. They did what they could to include members of their school communities – students, parents, teachers and others – in decision-making processes and other activities in ways that provided them with the power that they often did not possess in other contexts. They saw inclusion not as mere tokenism, but as a way for the marginalized to have a meaningful voice (Ryan, 2006c).

The principal pool represented a wide variety of experiences. All of these administrators had been in more than one school and eight had worked in more than one school district. Typically the schools that they worked in and central district offices with which they were associated functioned in a hierarchical manner. District offices issued policies and directives and they distributed resources. While most of the schools had school councils, they were only advisory in nature. These schools and districts and the communities that the principals in this study served in over the years varied considerably. They included both rural and urban schools – schools in big, mid-size and small cities and towns and those in villages and in the countryside, far from municipalities. The communities that they served
were well-off and poor, uniformly white and racially diverse, locally-born and highly immigrant. Some were also mixes of these. The schools that these principals worked over their careers were small and large, elementary and secondary, and public and private.

Principals were contacted by phone, and those who agreed to be interviewed were visited in person. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations, including participants’ offices, at the university, in coffee shops, or wherever it was most convenient. Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 90 minutes. All the interviews were tape-recorded. Initially study participants were asked about what they did to promote inclusion, equity and social justice in their schools and communities. In particular, they were asked about who and how they included students, teachers, parents and others in various school and academic activities, how they advocated for them, developed critical skills, emphasized student learning, promoted dialogue, adopted inclusive policy making processes and engendered whole school approaches (Ryan, 2006b).

Data analysis, as is commonly the case with qualitative research (Merriam, 1998), began as the interviews were being carried out. The interviewer took note of common themes during the interviews and after – with a cursory review of the transcriptions. In the interviews, the
participants spoke about what they were doing in their current environment and about the full breadth of their administrative experience in all of the schools in which they worked. What became apparent as they talked about these experiences were the difficulties of promoting inclusion, equity and social justice and the need to develop political strategies. In one of the first interviews, one of the participants – Beatrice (a pseudonym) – introduced this notion of political acumen, saying that principals needed a bit of this simply to survive on the job when promoting equity. She was not the only one to refer to the political arena, however, and this theme was pursued in more depth. Participants were asked more questions about politics and political acumen. In order to help with this issue, the literature on the topic was explored. Interviewing was concluded when the data began to repeat itself (Merriam, 1998).

After all the interviews were carried out, the data were analyzed in a more comprehensive way using N6 software. This aspect of the analysis fleshed out the nature of political acumen in more detail. In particular, it facilitated the emergence of three political acumen categories – (1) understanding the political environment, (2) putting this knowledge into practice in the strategies that principals employed, and (3) strategically monitoring actions. The remainder of the article is organized around these
three categories. It begins, though, with a general orientation to being political.

**Being Political**

The administrators in the study saw their political predispositions in a number of ways. Some recognized the necessity of playing politics and readily acknowledged their active participation in related practices. Beatrice, an experienced principal, for example, claims that ‘you have to have political acumen’ to survive on the job. More common, though, were principals who either preferred not to think of themselves as politicians or those who had difficulty articulating what they did in their political capacities. Jean is typical of the latter. An elementary principal who has had plenty of experience in a variety of schools, she has difficulty seeing herself as a ‘political person’, even though she readily acknowledges that schooling is a political process. She says, ‘I don't see myself as being particularly politically savvy. I know, however, that everything that we do is political and carries political weight’. After reflecting on her statement, she reconsidered somewhat, indicating that ‘maybe I am more politically savvy than I give myself credit for’, and relating that the reason for saying that she was not particularly savvy was her perceived lack of success at changing things.
Administrators speak of their political practices in a number of ways. They describe how they come to understand the political environments in which they work, the political strategies that they employ, and the manner in which they consciously consider their actions.

**Understanding Political Environments**

Participants in the study acknowledged the importance of understanding the political environments in which they worked. John, an experienced principal now working in a diverse urban elementary school, emphasized this point when he says, ‘You have to understand before you seek to change.’ John and his fellow participants felt that it is crucial to understand school cultures, community dynamics and the wider system idiosyncrasies. Understanding these realms requires that they come to know, or know about, the people who work in the system – teachers, parents and central office people – and their values and priorities. They speak about a number of ways of acquiring this knowledge, including listening, interacting with people and moving around.

Participants spoke of the importance of knowing and understanding the not-always-obvious system conventions. Part of this understanding required an understanding of the people who occupied significant positions in the system. According to Jean, school administrators need to know who has
power, what kind of power they possess, and how they are likely to use this power. Jean maintains that power is not necessarily associated just with a person’s formal organizational position, however. Instead, she says that it is often a product of the kind of relationship people have with others. So it is important for principals to understand these kinds of relationships and the relationships that they have with these powerful others in order to know who is likely to support their initiatives and interests. Roz also believes that part of politicking ‘is getting to know the players’. She says that it is important to know if ‘a lot of them like to profile themselves and their careers, and they like to be the best at whatever. So they don’t want anything to become public that might undermine that effort’. Getting what she wants requires that she figure out ‘their values, what’s important to them, what makes them tick’. Roz contends that promoting her equity agenda requires that she finds a way to align system/individual priorities with her own. She says, for example, that she has a ‘better shot at succeeding’ if she can ‘marry’ her goal of getting funding with the board’s desire to ‘look good publicly’.

Study participants also have a number of strategies that they employ to help them learn about their political environments. One strategy for learning more about the school district and the important and powerful players is to sit on board-wide committees. Jasmin says that in these circumstances ‘I
meet these people and I get to read them’. Jasmin also maintains that moving from board to board has helped her come to understand district dynamics. She says:

It helps when you have had a breadth of experiences. So I haven’t been in one system; I’ve been in many, unlike most of my colleagues. I tend to want to get that big picture. And so when you do that, you start to see some commonalities in all the systems. And that helps me figure out how everything is set up.

Participants also talked about the importance of getting to know the school community and staff. Roger, for example, maintained that ‘the first thing is listen to your community and get an understanding. And it takes time’. John also recognizes the importance of hearing what people have to say. He also employs a variety of techniques to learn about his environment. He invites parents into the school for focus groups and he sends out surveys. Not all principals, however, support the idea of using surveys. Jasmin, for example, does not employ this technique because she believes that it ‘really reinforces the power for the people who already have power in the community’. She feels that not all parents will take advantage of the survey opportunities, and as a consequence, not all sectors of the community will be equitably served by the practice.

Participants emphasize the importance of understanding the political environments in which they work. However, they also realize that just
knowing about how things work is not enough to promote their social justice agendas. They also have to understand how to best employ this knowledge in the unique contexts in which they work.

**Political Strategies**

In this study, participants spoke about a number of political strategies they employ to promote equity and social justice in their schools. These include, among others, developing and establishing relationships, persuading others, persisting, planning, experimenting, being up front, keeping others off-balance, playing ignorant, ignoring, working the system and quietly advocating.

**Relationships**

Participants emphasize the importance of developing and establishing relationships that will help them move their equity agendas along. The kinds of relationships that administrators have with others will vary considerably, however. They are shaped by such things as where the administrators and the others are located in the organization, the kind of power that they are able to wield, the relationships administrators feel comfortable with, and the nature of the issues in question, among other things. Whatever the particulars of the relationships, administrators feel that the people with
whom they deal will be more likely to be open to various overtures, requests and new initiatives if they have good working relationships with them.

Roger, an elementary principal, works on developing and maintaining trusting and caring relationship with his staff. He contends that ‘my focus with staff from the very beginning is school is your second family... we will always support you’. Roger maintains that he needs to establish credibility with his staff before they will listen to his ideas about equity. He says ‘you can't even talk about inclusion until they kind of know that you're going to care about them and genuinely care about them…. You have to build the relationships up with your staff first, before you get into the heart of the matter because equity and inclusion are only one piece of the puzzle’. Roger believes he has to model this caring – walk the talk – before his staff will trust what he has to say about equity issues.

Sylvia also talks about the importance of establishing relationships. She contends that good relationships with her staff enable her to talk to them about things that might be uncomfortable. Beside personal issues, this includes issues like racism. Sylvia also talks about the importance of establishing relationships with the central office. She maintains that her good relationship with Bob, an engineer at central office, which she achieved by ‘making things easier for him’ on another project, helped her
get a track for her school. Sylvia and other participants also spoke about establishing credibility, which included treating people right, not being perceived as a ‘whiner’ or someone who looks to ‘grab all the resources’, and giving people credit for the things that they (and others) do. Participants also speak of another kind of relationship that assists them in achieving their equity goals – alliances. According to administrators in this study, forging alliances can make it easier to promote equity. The politically astute administrators are constantly on the lookout for allies to help them in their cause.

The kinds of relationships that administrators establish with others will have an impact on the degree to which they will be able to convince them of the value of their equity causes.

*Persuading Others*

Administrators in this study often found themselves in the position of having to persuade others to go along with their equity initiatives, and so they had to employ various techniques to convince school or community members of the value of equity programs or prompt central office administrators to support a policy initiative or give them much needed resources. To do this, they employed various information circulating
techniques, modes of prompting, guided discussions, questioning, and provoking, and they used various arguments to get their points across.

Participants found ways of providing information to their school communities in various forums. Not only did they supply academic articles and student performance data for educators to mull over; they also employed stories, videos and people’s experiences to get their teachers, parents and students to buy into their ideas about equity. They hoped that these resources would prompt members of their schools and communities to learn things that they had not known before, to see things that they had not previously seen, and to prompt them to look more closely at themselves and at their environments. Jean, for example, likes to use a fable to discuss risk taking, dis/comfort and security. Jean also uses a couple of films that probe issues of race. She found that the discomfort that these films produced led to meaningful discussions. Roger, on the other hand, likes to bring in speakers from the community and from community organizations. Brian organizes workshops for teachers to help them understand and deal with the developmental needs of some of the special needs students who are now coming to the school and the students who are interacting with them.

Administrators had a number of strategies for conveying messages to their school communities and central office people. Most preferred to let
others reach their own conclusions about the issues that are presented to them. Jean, for example, says that ‘you have to be careful not to preach’. She believes that she can get her message across more effectively by providing people with information in ways that allow them to come to their own conclusions. Most participants encourage discussion among their staff. Such discussions often revolve around talk about academic articles or films. Some administrators find it necessary to move these discussions along by asking critical questions. Tom, for example, asks critical questions about teacher practice, like ‘Why have you done that? Why do I see 80% of the kids sent from your room are Black? Why is that?’ The least desired means of conveying the messages that promote equity is by preaching. Sometimes, though, administrators contend that they have no alternative but to do this.

Administrators also acknowledge that they need to be aware of their language when making a case to teachers or central office people. Ron, for example, believes that administrators need to be able to say what they have to say ‘without using these $500 words and put it in lay person terms’. Other administrators stress the need to be cautious. Jean says ‘you have to be careful with what audience you say it to and how you say it’. Other participants claim it helps to compliment superiors when making a case for something. Shelley, for example, says ‘always start with … the great work
the board is doing. Everybody loves a compliment. And then say, “there’s an area I think we still need to identify”’. Participants also contend that it is important to use the current government or district rhetoric/language. Anne claims that she has used this tactic successfully when trying to get money for her school. She remembers one occasion where she used the ‘conscience of the Board – their own rhetoric’ to get what she wanted. According to Anne, ‘you just use their language, and bing, I got the maximum amount’.

Administrators also use other arguments to convince others of the sense of their ideas. The one to which they most frequently appeal to is the ‘looking after the interests of students’ argument. Bill, for example, contends that ‘I take the role of an administrator very seriously in looking out for kids. … I want to do a good job for the kids, all kids and not just the ones who fit into the dominant culture’. Joan puts it this way: ‘You know you always rationalize it, what’s good for kids, we all throw that line out, but it is your argument’. Others find themselves combining this argument with ‘fairness’ values.

Other Strategies

Participants in the study also talked about other ways in which they put their knowledge of the system into practice. These strategies go hand in hand with the relationships they have established and their efforts at
persuasion. Administrators spoke of how their persistence, planning, experimentation, honesty, patience, aggression, play acting and quiet advocacy served them as they promoted their equity agendas.

Brenda maintains that her persistence has enabled her to get things done. She insists that if administrators persevere, others will tire and they will eventually get their way. She says,

One of the things I find that the systems generally don’t have as much of is energy…. But generally, I think if I choose my issue properly, I am tenacious and the system gets tired and their needs change. But I will continue to focus my resources, particularly my energy, on that one thing until I succeed…. I do know that systems can get fatigued. And sometimes they’ll just give up and say ‘Fine, give her the frigging wall’.

Other administrators note the value of being open and honest with those they deal with. Janice, for example, maintains that it is important to put ‘everything on the table’. She believes that people will not accept what she has to say about inclusion and equity if they think that she has a hidden agenda. Brian, on the other hand, has learned over the years that he must be patient in his efforts to promote social justice practices in his schools. He believes that the best approach is to take ‘baby steps’ along the path to social justice and equity. For him it takes time to build the trust and understanding necessary for these practices to sustain themselves.
Another practice that administrators spoke of was playing ignorant. Brenda, for example, broke system protocols by proceeding with a much-need renovation at her school, saying after being confronted by the central office that she was not aware that she violated system regulations. Other administrators simply ignore some of the inequitable policies that they are required to implement. Shelley, for example, felt that there were more important things to focus on than mobilizing to raise test scores, and so she ignored some of the policies associated with this issue.

Participants had different approaches for the way in which they approached their colleagues and superiors when they needed resources or when they were promoting a program or policy. This often depended upon the kinds of resources they could draw upon. Brenda, for example, employs the personal power that she has acquired over the years to get what she wants. She is an experienced principal who has moved from district to district, and she uses this experience, others’ awareness that she is very knowledgeable, and her unpredictability to put people on edge. She says:

people are nervous around me and they’re worried ‘what might she do next?’ And I use that, I leverage off of that, I sense that there’s that nervousness. And so yeah, I make people nervous. And they don’t know what I might say or do next. And that’s the edge I create. And I do that somewhat instinctively.
Bill, on the other hand, is not able to bring these same pressures to bear. He is a young, relatively inexperienced administrator of colour who works in a primarily white school community. His strategy is not to put people off-balance or make them nervous. Instead he employs what he refers to as ‘quiet advocacy’. He says, ‘I've been a quiet advocate just because I've always had to quietly advocate for myself being a minority, growing up in the same community that I'm working in right now’. Bill speaks of how he employed this strategy for getting one of his diversity projects underway. The first thing he did was to talk to people he believed ‘should be brought on board’. He was careful to let them have their say and worked to build a consensus among them before proceeding. In doing so, he made use of the good relationships that he had built with these colleagues over the years.

Study participants employ many strategies to promote their social justice agendas. They invariably consider their actions very carefully because the contexts in which they seek to promote their agendas may differ considerably. This means that a successful strategy in one situation may fail in another. Ultimately, the more politically astute among the study participants realize, as did Machiavelli five centuries ago, that they need to be strategic if they are to achieve their goals.
Acting Strategically

Administrators spoke of the importance of consciously considering their own actions before acting. They believed that they needed to be careful when deciding whether or not to introduce an initiative, promote a policy or request resources. They spoke first and foremost of being strategic in their actions – what strategies to employ, when to use them, and when to pull back. They also spoke of how they learned to be strategic and the manner in which they reflected on their successes and their failures.

Brenda contends that she needs to view situations strategically. She says ‘I have to look at it strategically. So I can’t be trying to do everything, I have to be specific about what needs I have to attend to, what are the critical things that I’m going to focus my efforts on’. She claims that she needs to ‘target properly’, that is, be selective. She does not go ‘after everything because you can wear that out pretty quickly’. Brenda considers a number of factors before making the decision to act. These include the history of the issue, who is involved at the time, whether she can read the situation and how much can she ‘push’. Brenda also recognizes that there are situations where she needs to pull back.

And I have had to say ‘no’ on a few things, even things I know we should be getting them for staff. But we’ve just gone to the
superintendent three times. I don’t think a fourth time to the well, right now, is a good idea. I think we need a little bit more time. … So you got to kind of pull back, regroup, rethink.

Administrators learn how to act strategically through their experience. Some are more prepared to learn than others. In this study, it was obvious that the more experienced principals were more tuned into their political environments and had a more acute sense of what to do to get their desired ends. Mary has learned a great deal over the years; most of this learning has come from her mistakes. She says:

Well, I’ve made a lot of mistakes over the years. And when you’re a risk taker or when you just want to learn, and you won’t be stopped. You know, I’ve been hit around the head a lot by systems and people in system positions. And I guess, I’m one of those people, and I hope most of the profession is, where you reflect on that and you figure out ‘What just happened there?’

Mary goes on to say that she learns ‘from experience, I have to say that, and being reflective on what’s occurred and what’s going on here. I didn’t want that to happen, or how did that happen? What just happened here?’ Of course, many other administrators speak of situations where they had to think long and hard about what they should do in these circumstances. Others have routines that they follow. Rosemary, for example, keeps quotes in her desk that she consults every once in a while. Not all administrators are as strategic or have the acumen that Mary, Rosemary and others in the
study possess. Gerald, for example, has not been as successful in his efforts to promote his vision or obtain resources at the district level. A very principled individual, he has been reluctant to play political games, preferring to follow his conscience and voice his opinion, regardless of the circumstances. His proclivity to speak his mind, however, has cost him. He says that over the years he has ‘gradually withdrawn from involvement because, obviously, I started to pay a price career-wise, and even personally’. Gerald’s situation underlies the risk that administrators take when they resist organizational conventions (See also Ylimaki, 2005). Indeed there are also other costs for engaging in such risky endeavors, like burnout, for example (Theoharis, 2007).

Gerald is not the only one to wrestle with the ethical issues associated with playing politics. Participants in this study, however, felt justified in doing what they did. Their justifications generally were related to their belief in the importance of working in the interests of students. Roger, for example, says that ‘we keep coming back to students. The school belongs to the students and not to anybody else. And one of the things you have to accept if you're going to be a principal is what is popular might not be morally right, or ethically or equitably right’. No participants admitted
committing unethical acts as part of their political strategies. They preferred to think of what they did as necessary. Sheila put it this way:

You manipulate, but with integrity. Everyone is doing it all the time. I do play the same game sometimes with the intention of want[ing] to move this forward. But here we’re not about being the agency advocate; we’re here as a collective to represent the needs of the students. That’s that political piece again about how you get these people to work together on inclusive education.

**Discussion: Foxes, Lions and Politics**

The participants in this study recognized the importance of political activity, and they used what resources they had at their disposal, that is the power they could bring to bear, to promote their equity interests. In this sense, they developed Machiavelli’s (1952) fox persona, relying on their acumen, intellect and cleverness. They worked to understand their political environments, employed various political practices, and acted strategically.

Study participants spoke at length about their political maneuvering. While not all saw themselves as politicians or looked positively on the idea of ‘playing politics’, most nevertheless recognized the importance of getting along in this often not-so-visible political arena. Engaging in this way did not always mean that principals were able to advance their equity agendas, however; many, like Jean for example, expressed frustration that their efforts to achieve their goals often fell short. Even so, those who engaged in
political maneuvering were more likely to be successful than those who did not. For example, one of the study participants who refused to play the political game out of principle, Gerald, found himself marginalized within the district, achieving few of his goals and mired in career quicksand. Participants admitted that they had to engage in politics because their social justice and equity priorities were not always popular with their school communities and in their school districts. If they were to have any chance at implementing and seeing these initiatives through, then they needed to play the political game.

Study participants talked about the importance of understanding the political environment in which they worked. Part of this process, as Machiavelli (1952) believed, required that leaders ‘find out what the truth of the matter is’. Among other things, this meant that they had to correctly interpret others’ intentions and understand the reasons for the latters’ actions. Principals in the study also acknowledged that it was important to know their contexts, and in particular, the people with whom they interacted. In this regard, they felt that they needed to understand who has power, how these people have acquired it and how they use it. Principals also talked about the strategies that they employed to help them come to know their political environments. These included sitting on committees, taking up
various positions in different districts, and taking time to listen to what people have to say. Ironically, principals spoke little about listening to students. This is perhaps not all that surprising given that students generally have less power than other members of the school community, and thus may not require the same kind of political attention that the latter do.

Principals in the study also described a number of political practices in which they engaged. They noted that it is helpful to establish good working relationships and to use the right words when communicating with others. Scholars who study political acumen also emphasize the importance of social relationships. McGuinn (2005), in fact, goes so far as to distinguish political acumen from social acumen. For her, social acumen refers to the ability to foster relationships and to communicate. Principals in this study recognized the importance of establishing good relationships with their fellow educators and community members. Among other things, these relationships helped them when it came time to convince the latter to go along with their equity initiatives. Like Machiavelli who emphasized the importance of rhetoric (See also Viroli, 1998), and McGuinn (2005) who refers to the need to be aware of one’s conversation, principals in this study noted the importance of the language that they employed. They were careful with language and preferred to advance their various arguments/initiatives
by employing different sources of information or modes of prompting, guided discussions, questioning, and provoking. The most effective means of convincing others, according to Jean and others, was not to preach, but to let people come to conclusions on their own. The most effective arguments were those that put students first and were aligned with board and government priorities. Principals also made reference to a number of other strategies that served them well. They found that persistence, planning, experimentation, honesty, patience, aggression, play acting and quiet advocacy also helped to promote their equity agendas.

Perhaps the most important element of political acumen is its strategic component (Buchanan & Badham, 1999; Machiavelli, 1952). Principals in the study emphasized that they cannot simply apply ready-made formulas or sets of prescriptions to the situations that arise in schools. They recognized that what might have worked in one situation will not necessarily work in another, even though the circumstances may be similar. Like the academics who write about organizational politics, the principals contended that they have to carefully consider the context before acting. One of the more important strategic decisions involved sizing up their own relative power and acting on the basis of this estimate. Consider the contrasting situations of Brenda and Bill. Brenda is an experienced principal with many resources
at her disposal. She knew that she ‘makes people nervous’ and so did not hesitate to use aggressive tactics when she could get away with it. Bill, on the other hand, is a relatively inexperienced administrator of colour who works in a primarily white school community and district. He understood that aggressive tactics would probably not work for him, so he employed what he refers to as ‘quiet advocacy’ strategies to advance his equity agenda. Principals also said that they learn to act strategically from reflecting on their experience, particularly the mistakes that they have made in the past. Needless to say, the more experienced principals in the study had more to say about this process than the less experienced administrators.

Surprisingly, principals did not dwell on the morality of acting politically, despite a propensity to reflect on their actions. Political activity, particularly if it is patterned after Machiavelli’s extreme pragmatist or ‘consequentialist’ position (Fischer, 2006), can raise moral questions. For example, is a principal justified in doing whatever it takes to promote the interests of his or her school? The principals in this study, however, did not experience any moral dilemmas as they promoted their equity agendas because they believed wholeheartedly in them. They ignored policies, attempted to manipulate superiors and did what they could to convert others to their ways of thinking because they sincerely felt that that this was the
right thing to do. None admitted to engaging in immoral actions or violating any personal or collective moral codes in these quests.

Finally, the data indicate that principals did not rely exclusively on their fox persona to promote their agendas; they also counted on their lion qualities. Lukes (2001) maintains that Machiavelli’s lion persona is both underappreciated and misunderstood. According to Lukes, Machiavelli’s lion embodies much more than just brute strength, impetuosity and violence; it was intended to complement the fox, tempering intellect with sensuality, and coldness and loneliness with passion and community. In 16th century Italy, the lion was seen as a social being that displayed courage, boldness and integrity, earning the respect and loyalty of its fellow beasts. The participants in this study exhibited a number of these characteristics. Roger, for example, spoke of earning the loyalty of his school community by treating it as a second family. Brenda boldly worked at making people nervous and she attempted to marshal her energy resources to outlast the system. But there are also elements of the fox’s strategy in these acts. Brenda, for example, would always take the time to calculate the potential consequences of her actions before she acted. The conclusion here is that it is difficult in practice to separate the fox and the lion. As Lukes (2001, p. 573), contends, ‘politics for Machiavelli is a delicate balance of acumen and
boldness, of knowing and feeling’. The same was true for a number of principals in this study; many combined their intellectual and strategic abilities with personal and social qualities like courage, boldness and care to move their social justice agendas along.

Conclusion

This article has described the manner in which social justice-minded principals employ political acumen to achieve their goals. It outlines how these administrators come to understand their political environments, the ways in which they put this knowledge to use, and the manner in which they strategically calculate their actions. Many of these strategies are similar to those that politically-minded administrators employ to achieve ends other than social justice ones. Indeed, recent and not so recent studies of micropolitical action in schools indicate that teachers and administrators rely on personal relationships, forge alliances with like-minded others, or look to persuade, ignore or keep their colleagues off-balance to achieve their various goals (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991b; Blase & Blase, 2002; Malen & Chochran, 2008). What is different about the actions of social justice-minded principals is the urgency and the context-specific nature of their actions. The specific nature of the strategies of social justice-minded principals may differ from other more general micropolitical strategies. For example, principals may
opt to show teachers a film that prompts them to reflect on racism, seek to mobilize an activist community group or target resources that would specifically benefit marginalized students – actions that other principals might not consider. There is also a certain degree of urgency in the micropolitical action of social justice-minded principals that is not always apparent in other non-social justice oriented micropolitical action. This is because social justice initiatives routinely face opposition from the various constituents of systems that resist such efforts in ways that other initiatives do not. If principals are to succeed in their social justice endeavors then they have little choice but to play the political game, that is, to acknowledge the political realities of their organizations, hone their political skills, and put these skills into play. Failure to do so will not bode well for the future of equity and social justice.

References


While inclusion, equity and social justice may mean different things, they belong to the same family of ideas and practices. For the purposes of this article, inclusion, like equity and social justice, is concerned with issues associated with not just the differently-abled, but also with other axes of dis/advantage like gender, social class, race and sexual orientation, among others. Inclusive, equitable and social justice practice seeks to expose, contest, and overturn the disadvantages associated with these structures.