

## ENACTING SOCIAL JUSTICE: PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

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*This qualitative study examines how educators who are either currently enrolled or who have completed an educational leadership preparation program in the past five years at one Rocky Mountain university understand social justice—as a concept and operationally—and the role of multicultural education in promoting social justice in P-12 school settings. Less than half (44%) of the educational leaders in this study were familiar with the concept of social justice, with those leaders who were familiar with the concept identifying full and equal participation (17%) and equal distribution of resources (11%) as the focus of school programs. Less than one third (28%) of participants expressed views reflecting cultural proficiency or competence, indicating a need for explicit coverage of social justice issues and cultural responsiveness in the educational leadership program examined. The results of this study indicate the need for leadership preparation programs to explicitly address social justice and oppression issues to increase the awareness of leaders and thus their capability to facilitate change that supports greater social justice and equitable educational outcomes for all students.*

*Keywords: educational leadership, social justice, leadership preparation*

In order to be globally competitive in the twenty-first century, the United States must develop and maintain a highly skilled and innovative workforce. Public education has long been seen as the vehicle for developing such a workforce, but student achievement data since the 1980's has shown a large discrepancy between the academic success of white middle and upper class students and students who come from low socioeconomic, racially diverse, and English as a Second Language backgrounds (Education Trust, 2006; Gamoran, 2007; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kozol, 2005; Miller, 1995; Rothenberg, 2007; Rothstein, 2005). Many federal initiatives, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the current Race to the Top, are focused on increasing the achievement of at-risk student subgroups so that the human capacity of the nation can be maximized.

As educators are attempting to address this achievement gap, the population of students in the at-risk subgroups of minority students and English language learners are increasing as the diversity of the nation grows (U. S. Census Bureau, 2008). The education of students from differing cultures is an increasingly critical challenge to which educational leaders must respond. While teachers, principals, and superintendents across the nation are acutely aware of the achievement gap data and the consequences of such data in relation to state and federal accountability systems, a systemic view of how schools can successfully educate a diverse student population is not common (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Multicultural education and social justice are two concepts found in social science and education research that address the engagement of minority students in the learning process, leading to increased academic achievement. Educational leaders should be familiar with and able to apply these concepts to educational settings in order for the potential of all students to be fully developed.

Multicultural education holds promise in addressing the significant achievement difference between racial minority and low SES students and their white, middle-class peers (Delpit, 1995; Florence, 1998; Howard, 2006; Lindsey et al., 2004; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Although scholars may identify multicultural education with different terms, each advocates an increase in awareness of one's own cultural identity, how cultural identities are formed, forms of oppression, and methods of appropriately addressing differences among groups of people. Multicultural education is not an annual celebration of a particular group, but an on-going, explicit process of understanding and celebrating the customs, beliefs, identity, and history of each student, as well as addressing forms of oppression that individuals as a part of a group may have or are experiencing and how to respond to such oppression.



The goal of multicultural education, in addition to closing the achievement gap, is social justice, which includes, but extends beyond, the schoolhouse walls and is not limited only to racial or cultural diversity issues (Bell, 2007; Freire, 1970/2007; Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Torres & Noguera, 2008; Young, 1990). As Young explained, "The ideal of the just society as eliminating group differences is both unrealistic and undesirable. Instead, justice in a group-differentiated society demands social equality of groups, and mutual recognition and affirmation of group differences. Attending to group-specific needs and providing for group representation both promotes that social equality and provides the recognition that undermines cultural imperialism" (p. 161). Social justice should include, then, the elements of recognition (including respect and dignity) and redistribution of power and wealth discussed by North (2008). Knowledge of differences and inequity, however, are nearly meaningless if members of the dominant or minority groups do not take action to correct injustices of which they are aware. This means that students of the dominant culture need to understand and value the culture of other students and understand the forms that oppression take, while students of the minority culture need to build healthy self-esteem and identity in order to for a school environment to be developed that supports the engagement, empowerment, social responsibility, and ultimately the success of all students.

While the idea of social justice is widely discussed among academics, it is the work of practitioners in schools to implement multicultural education and promote social justice to address the achievement gap, including motivational factors that contribute to drop-out rates, and empower students to fully participate in school and in society as adults. The understanding of what multicultural education and social justice are and what they look like in a school environment appears to remain minimal among P-12 educators and educational leaders (Adams et al., 2007; McDonald, 2007; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Superintendents and principals involved in research probing school leaders' perceptions and understandings of social justice in UCEA's *Voices From the Field* study revealed limited knowledge of how schools can promote social justice or even what the concept entailed (Dominguese et al., 2005; Place et al., 2006). Understanding how educators, in leadership roles or preparing to assume such roles, define social justice and what actions are or could be taken in schools to promote social justice, including but not limited to multicultural education, is necessary for educational leadership preparation programs and educational leadership scholars if they are to engage in a meaningful dialogue with practitioners that provides practical assistance and knowledge in addressing cultural and other minority group issues that impact the achievement gap. The academic success of minority groups in just an initial, albeit vital, step in promoting an active voice and participation in American society by all citizens that must be supported by schools and their leaders, with the imperative to adequately train those school leaders falling squarely on the shoulders of educational leadership preparation programs.

## METHODS

This qualitative case study was conducted to determine how educators who either were currently enrolled in or who had completed an educational leadership preparation program in the past five years at one Rocky Mountain university understood the concept of social justice and the role of multicultural education in promoting social justice in P-12 school settings. The study resulted from numerous conversations among the program faculty as to whether program graduates were being adequately prepared to address the educational needs of a diverse student population in a systemic manner that would lead to the increased academic achievement of at-risk students. While program curriculum included discussions and analysis of student achievement data, the concepts of multicultural education and social justice were not explicitly addressed as part of educational leadership to support the achievement of at-risk students.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do educators who have participated in an educational leadership preparation program define the concept of social justice?
2. How do educators who have participated in an educational leadership preparation program view multicultural

education in relation to promoting social justice?

3. What school reform efforts do educators who have participated in an educational leadership preparation program identify as promoting social justice?

An open-ended survey was developed based on these research questions. The survey was emailed to randomly selected educators currently enrolled in or having completed the educational leadership preparation program in the past five years at the case study university. The survey was designed to gain a cross-section of the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of these educators, occupying various educational positions and at different points in their careers, regarding their understanding and use of multicultural education and social justice in their specific educational settings. A survey was determined to be the most effective method to gather the opinions of this population of graduates who were geographically dispersed throughout the state and nation.

Invitations were sent to 25 randomly selected educators who had completed the program in each of the five years prior to the study and whose current business email addresses were available in an attempt to obtain feedback evenly across the five year time period. Invitations were also emailed to 30 educators who were currently enrolled in the program to obtain the perspectives of those who were striving at the time of the study to become educational leaders. Three invitations were returned as undeliverable, making the total number of delivered invitations 152.

The survey was made available online using SurveyMonkey software for a period of one month. The survey consisted of five demographic questions and the following eight open-ended questions:

1. Have you heard of "social justice"? If so, how are you familiar with the term?
2. Whether or not you have heard the term before, how do you personally define "social justice"?
3. What actions/policies/programs at your school/district would you describe as promoting social justice, as you have defined it?
4. What actions/policies/programs would you like to see your school/district implement regarding social justice, as you have defined it?
5. What role do you feel multicultural education plays in promoting social justice?
6. How do you define "multicultural education"?
7. What actions/policies/programs at your school/district would you describe as promoting multicultural education, as you have defined it?
8. What actions/policies/programs would you like to see your school/district implement regarding multicultural education, as you have defined it?

Fifty-four educators (n=54) completed the survey for a response rate of 36%. The open-ended survey responses were analyzed using NVIVO software to identify key themes for each question and among responses. Responses were coded in relationship to the characteristics of social justice articulated by Bell (2007) and Robins et al.'s (2006) definition of multiculturalism and continuum of cultural proficiency. Findings were reported in terms of the number of responses coded in each category for each question and among questions across all respondents. The definition of each coding category was as follows:

- *Social justice*: Full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs, including an equitable distribution of resources where all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure, self-determining, interdependent, with "a sense of their own agency and social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole" (Bell, 2007, p. 3).



- *Multiculturalism*: The preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a society or nation, holding each as equally valuable to and influential on the members of the society (Robins et al., 2006, p. 14).
- *Cultural proficiency*: See the difference and respond effectively in a variety of environments (Robins et al., 2006, p. 3).
- *Cultural competence*: See the difference, understand the difference that difference makes (Robins et al., 2006, p. 3).
- *Cultural precompetence*: See the difference, respond inadequately (Robins et al., 2006, p. 3).
- *Cultural blindness*: See the difference, act like you don't (Robins et al., 2006, p. 3).
- *Cultural incapacity*: See the difference, make it wrong (Robins et al., 2006, p. 3).
- *Cultural destructiveness*: See the difference, stomp it out (Robins et al., 2006, p. 3).

Responses were also analyzed to determine perceptions of types of oppression (racism, sexism, ableism, and classism) among respondents, with responses regarding race, gender, disability, and social class coded and then analyzed to determine if the responses advocated inclusive or exclusive educational or social practices.

Validity and reliability in qualitative research is often viewed in terms of trustworthiness, confirmability, and auditability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An audit trail was developed so that the methodology was transparent and replicable. The accuracy and credibility of the coding and analysis of the responses in this study were supported by an external audit in which a colleague at an institution in another state reviewed the data, coding, and findings, based on the questions suggested by Schwandt and Halpern (1988) for such purposes. Member checks and triangulation could not be conducted because the survey results were anonymous to promote honest responses. Because the data gathered by the survey was narrative in nature, rather than quantitative, statistical analysis of reliability was not appropriate. The questions posed in the survey were determined to be objective, and the coding of responses was also determined to be consistent between responses and coding category definitions by the external auditor.

As with most qualitative research and particularly case study research, the findings are limited to the case population studied. However, these findings may reflect similar trends in attitudes and understandings among educational leaders who have completed training programs that do not explicitly address the concepts of multicultural education and social justice, as in the case study program. The results of this study can be used to further discussions among leadership preparation faculty and educators to explicitly discuss these concepts so that a greater degree of common understanding can be established and more inclusive and equitable practices can be put in place in schools across the nation.

## PARTICIPANTS

A majority of respondents were female (61%) and Caucasian (81%). Other ethnicities of respondents included African American (6%), Native American (6%), and Latino (7%). Half of the respondents reported their current position as a classroom teacher, with an additional 3% identifying their position as a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA). Almost one quarter (24%) of respondents was serving as either assistant principals or principals, and an additional 23% were employed in district office positions (17%) or as district superintendents (6%). Nearly one-third (32%) of respondents who were not district-level leaders worked at elementary schools, 15% at middle schools, and 20% at high schools. Six percent of respondents reported they were employed in a K-8 building, and 10% worked in an alternative school setting. Over half (52%) of respondents employed at the school level worked in large schools with a student population of 500 or above, and 20% worked in schools with between 350 and 500 students. Only 4% of respondents worked in small schools serving under 150 students, with 11% serving schools with 150-250 students and another 13% working in schools with 250-350 students.

## RESULTS

### Conceptual Understanding of Social Justice

Forty-three percent of the study participants felt that they understood the concept of social justice, with 24% having limited familiarity with the term and a third (33%) reporting no familiarity with the term. Of those educators who identified themselves as being familiar with the concept of social justice, a slight majority was female (57%). Forty percent of the minority educators in the study felt they were familiar with the term, as well. Over two-thirds of the district-level administrators in the study identified themselves as being familiar with the term, while only 27% of building-level administrators and 38% of classroom teachers felt they understood what social justice meant (Figure 1).

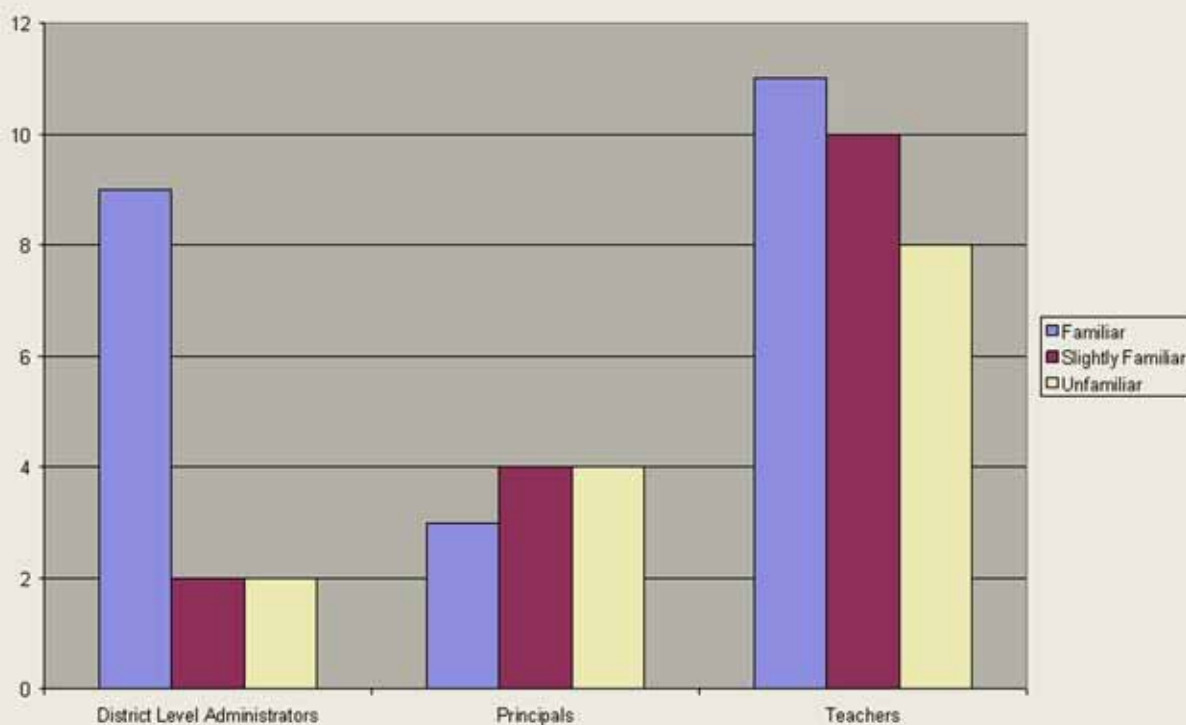


Figure 1. Social Justice Familiarity by Position.

However, in their definition of social justice, 18% of respondents who identified themselves as understanding the term limited their definition to restorative justice, such as peer discipline review boards, which does not reflect a true understanding of the concept based on Bell's five characteristics. A Caucasian middle school principal defined social justice as "Keeping the social balance through working together. When choices are made by individuals that throw the balance of the social system, it is the responsibility of the person who throws off the balance to find a way to fix it, make it right again." Given such responses, only 35% of respondents who felt they understood the term of social justice reflected such an understanding in their other responses.

Thirty-five percent of classroom teachers in the study felt they had a limited understanding of what social justice was, and 28% had no idea. A third of responding principals had a limited understanding of the concept, and 40% reported having no understanding of the definition of social justice. Thirty percent of district-level administrators in the study reported having little (15%) or no (15%) understanding of social justice.

Of the respondents who felt they understood the definition of social justice, only 4 (7%) reported learning the concept through a class or experience in their preparation program. Several respondents identified life experiences, particular growing up in the 1960's and 1970's, as the source of their knowledge of social justice.





## Dominant Theme of Equity

Equity was the dominant theme that emerged in responses relating to the definition of social justice, as well as perceived and desired implementation of social justice measures in schools. The most common definition given for social justice by respondents was “fair and equitable treatment of all.” Over half (57%) of educators in the study included equity of resources (4%), opportunity (32%), or fairness in terms of a “level playing field” or treatment (44%) as part of their definition of social justice. A Latino district administrator explained, “Many children are born with a lot more obstacles to succeed and it’s our duty to try and make more resources available to them so that they too can reach the American Dream through quality education.” The way in which schools can and do distribute resources and provide opportunities that are equitable for all students varied among respondents, however.

## Social Justice in Schools

Nearly a quarter (24%) of educators in the study identified school programs for English Language Learners (ELLs) and special education programs as the primary means in their districts and schools of providing greater equity for students from different cultures or who face emotional, physical, or cognitive challenges. Non-discrimination policies for school personnel and students were noted by 6% of study participants as providing social justice in the school environment, with an additional 6% identifying anti-bullying student policies. Intervention programs, such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Systems (PBS) were identified by 7% of respondents as promoting social justice in schools.

A Latino superintendent explained that he did not feel “it’s the primary job of the school to teach about social justice. That should be a family’s role and the school can support it.” Several other respondents expressed faith in their district to provide a socially just learning environment with such comments as, “I feel confident that the current programs/policies are an appropriate expression of a desire to achieve social justice. I am also confident that as data becomes available and needs arise, the district will respond accordingly” and “My district does an outstanding job for all students to access the general ed[ucation] curriculum.”

Few responses, however, moved beyond the idea of equity to encompass the deeper and larger concepts included in Bell’s (2007) definition of social justice. Bell’s definition encompasses the following five characteristics:

1. full and equitable participation of all groups in a society;
2. mutual shaping of society to meet the needs of all groups;
3. equitable distribution of resources to assure the physical and psychological safety and security of all individuals;
4. self-determination and interdependence of all individuals in a society; and
5. self-efficacy and social responsibility of individuals in a society.

Full participation in either a school or larger social context was mentioned by only 7% of respondents as part of social justice. Six percent identified self-determination or self-agency as a characteristic of social justice, and only 4% mentioned social responsibility in terms of each individual being responsible for seeing social justice enacted in schools or in society. Neither the mutual shaping of society to meet the needs of all groups or interdependence of individuals in a society was identified by respondents as an element of social justice.

The question asking respondents to identify how their school or district could better address issues related to social justice had the lowest response rate of any of the questions on the survey, with only 31 educators responding. Of those 31 responses, 7 (23%) discussed the need for stronger discipline policies such as no tolerance of drugs or violence, harsher penalties for tardies and absences, or peer court systems. Issues related to the educational system, including funding of schools, teacher evaluations, and hiring practices, were identified by 19% of respondents as important for the advancement of social justice within their districts. Thirteen percent of the educators in the study

did, however, identify the need for equity or diversity training for school staff, and 9% said that coverage of diversity issues was needed in the curriculum.

## Understanding of Multicultural Education

Definitions of multicultural education were more homogeneous than the definitions given for social justice. Providing curriculum that teaches students about other cultures, thereby developing an appreciation for or tolerance of other cultures, was the dominate theme (56% of respondents) in the definitions provided for multicultural education. Teaching “in a way that honors and reflects various cultures instead of just one” summarizes the definitions of 30% of respondents. Differentiation of instruction, being more “learner-centered,” providing ELL classes, and inclusion of the study of other cultures and non-Western and minority authors and leaders in the curriculum were identified as the means by which respondents felt their schools and districts were providing multicultural education.

Multicultural education was seen by 76% of respondents as playing a role in promoting social justice, although 3 respondents felt that it had limited potential—with “modeling and the environment” serving as a much more powerful teacher to students—and could not “go far enough to dealing with issues of race and racism.” Specifically, multicultural education was viewed as assisting students in becoming aware of other cultures and building an understanding and perhaps an appreciation of cultures other than the dominant White culture. A Caucasian high school teacher explained that, “Typically, social justice occurs when the WASP culture is considered the dominant and important one. So, multicultural education would help demonstrate to students that there are many cultures and that they all have strengths that can be admired.” A Caucasian district administrator noted that, “We cannot promote equality without understanding where others are coming from.” In the responses that identified multicultural education as supporting social justice efforts, the goal of equality was frequently mentioned.

Not all educators in the study felt that multicultural education was needed to promote social justice, and some strongly advocated the need for assimilation of cultures into the mainstream. “I do think that we need to acknowledge other cultures and elevate awareness of them; however, I feel very strongly that our culture needs to be the one honored and promoted,” a Caucasian middle school teacher responded. “As people arrive in our country for the benefits it provides, they need to understand that embracing our culture is part of achieving those benefits. I would not expect to go to any other foreign country and have them cater to me, and I don’t feel that we should change what we do to accommodate those who choose to come here.” A Caucasian high school teacher felt that multicultural education “makes the issue more cloudy because the cultural norms of different races will be considered and possibly used as excuses for inappropriate behavior.”

In the 18% of respondents that defined social justice in terms of restorative justice or “everyone getting what they deserve” in terms of discipline, the definitions given for multicultural education and its relationship to social justice expressed the need to not use culture as an excuse for special treatment in disciplinary or academic situations. For example, a Caucasian high school special education teacher described her experiences with minority student discipline thus: “My internship took place in a poor school with a 98 percent free and reduced lunch rate with a high minority population of mixed ethnicity. It has been my experience that a disproportionate amount of discipline referrals come from minority students. Cultural sensitivity was practiced among the teaching staff. When it came time to bring families into the office, it was important that relationships and bonds had been established.” A Caucasian elementary principal expressed his view that “our empathy and desire to not make school too hard creates a system where we fail kids” by not retaining “non-proficient second language learners.” While 15% of respondents felt that the individual needs, inclusive of cultural background, needed to be considered in educating each student, an equal percentage advocated for a “no excuses” approach in the classroom learning environment.

Two educators expressed the opposite opinion, linking cultural understanding of administrators to a decrease in disciplinary actions and a means of building support for academic success. “Prejudice still exists. I see it and hear it. On any given day, at any given hour, Hispanic students are referred for a disciplinary action. Perhaps multicultural education would prevent much of the referral actions if teachers understood the cultural reactions of students,” a high school teacher explained. Understanding that, for parents from Latino cultures, non-interference is a sign of



respect for educators was suggested by another teacher at the middle school level as a basis for going beyond the school to build support for student success, as well.

## Perceptions of Oppression

Three respondents explicitly discussed the need to educate student to be aware of injustices, prejudice, and oppression in order to advance socially just policies and practices. Racism was noted by 50% of respondents as a problem that could be addressed through multicultural education and socially just policies, such as non-discrimination and harassment policies and anti-bullying programs. Only 2% of respondents noted sexism as a form of oppression, 9% linked ableism as a form of oppression (frequently in the context of such oppression being counteracted through special education programs), and 4% identified issues of classism as oppression within their school or community.

## Cultural Competency

Educators who participated in the study exemplified beliefs compatible with all but the lowest level of Robbins et al.'s (2005) continuum of cultural proficiency, with the greatest percent at the precompetent level, closely followed by cultural blindness. Figure 2 shows the distribution of district administrators, school administrators, and teachers, in terms of their level of cultural competency, based on their responses at the various levels on the cultural proficiency continuum.

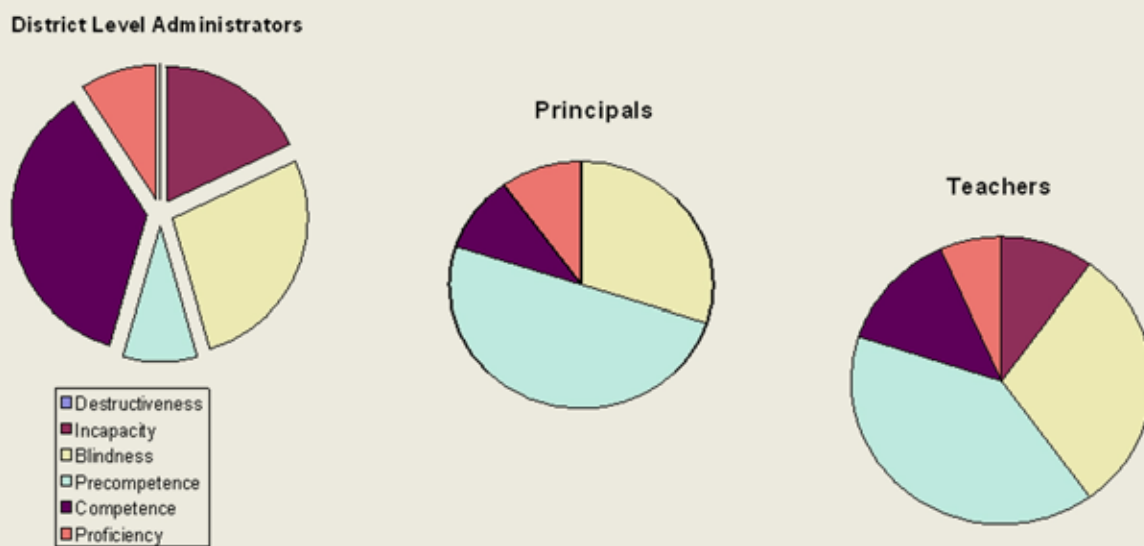


Figure 2. Percentage of District Administrators, Principals, and Teachers Responses at Each Level of Cultural Proficiency.

Seven percent of the educators in the study expressed views consistent with Robbins et al.'s (2005) highest level of seeing and responding to differences among people, cultural proficiency. Robbins et al. describes this level as "See the difference and respond effectively in a variety of environments," including "holding esteem for culture; knowing how to learn about individual and organizational culture; interacting effectively in a variety of cultural environments" (p. 3). To be considered culturally proficient, responses needed to demonstrate a positive recognition of differences among individuals and an active response to those differences that honored the perspectives and experiences of all individuals. The respondents who demonstrated this level of cultural responsiveness were all Caucasian; one male principal, two female teachers, and one female district administrator.

The second highest level of cultural competence was demonstrated by 17% of educators in the study. Seeing the difference and understanding the "difference that difference makes" marks this level (Robbins et al., 2005, p. 3). This



includes naming, claiming, and reframing the differences while training about the differences and attempting to make change for differences. Respondents in this category expressed a positive appreciation of differences and supported education as a means of changing other educators, students, and the larger society's response to differences, but expressed doubts or a lack of personal knowledge or skills as to how to do so. Of the nine respondents at this level, five were male and four were female. Two-thirds of culturally competent respondents were Caucasian, two were Hispanic, and one was Native American. Four teachers and four administrators were in this category, as well as one principal.

The largest group of respondents, 33%, fell into the middle level of cultural precompetence, marked by seeing the difference but responding inadequately (Robbins et al., 2005). Responses were labeled as precompetent if there was no indication in the answers given as to a desire or knowledge to respond to perceived differences. Females outnumbered males in this category on a two to one ratio. This category had the most diversity among ethnicities of respondents, with one Latino, two African American, and two Native American educators, as well as 13 Caucasian educators. Two-thirds of educators at the precompetent level were teachers, with five principals and one administrator also at this level.

Twenty-six percent of the educators participating in the study expressed the belief that it was more important to focus on similarities rather than differences among groups and individuals. These respondents were placed at the level of cultural blindness, which Robbins et al. (2005) defines as seeing the difference but acting like you do not. This view emphasizes that differences do not really matter. Two-thirds of respondents advocating and/or demonstrating cultural blindness were female, and all were Caucasian. Three-fifths were teachers, with one-fifth principals and the remaining fifth in district administrative roles.

At the level of cultural incapacity, one sees the difference, but labels it as wrong, according to Robbins et al. (2005). This includes a "belief in the superiority of one's culture and behavior that disempowers another's culture" (p. 3). Seven percent of the educators in this study expressed beliefs as to the superiority of the dominant white American culture. All of the respondents at this level were Caucasian, with three male educators and two female educators. Of the five, three were teachers, and two were district-level administrators.

None of the educators in the study expressed a desire to "eliminate other people's cultures," the definition of cultural destructiveness articulated by Robbins et al. (2005, p. 3) as the lowest level of cultural proficiency.

## DISCUSSION

### Understanding of Social Justice

The responses of educators in this study demonstrated a very limited or nonexistent understanding of the concept of social justice. The role of multicultural education in promoting social justice was also superficial in most of the educators' responses, as were the educational practices identified as supporting both multicultural education and social justice. While this may not mean that these educators do not understand and practice school and district leadership that addresses systemic inequities among individuals and groups, it is clear that explicit discussion of the parameters of social justice to enact change in educational environments or society has not occurred. This might also mean that the personal awareness to identify inequities beyond such policy issues as non-discrimination in hiring practices and providing special education or ELL services has not been developed, either through life experiences or in the participants' leadership preparation programs.

The preparation program which the study participants either had or were completing covered critical theory, moral and transformative leadership, non-discriminatory personnel practices, and discussions of achievement gap data in the principal preparation curriculum, as listed in course syllabi. In only one course required for the principal license was an awareness of group differences and inequities directly addressed. The concept of social justice was explicitly discussed, using Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin's (2005) *Re-framing Educational Politics for Social Justice*, in only one course required for the administrative (superintendent) license and typically not taken by students who are not pursuing



that license or a doctorate. Ethical frameworks which might include social justice issues, such as Starratt's (1994), were only discussed in doctoral-level classes.

More direct instruction and development of awareness, knowledge, and appropriate responsive skills are needed by all school leaders, however. As Marshall and Oliva (2010) explain, "leadership for social justice investigates and poses solutions for issues that generate and reproduce societal inequities" (p. 20). Discussions that are limited to the data related to the achievement gap falls far short of building the necessary awareness and skills that educational leadership need to identify, investigate, and respond to social inequities. To identify when a group or individual is "othered," an educational leader must have an established understanding of his or her own perspective in terms of culture, gender, race, socioeconomic level, and ability. They must understand who is "othered" and how. This implies the need for inclusion of the concept of oppression in educational leadership preparation curriculums, as well as an assessment of one's own perspectives or lenses.

## Developing Educational Leadership for Social Justice

Singleton and Linton (2006) and Robbins et al. (2005) both provide guides for educators to develop their awareness and responsiveness to minority groups and injustices perpetuated by the dominant culture. Singleton and Linton concentrate on race as the salient issue that they present as the fundamental factor in societal inequity. Robbins et al. uses the broader term culture, which can encompass race, but extends to "other sociological factors, such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical ability" (p. 13). The word "oppression" is avoided in both of these guides, however, with a greater focus on appropriate responses to differences rather than the complex power structure that defines and perpetuates differential treatment.

To truly understand the beliefs, practices, and policies which contribute to the systemic inequities that constitute oppression, a theory of oppression must first be understood. Not understanding the roots of the problems that face children and adults who are "othered" in today's society would be akin to a doctor focusing on treating an infection with antibiotics without knowledge of the properties of either the antibiotics or the cause of the infections. A simplistic focus on the treatment cannot cure a deep-seated disease when all interacting factors are not understood in either the case of a physician or an educational leader.

As Bell (2007) explains, there are three important purposes of understanding a theory of oppression:

First, theory enables us to think clearly about our intentions and the means we use to actualize them in the classroom. It provides a framework for making choices about what we do and how, and for distinguishing among different approaches. Second, at its best, theory also provides a framework for questioning and challenging our practices and creating new approaches as we encounter inevitable problems of cooptation, resistance, insufficient knowledge, and changing social conditions.... Finally, theory has the potential to help us stay conscious of our position as historical subjects, able to learn from the past as we try to meet current conditions in more effective and imaginative ways. (p. 4)

Aspects of oppression that should be discussed in such a theory in educational leadership preparation programs include the following:

1. the pervasiveness of "of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness" (Bell, 2007, p. 4);
2. the restricting "structural and material constraints that significantly shape a person's life chances and sense of possibility" (Bell, 2007, p. 4), limiting both self-development and self-determination (Young, 1990);
3. the hierarchical systems that benefit the dominant or privileged group and disempower or silence subordinated groups;
4. the various roles played by individuals across relationships;

5. the internalization of dominant and subordinate roles by individuals as explained by Freire (1970, 2007); and
6. specific forms of oppression (Bell, 2007).

Such discussion must be explicit, rather than implied by the discussion of achievement gap data and analysis in order for a systemic perspective to be developed.

### After Knowledge Comes Action

In order for educational leaders to enact change in schools that can lead to greater social justice, an understanding of oppression and self-awareness can provide the foundation for advocacy and activism on the part of those who are oppressed. The goal of educational leadership preparation programs should be to prepare district and school leaders who can appropriately respond to inequity and social injustice and are willing to do so. Larson and Murtada (2003) identify three strands necessary for educational leadership for social justice. These include a deconstructing of leadership using critical theory and other theories that emphasize the perspectives and experiences of subordinated groups, exploring alternative leadership theories that are responsive to the needs of subordinated groups, and recommendations for practice. The development of awareness should be followed by an understanding of theory then continued on to activism.

Marshall and Oliva (2010, p. 23) articulate the following five characteristics of educational leadership for social justice:

1. a consciousness of the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of schools;
2. the critique of the marginalizing behaviors and predispositions of schools and their leadership;
3. a commitment to the more genuine enactment of democratic principles in schools;
4. a moral obligation to articulate a counterhegemonic vision or narrative of hope regarding education; and
5. a determination to move from rhetoric to civil rights activism [to promote social justice].

The important element in each of these authors' analyses of what constitutes educational leadership for social justice is action. Educational leadership preparation programs are obligated to not only provide a venue for self-assessment and the development of a knowledge of oppression, but to support the moral imperative to change practices, policies, and systems that perpetuate inequity and oppression in future educational leaders if social justice is to be addressed in schools.

## CONCLUSION

Although this study represents the views of just one educational leadership preparation program, the results should challenge all such programs to examine the knowledge and views of their participants. With less than half of the educators in this study expressing a familiarity with the concept of social justice and frequently a limited or incorrect understanding of the term, discussions of diversity and the achievement gap do not go far enough to build leaders' knowledge of their role in enacting socially just change. Clearly, with only 7% of the educators in this study attributing any knowledge of social justice to their preparation program, the development of socially just leadership skills to change inequities in schools and to empower minority group students is not currently an overt topic of conversation. While leadership preparation faculty may feel that discussions of diversity and achievement gap data should lead to future leaders enacting more socially just policies and practices, the biases and ingrained perceptions of all people, including educational leaders, are so deep and often unconsidered that an awareness of perceptions, an understanding of those who are disempowered, and how that disempowerment is institutionalized must be explicitly addressed for change in those leaders and as a result of those leaders' actions to support greater social justice to be enacted.

In the current educational environment, where resegregation appears to be occurring (Vogel et al., 2004), and



discrimination appears to be increasing (Colorado Civil Rights Commission, 2010), such leadership is a necessity if greater social justice is to be advanced. Hafner (2010) provides an excellent discussion of texts that relate to teaching about social justice in educational leadership preparation programs. Using a continuum developed by Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997), Hafner describes activities such as the development of an Equity Action Plan that can be used to move educators along in their understanding of the problems that comprise social injustice and help them to develop appropriate responses to those injustices. Such activities as those described by Hafner and others that target self-assessment and the development of personal awareness, increased knowledge of the cycle and institutionalization of oppression, and the development of meaningfully responsive actions that promote change in the oppression cycle can help prepare the leaders of our schools to confront and address inequity in all its forms, as well as serve as role models for students to do the same.

For a change in students' thoughts and actions to occur, they must first be made aware of inequities and then be taught how to promote change. For this to occur in students, school leaders must have the knowledge and awareness to identify and confront those inequities and to include such issues in the curriculum. For such socially just leaders to enact change in schools, leadership preparation programs must provide pre-service leaders with the learning opportunities to develop their awareness, understanding, and path for action in an open and explicit dialogue.

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