Social Injustices in Schools: Principals' Perception

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Abstract

This qualitative study intends to highlight social injustices that appear of the greatest concern to school leaders. Semi-structured interviews were used to glean data on principals' work contexts, their perceptions of social in/justices, and relevant anecdotes, stories, and examples. Twenty-one elementary and secondary school principals were interviewed in the Greater Toronto Area. The discussion of the salient issues as identified by principals entails presenting various forms of injustices, and explaining how each relates, overlaps, and interacts to affect students' lives. Essentially, it prompts us to rethink oppression and injustice in schools and the actions required in response.

Introduction

The expectations for school principals to lead in diverse settings have increased in recent years (Boske & Diem, 2012). Principals have not only been urged to be responsible for improving educational outcomes (Berkovich, 2014), but also to aim their efforts at promoting social justice for disadvantaged and marginalized groups (Theoharis, 2007). This is illustrated by a growing interest in social justice leadership in education (e.g. Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Bosu, Dare, Dachi, & Fertig, 2011; Capper & Young, 2014; De Angelis, Griffiths, Joshee, Portelli, Ryan, & Zaretsky, 2007; Theoharis, 2007; Zembylas, 2010). However, the prevailing social justice discourse in education seemingly focuses more on social justice efforts and their outcomes, not properly recognizing injustice problems and causes, how they are manifested in schools, and how principals perceive them. This study specifically looks into the questions: What are social injustices particular to schools in Ontario, Canada as perceived by school principals who self-identify as social justice advocates? What practices have been implemented to address the issue?

The purpose of this study is not to theorise social justice and leadership, but to highlight injustices that appear of the greatest concern to school leaders. The injustices identified by principals in this study may read as déjà vu to some, but their continued prevalence prompts us to rethink

oppression and injustice in schools and the actions required in response. By examining testimonies of the tensions confronted by principals as they attempt to meet multiple demands, this study contributes to the dialogue and discourse surrounding social justice and provides empirical evidence on reality versus ideal, practice versus theory. The results are also illustrative of why more attention to social justice concerns needs to become an explicit focus of principal preparation programs.

Literature Review

Injustices manifest in various forms in different spatial and temporal contexts. Ostensibly, they appear discrete, but fundamentally they relate to and intersect each other. First and foremost is racism. "Racism is a slippery subject, one which evades confrontation, yet one which overshadows every aspect of our lives" (Anzaldua, 1990, p. xix). As the site of social production, undoubtedly, schools are blighted by subtle or obvious forms of racism. These forms of racism operate at different levels, such as name-calling, harassment, interpersonal conflict, stereotyping, bullying, prejudice, and discrimination based on language, faith, and religion (Ryan, 2003). Racism does not merely stem from "conscious and unconscious personal prejudice" (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 329). It also operates at the systemic level with policies and practices entrenched in established institutions that marginalize or exclude members of particular social groups from significant participation in major social institutions (Henry & Tator, 2006). In this light, racism ought to become a serious concern for some school principals. However, Ryan (2003) has suggested that school principals are either reluctant to acknowledge the occurrence of racism in their schools or inclined to emphasize its insignificant nature. He has offered three explanations: first, administrators simply cannot see racism. Second, principals may feel that it is their obligation to convey a positive image of their schools. Third, principals may disavow racism because of the narrow way in which they view racism. They generally associate racism with individual acts or isolated incidents and do not see it as systemic. Addressing racism may cause White educators personal discomfort and undermine their secure positions of privilege (Ryan, 2003).

Poverty is another issue that continues to draw our attention. A body of research has shown that poverty affects children's physical, emotional, and cognitive development (Books, 2004) and their academic performance at school (Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997). The life-altering consequences of poverty can even be exacerbated if the students are from visible minority families. In America, there is a common tendency that young people encounter greater disparities in social mobility and experience lower equality of opportunity than that enjoyed by their parents (Putnam, 2015). In Canada, immigrants, particularly recent arrivals, are recognised as a group most likely to experience persistent poverty (Hatfield, 2004). The disparity in socioeconomic status has steadily extended to schools in such demographic areas and contributed to racist attitudes and practices that transmit poverty from generation to generation.

Among gender issues, of particular concern has been the achievement gap between boys and girls in school. There has been a considerable amount of research on the underachievement of boys relative to girls (e.g., Elwood & Gipps, 1999; Gorard, Rees, & Salisbury, 2001; Matters, Allen, Gray, & Pitman, 1999; Murphy & Elwood, 1998). Despite efforts and attention, the gender gap in school achievement continues to be a problem. The gender achievement gap has also directed people's attention away from the "feminisation of poverty" in schools where girls tend to be disadvantaged in comparison to their male peers as a result of poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015; Goldberg & Kremen, 1990).

A caring, safe, and gender-inclusive learning environment is essential for students' success. Principals must be mindful of not only gender inequality but also gender diversity in schools. Their first job is to keep students safe, particularly gender-nonconforming students. For example, homophobia is a serious safety issue and has perpetually faced lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students among others. Studies (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Walton, 2004, 2006) have indicated that the climate of U. S. and Canadian schools is in general unsupportive and unsafe for many LGBTQ students. A homophobic school climate negatively impacts LGBTQ youth, manifesting itself in lower levels of school engagement and academic success (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005), depression and low self-esteem (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Wyss, 2004), substance abuse (Kosciw et al., 2009), suicide (Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001), and negative psychological adjustment (Uribe & Harbeck, 1991).

Bullying has become far more complicated and even harder to identify as cyberbullying allows the bullies to assume perceived anonymity and feel less accountable for their actions and behaviours (Keith & Martin 2005; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Sparling, 2004). Any form of bullying will have detrimental and long-lasting effects on both bullies and victims, impacting the well-being, schooling, and peer relationships of the young (Price & Dalgleish, 2010).

Social injustices appear more aggravated when it comes to the challenges of special education. As the accountability movement that dictates achievement and success has gained steam, debates on educational access and opportunities for special education students seem to have fallen away from the public's attention. Social justice issues surrounding special education are "rarely discussed openly" (Christensen & Dorn, 1997, p. 182).

Mainstreaming more special education students in regular education settings increases the need for equity and advocacy in the mobilization and distribution of social, political, and economic resources. In order to ensure positive educational outcomes for these students, school leaders play a critical role in promoting the educational interests of this group (Garner & Forbes, 2013). Bogotch (2002) has stated that

> the ongoing leadership challenge is to create social and political spaces for advocates, as well as outlaws, to function inside and out of schools and, deliberately to encourage activists and radical intellectuals to make explicit the connections to the subjective meanings of social justice. (p. 152)

Thus, through the discussion and sharing of views on social justice, this study might heighten among all stakeholders the awareness of social injustices that exist in schools, prompting them to reflect, question, and challenge the status quo and rethink and reconceptualize the meaning of social justice. Most importantly, the dissemination of the findings may help engage more practicing principals in the dialogue and encourage them to join the force to become social justice advocates, challenging their personal discomfort and privilege, addressing equity and social justice concerns, and ethically working towards what is good for all children.

Theoretical Framework

Racism, classism, disability, and LGBT exclusions do not operate primarily through interpersonal relations. They are deeply embedded at the institutional and system levels. To unravel various "isms", the study uses Young's (1990) five faces of oppression to examine the existence and levels of oppression of different groups of students. According to Young (1990), oppression is a structural concept, preserved institutionally along five dimensions: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, violence, and cultural imperialism. Young's (1990) five faces of oppression underlie the accounts of the school principals in this study and reveal the various "isms" at the institutional and system level.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study looks into school principals' perceptions and understandings of social injustices that are particular to their own schools. This line of research could benefit from surveys that investigate on a larger scale principals' perceptions and views on social justice and its related issues. However, research methods are associated with a philosophical rationale that underlies a particular study. A qualitative method is appropriate for this research because it allows comparative interpretations (Patton, 2002) of principals' views and perceptions that critique societal inequities from different perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews were used to glean data on principals' work contexts, their perceptions of social in/justices, and relevant anecdotes, stories, and examples. The semi-structured interview can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data and the opportunity for identifying new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The purposeful and snowball sampling strategy was used to help generate a list of principals through discussions with colleagues and other work-related contacts. They were contacted by emails detailing the purpose of the study and qualifications for participation. Principals were then selected based on their self-identification as social justice advocates or having a social justice agenda in their schools. Selection also took into consideration principals' gender, work experience, school type, and district school board. Twenty-one school principals from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) were interviewed for approximately 45-60 minutes each at a place of participants' choice. They were from four district school boards in the GTA and had more than 3 years of experience in the administrative position. Participants were from 12 secondary schools, 5 elementary schools, 1 junior high school, and 1 middle school. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality purpose in the presentation of the findings. Eight male principals were referred to as Andy, Dan, Dean, John, Roderick, Ron, Sean, and Dirk, and eleven female principals were given pseudonyms as Dora, Elaine, Ella, Freda, Hilda, Ida, Lily, Molly, Paula, Sara, and Sonia. Two vice-principals (VPs) were referred to as Paul and Kate.

Interview data were analysed using a constant comparative method (Patton, 2002) with the aid of NVivo. All interviews were first audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview transcripts were emailed back to participants to verify any unclear responses and check the accuracy of the transcription. The verified transcripts were imported to NVivo for free coding which aimed to capture any emerging themes. These free codes were further reviewed and categorized for meaningful patterns following the research questions as general analysis guidelines. The thematic patterns were organized under subheadings that are reported in the research findings.

Research Findings

The following social injustices were identified by the participants as priorities to challenge and overcome. Through revealing the salient social problems in schools, the study draws attention to the central importance of awareness of the social injustices in schools – in structure, policy, and practices – and adds to the debate on what can be considered as leadership for social justice. This also provides a useful starting point in exploring how leadership roles and practices can be improved to reverse injustices associated with students along diverse dimensions. The study explores injustices under the following subheadings: *racism and racial problems, class and poverty, gender and its related issues, injustices in special education,* and *school safety.*

Racism and Racial Problems

Participants commented on racism in schools with opposing views. Four participants (Andy, Hilda, Molly, Paula) acknowledged that racism is one of the prominent issues in their schools and its pervasiveness calls for principals' continued efforts to challenge and confront the problem of racism. Principal Hilda reflected,

> So consider being a principal of a school that is exceptionally diverse. What you have is this middle class white lady who is the principal, and the middle class white lady who is the vice principal. When you are talking in terms of social justice, regardless of how we perceive ourselves in Ontario, or in Canada, we still have a long way to go in terms of race issues, in terms of equity, and the way that we treat each other and perceive each other.

Clearly, challenging racism and lessening its effect in schools commences with principals questioning their own attitudes, beliefs, and actions. It is the first step to reconcile the moral challenges of racial equity with the hierarchical institutions of schooling.

Racism can also manifest in the form of racial stereotyping, the false assumption or judgement that distorts how people perceive an entire group based on an individual's actions. These assumptions induce negativity and misunderstanding that are nothing but harmful and destructive. Hilda described her struggle in dealing with the police with regard to her black students:

> I had a couple of interesting encounters in dealing with the police of late where I have felt that, because we were dealing with young black males, the outcomes weren't what they should have been. ... It makes me understand that we still have a long way to go. You know, you see a young boy. He's got his hood up. He's got his droopy pants that look like his diaper is full, striding along. You immediately make an assumption about that boy's character. You immediately make an assumption about who he is. And you haven't spoken to him. You know you don't know anything about his background. You don't know anything about him. You're judging him based upon how we appear. And we just have such a long way to go. I'm trying to talk to my boys about taking responsibility for the impression that they give. Pulling their hood up, smiling at people as they go by, saying "Hello", asking them, how their day is. Right away, you can shift that image. But they are KIDS. You know, they're trying to be cool. They're trying to do their thing. We as adults are the ones that have the hang-up, have the problems.

Social stereotyping impacts the way society views certain groups of people and with enough exposure to a stereotype, society may deem it to be a reality rather than a mistaken representation. Although a study (Ryan, 2003)

of school administrators indicated that most administrators do not equate stereotype as a form of racism, the effects of stereotyping can be more devastating than explicit forms of racism. Hilda's account implies the interplay between youth gangs, stereotypes, and self-esteem. Because of social stereotyping, racial minorities are likely to be viewed as related to youth gangs, become more susceptible to unfair treatment, and have lower levels of self-esteem. Prompted by the alarming effects of stereotyping, Hilda has striven to build hope and trust among her students and educate them on how to challenge stereotypes and present a positive image in public by influencing the way adults see them as students.

Language and Religion

Increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) complicate principals' work. Under current accountability mandates, principals find their work on ELL issues becoming even more prominent as they are held accountable for the performance of English language learners both in their language acquisition and in core content. Both principals Ella and Sonia have had to focus their efforts on expediting the transition of their ELL students to an all-English academic environment so that the students can meet the high expectations of the accountability policy. This transitional framework tends to label ELL students as problems that need to be corrected (Black, 2006). While seeking to fully incorporate the ELLs into accountability performance categories, Ella and Sonia acknowledged that students' language proficiency may invalidate the measures of language learners' content knowledge, and students' own culture can affect the way they achieve.

Social justice issues are not always discrete, but rather intersect or overlap in various cause-and-effect relationships. This is the case in Paula's school where religion, faith, language, and poverty all come into play and consequently generate social tensions among different cultural groups. The Islamic students outnumbered the Christians 3-to-1, but she remarked:

> … the group that was Christian, and that lived in the middle class neighbourhood were all white, Caucasian, where the group that was living in the lower social-economic group and were Muslim, were all South Asian, so mainly from Afghanistan and Pakistan. So all of them were divided in the school, and the divide was very prominent. And within the community, when we originally have the boundaries change, that brought more of the kids from the lower social-economic group. There was a huge backlash from the working community. They did not want those kids in our school, because our EQAO scores were going to fall, because we would have too many English language learners.

Faith-based differences do not entail social conflict per se. However, discrimination on religious grounds is

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problematic as it enhances social exclusion and fragmentation. Within the political accountability context, different faith groups wrangle over issues such as educational opportunities and quality of education. Paula revealed how certain religious communities can justify depriving others of equal educational opportunities. This harmful effect is accentuated by other social factors that are associated with different religious communities, such as poverty, social class, and related socioeconomic matters.

Poverty and Social Class

Paula raised the issue of poverty and class and their social causes and effects on children from low-income families. Whether it is absolute or relative, poverty continues to be a prevalent and complex issue in education. It not only creates acute social needs for students who are experiencing poverty, but also poses a great challenge for school principals who attempt to close achievement gaps and equalize educational outcomes. Studies have shown that students who live in poverty are more likely to underachieve than their peers from middle- and high-income households and are also at risk of not completing school (Dell'Angelo, 2016; Moore, 2011).

Several participants (Dan, Dean, Ella, John, Paula) acknowledged that poverty runs rampant in their schools and has become one of the prominent issues in addressing students' overall social and intellectual needs. Both Dan's and John's schools are located in communities that are far from wealthy, so poverty and its concomitant problems are among their greatest concerns:

> We have kids here not able to buy lunch, or have breakfast in the morning. So we provide some means that support those students. So the issue of poverty is a social justice issue. We have the haves and have-nots. School is just a reflection of society. It does play out in a school setting. (John)

When students come from families that face stresses from poverty and struggle to afford adequate nutrition, they enter schools with problems that affect their readiness to learn. This is the situation in Dean's school, where coping with poverty has reached the forefront of his daily practices. Dean has seen that the struggles of neighbourhood families are not only affecting students' academic achievement as an end result, but they are also contributing to physical and psychological issues with respect to students' health and well-being:

> The fact of not having money, poor nutrition, probably poor sleeping habits, less organisation in their functioning level, then when they come to school, they have a shorter attention span. They may be crankier. They don't value some of the long-term goals that you as a teacher value. Doesn't make them bad people. And traditional school response to those kinds of things has been

somewhat punitive. I think that's injustice to punish people, well, not punishing. No one would say we're punishing them for being poor, but we're punishing them sometimes for the unavoidable consequences of being poor.

Dean's accounts substantiate the association between poverty and students' health, behaviour problems, emotional well-being, and their academic achievement problems. A more destructive aspect of being poor is that students are susceptible to punishment for their behaviours and school performances that are attributable to the devastating consequences of poverty. As a result, its cumulative effect reinforces the irreversible process that leads from vulnerability to the deterioration of individual and group situations (Bogard, 1991).

Gender, Sexism, and Related Issues

Issues surrounding gender go far beyond the achievement gap and extend to more sophisticated discussions, such as the relationship between gender, sex, sexism, and gender identity. Both Dan and Roderick have been seriously concerned with gender issues in their respective schools. For example, Dan expressed his concern that there are gender issues in terms of how males and females interact and treat each other in his school. Although Dan did not provide a detailed account as to how power comes into play in terms of male and female interaction, he recognised it is of great importance to create an environment that is not organized around roles so that every student can realize her or his potential regardless of gender.

Salient issues around gender also emerged from a student survey and caught Roderick's attention. He commented:

> When a few years ago, we noticed that there hadn't been a lot of work on healthy relationships, on taking a look at gender identity. There wasn't a case of gay/straight alliance here. Nobody was looking at what does it mean to be "man", "woman". ...The students told us through our survey: They saw sexism. They saw homophobia. They saw unhealthy relationships. Those are the issues we're addressing at the school.

Roderick's remarks foreground the issue of gender and gender identity and how they come into play in the school context. As the meaning of gender is bastardized and expanded in diverse and often new social contexts and discourses, Roderick noticed that his efforts in addressing gender issues appeared far more complicated and thorny. There is a great need for sustained vigilance about all aspects of gender, such as the social construction of gender, sexism, homophobia, and other issues when gender intersects with power relations.

School Safety

One of the issues that stands out in Roderick's comments is homophobia. Though homophobia is relevant to issues of gender and sexism, it is perceived by principals more as one of the greatest concerns related to school safety. As homophobia continues to flourish in school communities, principals have an important role to play in challenging and combating homophobia. It seems that today's school principals continue to struggle with how to improve the experience of LGBTQ students and foster a safe and tolerant school environment for all. In order to fight against the negative feelings and hostile attitudes towards sexual minority students, Molly has had to cope with all stakeholders as they react differently to the issue of homophobia. She added: "People are fine to talk about racism, sexism, ageism, but they're not fine to talk about homophobia. Staff are not comfortable. Kids are not comfortable. Parents don't like it."

Among other potential school safety threats, bullying is undoubtedly one of the serious issues worthy of attention. Both Sara and Freda deemed bullying to be a common problem in their schools and have made considerable attempts to mitigate such activity. Freda provided a detailed account of how cyber-bullying at a level that required police and board intervention adversely impacted the safety of her school:

> I think that there is an issue of power and who has it, who doesn't? Who wants it? Who gets it? How do they get it? … What I took from that is that there were certain students who are beginning to realize they have power with them. They are beginning to learn what that power is, how they should use it. They are not yet interested in whether that power is used for good. They are more interested in understanding the effects for either good or bad.

Freda's comments indicate that bullying has become a potentially damaging form of aggression that manifests an imbalance of power between the bullies and their victims. Thanks to the increasingly interactive use of internet and cell phones among students, bullying goes beyond campus and streets and comes home via electronic media.

Special Education: No Child Left Behind?

Aside from historical arguments about social justice and the right for special-needs students to be included in a local school, participants' (Andy, Ella) accounts revealed that children with disabilities require something more than a set of inclusive education policy guidelines. As a principal from a special education school, Andy expressed his discontent and concern with the current special education system. He commented with immense righteous indignation:

> Most of the students have been in self-contained classes, which means with the same group of students for five hours a day, often five days a week, often multiple years. They do not have

access to opportunities both curricular as well as social, as well as governmental, as well as co-curricular that students who are not facing the same challenges would have had. So starting from a curriculum point of view, there are no materials being developed by the ministry or by publishers for this particular groups of students. So they don't get the same access to the curriculum in the same way. In terms of the other things, because of their needs, they're often marginalized from the school, so they don't have access to school teams, student government, or to the activities that might be available to other students. Therefore, when they get here, they're already facing those social injustices.

Although the scope of rights for special education students has been growing steadily, inequity still exists. Students with special needs are receiving less than adequate curriculum instruction and less than a fair share of administrative and personal resources. Due to the insufficiency in curriculum construction and lack of support, it makes it even harder for learners with special needs to achieve a higher level of personal self-sufficiency and success in both schools and communities. The net result is that they are bound to be marginalized and disadvantaged. Additionally, students with special needs have to face a social challenge when they graduate. Andy continued with other justice issues facing special needs students:

> Destination is definitely an area that needs to be addressed, because the opportunities for these students obviously are not as nearly as great as it would be for someone else. ... Another post-secondary issue – graduation issue: you know, these kids are in the system until they are 21 years old. For some of them from the time they're like 3 or 4 years old, and throughout that time, we provide supports and programming, and everything, and when they graduate, it's all gone. So how the heck are they transitioning at the post secondary? I don't say this is necessarily board's responsibility. I think it's a societal responsibility. … The other place that social injustice is current is the curriculum. There is no one other than classroom teachers who are developing curriculum for those students. That is grossly unfair. It's grossly unfair because teachers don't have the time. They don't have the support outside of my knowledge, the VP's knowledge. I mean, even our instructional leaders of the board, they don't know this population.

The problem concerning special education students rests not only with curriculum and resource allocation, but also with the opportunities that are available for special education students upon their graduation. There apparently exists a disconnection between schools and

social services to help these students to be able to function properly in society. Andy reiterated how inadequacy in curriculum construction and lack of support for teachers and students impact special education. Teachers are required to complete overwhelming amounts of work, all with less time and too little support. Under these conditions, special education teachers cannot give their students the best of their instruction and time. Instead, special education calls on schools, districts, ministries, parents, and teachers to take action collectively and recommend steps each can take one at a time to provide special-needs children a future bright with promise and opportunities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The injustices that exist in the education system are ingrained in every aspect of education and place the challenge of, and demand for, change on the backs of school principals. School principals

> must be willing to examine unconscious, often deeply held assumptions; to acknowledge their own privilege or resentments; and to recognise how their own values, priorities, and attitudes, and those of others of different ethnic or cultural groups, are expressed in community life and in school. (Parks, 1999, p. 14)

At the intra-institutional level, principals have an obligation to deal with various injustices in schools (Berkovich, 2014). It would be unfortunate if principals turn a blind eye to or are complacent in maintaining, if not protecting, the status quo without questioning or challenging the social, economic, and political structures that sustain injustices across the school system. It would also be unfortunate if principals ignore the fact that "the kinds of institutional and cultural arrangements which control us were built by us. They can be rebuilt as well" (Apple, 1990, p. 13).

Issues of injustice figure prominently among students of diversity, relating to their social status such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and other existing social and political constructs. Such issues manifest in various forms of "isms", of which the list of prefixes is getting as long as it is complex. Without being cognizant of their prevalence, there will be no substantial improvement of student learning. Among the prevailing "isms" that school leaders encounter and grapple with, racism, poverty/classism, sexism/gender-related issues, school safety, and special education are of particular concern to the participants. It is noteworthy that injustices as perceived by participants are context related: certain forms of injustices may be salient in one school, but may not be in others. Such perception may result in isolated actions, without recognizing the interrelatedness of injustices at the system and societal level. Eventually, promoting social justice is more inclined to become an intra-school activity (Berkovich, 2014).

Although the faces of injustice that have been identified by study participants appear in various forms and change over time, essentially they come down to two disabling constraints, oppression and domination (Young, 1990). Both concepts are embedded in relationships that exist between and within social groups and individuals. Oppression refers to structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a social group through exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 1990). In order to move forward for social justice, school leaders must examine the complex ways "isms" impact students' lives and confront and reverse social oppression and domination for a more equitable and socially justice learning environment for students.

Nevertheless, accountability reform has not only impacted "the central organizing principles of democratic public schooling in significant and disturbing ways" (Hoover & Shook, 2003, p. 81), but also shifted views of social justice, which for some becomes synonymous with school achievement (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004). As a result, school principals are inevitably caught in the chicken-and-egg debate around promoting social justice in schools and improving student achievement in meeting the accountability mandates. Although principals in this study grounded their conception of and concerns with social injustices in daily realities, fundamentally the operations and actions of their leadership tend to focus on achievement and inclusion. Their social justice efforts are more context-driven and compartmentalized.

Bogotch (2002) has asserted that "there are no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices" (p. 153). Evident in this study is that participants commonly have held that their moral justification for social justice is to work towards what is best for their students. Such justification has allowed them to assemble the elements for a new model of social justice in schools that involves critical consciousness, empowerment, and advocacy. This holistic framework is based on personal philosophies and beliefs that guide their actions and shape the direction of their leadership. Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2011) have argued that "the impact of the principal's leadership is felt, and is dependent on, what the principal values, and the clarity and commitment the principal displays toward those values" (p. 13). Values and beliefs have become participants' momentum to engage in the collective enterprise of promoting justice and equity.

Theoharis (2007) has defined social justice leadership with a reference to principals who "make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (p. 223). His definition has a central focus on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. However, social injustices do not appear simply in the form of marginalization. Instead, they emanate under different

guises to include exploitation, deprivation, domination, non-recognition, and disrespect (Fraser, 1995). In order to alter or eliminate these arrangements, institutional or systemic, social justice leaders bear a moral imperative (Fullan, 2003), not merely in the sense of simply improving student achievement, but in terms of an active engagement in "reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions" (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002, p. 162). Such engagement calls for principals to exercise strategic activism and subversive leadership to question and challenge educational policies and practices that are counterproductive and unjust.

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