

## Social Justice Leadership in School Settings: A Qualitative Study

Ceyhun Kavrayıcı 

Anadolu University, Eskişehir, Türkiye

### Abstract

Justice emerges as a need like any other human need and the processes of justice play important role within the organization. Social justice leadership includes the practice of leading and advocating for positive social change, equity, and fairness within society. Social justice leaders work to address and rectify systemic inequalities, discrimination, and injustices that affect marginalized and disadvantaged groups. They actively promote inclusivity, diversity, and equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances. This study is designed in qualitative paradigm as a case study. For selecting the participants, I employed maximum variation sampling which is one of the categories of purposeful sampling that provides the researcher understand the basics of a case or a phenomenon under exploration. The findings of the study revealed that the practices of the school principals include "caring students", "supporting staff" and "promoting positive organizational climate" theme. The challenges and barriers that the principals face with include "parental challenges", "financial issues" and "school conditions". Social justice leadership practices are crucial in ensuring equitable learning atmosphere and barriers should be taken into account in policy making of education.

### Article Info

#### Article History:

Received:

February 3, 2024

Accepted:

May 29, 2024

#### Keywords:

Equity,  
social justice  
leadership, school  
principals, strategies,  
barriers.

**Cite as:**

Kavrayıcı, C. (2024). Social justice leadership in school settings: A qualitative study. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, 9(2), 232-266. DOI: 10.30828/real.143131

**Introduction**

Today's organizations are miniature of society, and ensuring justice in these organizations means ensuring justice at the level of society. Justice emerges as a need like any other human need and the processes of justice play important role within the organization. How to deal with individuals in organizations shapes human resources, employee attitudes and commitments, thus it effects the success of the organization. Justice is a requirement for all forms of social participation. The continued existence of individuals in groups and organizations depends on their perception of the system's justice and equality. Along with education, justice is one of the fundamental rights of human beings and this right is guaranteed by various national and international conventions and instruments. These conventions and instruments emphasize that all students should be provided with equal educational opportunities (Ural, 2012). With the increase in internal and external migration due to various reasons, individuals with different cultures, religions, beliefs and traditions live together in countries and communities. The increasing differentiation created by globalization in the social structure of countries has revealed the need to adopt different approaches in both educational processes and educational management (Falk, 2003; White & Cooper, 2014). Accordingly, countries should organize their education policies in a way to eliminate inequalities and injustices that may arise. In this context, education policies should be based on values such as justice, equality and solidarity (Furman, 2012). In this context, considering



differences in schools where educational policies are implemented facilitates the achievement of social justice (Kondakçı, Kurtay, Oldaç ve Şenay, 2016). Today, debates on issues such as social justice, human rights, democracy, and freedom which have profoundly affected education systems, necessitated a rethinking of the role of schools (Doğan vd.,2022).

### **Social Justice Leadership**

Thoughts on social justice leadership has been ongoing for over forty years starting with Edmond's call to educators to support divergent students in 1979 (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Theoharis, 2010) and has been in the literature as a remarkable concept in recent years (Oplatka, 2010). Since appears as a remarkable concept in recent years social justice leadership analyses have mostly been addressed in the context of critical approaches (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004). Social justice leadership refers to a style of leadership that prioritizes and advocates for fairness, equity, and the protection of human rights within a society. It involves guiding and influencing individuals, groups, or communities to work towards addressing systemic inequalities, discrimination, and social injustices. Social justice leadership includes the practice of leading and advocating for positive social change, equity, and fairness within society. Lewis (2016) argues that the modern concept of leadership for social justice originates from early ideas of distributive justice and restructuring society. Although the term "social justice" has its origins in the mid-nineteenth century with Catholic thinkers, conversations about social justice predominantly centered on societal issues such as economic inequality and unfavorable working conditions. During that period, social justice was closely linked to distributive justice, emphasizing the equitable



treatment of individuals and ensuring that people received the goods they rightly deserved.

Social justice leaders are committed to creating positive change by challenging oppressive structures and promoting inclusivity, diversity, and equal opportunities for all (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Social justice leaders work to address and rectify systemic inequalities, discrimination, and injustices that affect marginalized and disadvantaged groups. They actively promote inclusivity, diversity, and equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances (Berkovich, 2014; DeMatthews, 2015; Wang, 2018). According to Allen et al. (2017), key dispositions of social justice leaders include adhering to the common good rather than self-interest, valuing diversity, being willing and ready to foster safe, supportive and sustainable learning environments, believing that every student learns, and contributing to the development of diverse social and cultural groups. These trends indicate that social justice leadership reflects a student-centered, inclusive and equitable approach for management. Theoharis (2007) points out that within the literature on leadership for social justice, there are instances of schools showcasing remarkable achievements not just with White, middle-income group, and privileged students, but also with students from various racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. He contends that the attainment of social justice in schools is not a haphazard event; it demands more than the typical comprehension of effective leadership. The leadership he discusses in his article goes beyond traditional concepts of exemplary leadership and advocates for a reinterpretation of effective leadership as leadership oriented towards social justice. Wang (2018) also suggests that the way school principals present themselves can affect their interactions with

students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders. According to him, principals are characterized as initiators, cheerleaders, facilitators, active learners, and other social roles. Additionally, social justice leaders focus on creating equitable educational opportunities and concentrate on the learning needs of all students by addressing how differences in language, income, race, gender, ability and sexual orientation influence the effectiveness and design of learning environments to help all students reach academic proficiency (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009).

Research on social leadership highlight that critical theory is one of the lenses theoretically valid in conceptualizing leadership for social justice (Freire, 1998; Furman, 2012; Griffiths, 2013; Ryan, 2012; Shields, 2010). According to Foster (1986, p.187), “aspirations and efforts to alter the human condition” are at the core of leadership. Freire (1998), on the other hand, asserts that his concept of "critical pedagogy," the term he employs to define his stance on leadership for social justice, involves a conscious intervention that necessitates the ethical application of authority. Several leadership theories aligned with social justice and from a critical perspective, are present in the literature (McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). Scholars and theorists who adopt a critical perspective argue that social justice leadership aims to unify theory and practical application. This involves a continuous and dynamic exchange, referred to as praxis, where power and accountability undergo scrutiny. This process demands both thoughtful reflection and decisive action, along with a deliberate examination of the power dynamics inherent in leadership. Hence, I used critical social theory as a framework of this study. CST (Critical Social Theory) is employed to evaluate the progress toward a fairer world through practical action aimed at diminishing power

dynamics. It was suitable for this research as it delved into the foundational comprehension and discerning awareness of leaders' commitment to social justice and educational equity in their practices.

The literature acknowledges that social justice leadership and related variables are vital in educational settings. "In recent years, social justice has generated much attention and debate in contemporary educational circles and academic discourse" (Azorín & Murillo, 2023, p. 286). However, Kondakçı and Beycioglu (2020) focus on the gap in research on social justice and social justice leadership. They believe that "there is a need for more research about the infant social justice and social justice leadership fields both from macro- and micro-sociological perspectives" (p. 323). Moreover, the need for the research in Turkish context is evident. Because of the infancy of the research in Turkish context and, the study aims to explore social justice leadership practices in public schools. Within this this general aim, the research questions guiding this study will be:

1. How do social justice leadership practices function in public schools?
2. What kind of challenges do school principals experience in their social justice leadership role?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study is designed in qualitative paradigm as a case study. Qualitative research examine practices, activities and phenomena situated in the world making that studied aspect of the naturalistic world visible for others (Billups, 2021) and it is a research approach that provides the opportunity to recognize, uncover and integrate



multiple perspectives in the exploration of the case and phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Hence, I applied case study to comprehend intricate social phenomena and real-life circumstance, including organizational-managerial processes, international relations, and individual life cycles (Yin, 2003). Case studies, employed for in-depth and comprehensive insight into a phenomenon, are also chosen when the context or boundaries of situations are not precisely defined (Creswell, 2013).

### **Participants**

In order to decide the participants, I employed maximum variation sampling which is one of the categories of purposeful sampling that provides the researcher understand the basics of a case or a phenomenon under exploration (Creswell, 2013). Maximum variation sampling is used to determine essential common patterns by discovering particular variations (Glesne, 2016). The aim of this sampling is to select different cases on important characteristic (Patton, 2015). School principals who participated voluntarily were selected from different types of schools, different region and seniority who were working at different educational levels of schools in Eskişehir province of Türkiye. The participants of the study were the school principals who are working for public schools. They were anonymized by using codes like P1, P2, ... and P11. Table 1 displays demographic characteristics of the participants.



**Table 1.**

Demographic Information about the Participants

Participant	Gender	Experience in Management (Year)	School Type
P1	Female	5	Primary School
P2	Female	8	High School
P3	Male	11	Secondary School
P4	Female	4	Secondary School
P5	Female	18	Secondary School
P6	Male	20	High School
P7	Male	19	Secondary School
P8	Male	14	Primary School
P9	Female	13	Primary School
P10	Male	9	Primary School
P11	Male	12	High School

### Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

The study used semi-structured interviews which is one of the robust data gathering technique to access rich experiences about a phenomena, case or event (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Researchers typically conduct semi-structured interviews using pre-determined open-ended questions, supplemented by questions that emerge spontaneously during the interviewer-participant dialogue (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Hence, as a researcher I prepared the interview questions based on purpose of the research and related literature. Semi-structured interview form included three parts: informed consent form and description of the study, demographics form and interview questions. The researcher consulted two scholars about the questions in order to get an expert opinion. The scholars who have PhD degree in the field of educational administration examined





the questions and gave feedback. After the feedback, some of the questions were modified and the last version of the form was gathered. Fifteen questions remained for the final draft, after excluding two interview questions. The interviews were conducted in school settings and face-to-face in fall semester of 2023-2024 academic year. The goal was to get detailed explanations from the participants about their own practices on social justice leadership and experiences about contextual factors on social justice leadership implementations. After thoroughly explaining the study details, the researcher presented an informed consent form to the school principals, who voluntarily agreed to participate. Upon receiving approval from the school principals, the researcher digitally recorded the interviews to ensure data preservation. All of the interviews lasted between 40-75 minutes recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in rooms of the principals. I had field notes and audio recordings with the consent of the participants during the interviews.

#### Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are important tenets of trustworthiness in qualitative research. The trustworthiness of this data was confirmed through the strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). According to the scholars one of the strategies for credibility is prolonged engagement. Therefore, in order to ensure long-term interaction, the researcher visited the schools of the principals during the fall semester of 2023-2024 and conducted long in-depth interviews. Another strategy to establish credibility is peer debriefing. In order to prevent the researcher's prejudices, to discover the meanings objectively and to make the interpretations clear the researcher exposed himself to a disinterested peer from outside of the field. Besides, member check is



another point of credibility. Therefore, I provided participants the transcripts of their interviews to take their opinions, clarifications and validate the data. In order to establish transferability, I used thick descriptions and purposeful sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993). I described the preparation of the data collection tool, data collection and analysis process in detail. I also supported categories and themes with direct quotations which allows the reader to make intellectual generalizations. Dependability in qualitative research shows that the research is reliable and repeatable. One of the strategies in order to establish dependability is inquiry audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hence, the process of data analysis in the study was supervised by another scholar who worked in the Department of Educational Administration and used qualitative research method in his doctoral thesis. The researcher and the supervisor scholar examined the consistency of the results together. On the other hand, confirmability in qualitative research is degree of neutrality. Therefore, I used confirmability audit. In order to build the audit, I described all the process like data collection tools, data collection and analysis in detail. I compared the results with the raw data and presented to external experts for review.

Another aspect of the trustworthiness is reflexivity. In qualitative research, the researcher's viewpoint and skills hold significant importance, as they can contribute to the formation of biases and assumptions regarding the research. Researchers are anticipated to be conscious of their individual stance on the issue and to carry out the process impartially, irrespective of their personal beliefs (Creswell, 2005). In order to enhance reflexivity, I try to present my perspective and competencies as a researcher. I can define myself as a reflective practitioner who had worked in public schools as a teacher in

Yüksekova province in Türkiye. Yüksekova is a province where Kurdish people are densely populated, and the economic income of people are below the average. After having an experience as a teacher, I started to work in university and got my doctoral degree in the field of educational administration. Leadership and school administration are the fields of study of the researcher. The researcher's ability to differentiate his personal approaches from the theoretical approach was promoted by his previous experience in delivering seminars and lectures on leadership. This enabled him 'bracket' his personal point of view.

### **Data Analysis**

During the initial phases of data analysis, researchers transcribed approximately 9.5 hours of audio recordings from interviews with 11 principals into textual format. Interviews which were transcribed first, hand-coded initially for recurring codes and themes using a content analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In the data analysis phase, the researcher reviewed the transcribed records by listening to the audio again to ensure accuracy, correcting any typos, and enhancing their familiarity with the data. Subsequently, he repeatedly read through the text data and took concise notes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the overall meaning conveyed in the text. The researcher also reviewed his interview notes and wrote several memos in order to understand which of the experiences of the participants were important and meaningful (Emerson et al., 2011). I followed the four steps recommended by Marshall and Rossman (2012) for the content analysis. These steps are “organizing the data,” “generating categories, themes and patterns,” “testing any emergent hypothesis,” and “searching for alternative explanations”. By following these stages I identified categories, themes and common patterns to reveal the



views and practices of school principals on social justice leadership. Additionally, I used inductive coding to determine initial ideas derived primarily from the conceptual framework of the study to organize the data related with social justice leadership. Then I conducted a second round of coding to classify themes and to analyze subcategories directly and specifically relevant to the study and arrange them visually (Maxwell, 2013; Rudestam & Newton 2015). In the further rounds of coding, I re-examined the themes and categories by re-naming and merging them. This enabled me find better patterns and get closer to develop the patterns and concepts. Then, the researcher organized the themes and categories by tabulating them and providing direct quotes from the dataset to support the findings.

### **Ethical considerations**

The researcher received ethics committee approval from the university. All effort was made to ensure the confidentiality and comfort of the participants. Pseudonyms (like P1, P2, P3...) were implemented for the participants to protect confidentiality further. The participants were informed about the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview and to clarify or amend any information from the interview. They were also informed about the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Findings**

As previously stated, this study explores the practices of public-school principals on social justice leadership and investigate the challenges and barriers when practicing it. The finding part of the study presents the emergent themes and categories that resulted from qualitative data analysis of semi-structured interviews. Themes and categories provided by practices and experiences of principals revealed the



essence of the case of social justice leadership in schools. The key attributes of the study are presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 2.**

Practices of School Principals on Social Justice Leadership

Theme: Actions and Strategies	
Category	Code
Caring Students	Support education room
	Financial aid
	In-kind aid
	Weekend courses
	Psychological support
Supporting Staff	Fairness in course schedule
	Fairness in course distribution
	Professional development opportunities
	Empowerment for Teacher Leadership
Promoting Positive Organizational Climate	Building Democracy
	Respect for beliefs
	Respect for political views
	Valuing Diversities
	Collaborative Atmosphere
	Heterogenous classes

Findings of the study revealed that there are some strategies implemented and actions taken by the school principals about social justice leadership practices in schools. First category of the emergent “actions and strategies” theme is “caring students”. School principals

think students as a center of school setting. Some inequalities may appear in school organization among students. These inequalities stem from poverty, lack of desired learning outcomes and special education needs. School principals should promote equity and enable all students access learning opportunities for the success. Participants of the study stated that they put all their effort to promote inclusion and equitable educational facilities. They establish rooms for support education and organize extra courses for the students that have special needs. These courses are designed for both gifted and mentally disabled students in order to promote inclusion and develop students. Students without disabilities from low income families also look for compensation courses for the subjects they have fallen behind. School principals arrange weekend courses to ensure a fair learning environment. There are inequalities on financial issues among the students. Some of the students are from low income families. They have problems in reaching basic needs like clothes, pencils, books etc. School principals strive for closing these gaps among students by organizing aids from state and private business organizations. They try to contact with philanthropists, business people and representatives of state organizations like municipalities, local authorities and get donations. Hence, financial and in-kind aids were regarded as tools in struggling inequalities. Orphans or students from broken families are another disadvantaged group of school setting. Counseling service and their experts in guidance and counselling field care about these students and provide psychological support to promote equitable educational journey. The principals' views on student care were as follows:

*“We organize support education for children with special education needs. We invite teachers from other schools when needed.*

*Organizing schedule for this extra education should be equal for all special students. Sometimes this would be difficult task. Because parents would like to have this support education in different days and timeline” (P1)*

*“Generally speaking, socio-economic background of parents in our school is above average. However, we still have students with low-income group and cannot afford the needs of children. In order to ensure the equality and closing the gap a little bit at least, we request in-kind and financial aids from municipality and district governorship fund” (P4)*

*“Children from broken families and orphans exist in our school. They need psychological and emotional support. Our psychological counseling and guidance department organize sessions and therapies for these students” (P8)*

“Supporting staff” is another key point in accessing social justice in school settings according to views of school principals. Since schools are multicultural and heterogenous organizations, it is important to keep stakeholders together on equal conditions in line with common goals. To do so, school principals have some strategies. As a social justice leader, they try to maintain balance their course distribution and course schedule. They believe that teachers should have similar weekly course load and regular class schedule. School principals encourage in-service trainings for teachers' development. They try to organize professional development opportunities for teachers in order to ensure justice and satisfaction among professionals. Besides, school principals believe that teacher leadership should be empowered for detecting in-class inequalities. They consider that building strong cooperation and division of labor with teachers are crucial to observe disparities and inequalities closely. Because teachers are the

professionals who spend most of their day time with the students during academic period. School principals perceive the other staff of the school as a team member as well. They invite all of the members to outdoor organizations like school picnic, teachers' day celebration party in order to evoke the feeling of justice and equalities. School principals' opinions were as follows:

*"As a social justice leader, you should be equal for your teacher. I try to be fair and equitable in organizing their course load and weekly distribution. I know that they will believe the organization and me more than usual" (P7)*

*"As a school principal I am open to new ideas and professional development opportunities. I want my teachers develop themselves by attending in-service trainings. For example, I think it is important to participate in congresses and symposiums and I encourage them to do so. I recommend them to attend master's degree and Ph. D. I consider doctoral and master's degree courses when I adjust their course schedules at school." (P6)*

*"We can't practice social justice leadership without teacher empowerment and teacher leadership. Because they are the practitioners who have close relationships with children. They are the observers; they know family of students better than administrative staff. They can feel emotional situations of children better. Hence, we have to cooperate with them and encourage the teacher leadership" (P9)*

According to views of school principals, building healthy and positive school atmosphere is another essential factor for being social justice leader. School principals position themselves on behalf of applying democracy in school settings. They would like to make decisions with



their teachers in teachers' committee meeting. Apart from the official committee meetings, they try to build friendly atmosphere where decisions are made in the teachers' room during course breaks. Moreover, they express the importance of respecting divergent political and religious beliefs of the staff. They emphasize the importance of being at an equal distance to teachers in different professional unions and divergent religions. Besides, there are ethnically diverse people in school organizations. Hence, valuing diversities and being equal distance to each ethnic group are at the center of preventing conflicts and inequities. Creating heterogeneous classes is also seen as an important factor in reducing ethnic discrimination. School principals aim to have students from different regions and refugees in the same classes. They also believe that building collaborative atmosphere among the staff of the school is essential. School principals narrated their experiences as follows:

*“For me building democratic culture is indispensable. I like to consult my teachers and take their opinions into consideration when making organizational decisions. In order to build social justice, I try to apply distributive leadership as well. I also attach importance to students’ views. We have a student council with representatives from each class. For example, we recently asked for their opinion on what color the school should be painted.” (P11)*

*“I am respectful for beliefs, religion and political background of the staff. There are pious, deists and even unbelievers in my school. There are teachers from different professional unions with different worldviews. As a school leader my distance is equal for all of them. I can’t position myself according to teachers’ worldviews and beliefs. I have to approach them on a professional level.” (P3)*

*“I try to build classes with students from every ethnic, cultural and socio-economic background. Students from low and high income families are in the same class. There are students with special education needs in almost each class. Turkish, Kurdish and immigrant students are together in the same classes. We don’t distinguish one from the other.” (P5)*

**Table 3.**

Barriers and Challenges experienced by School Principals

Theme: Barriers and Challenges	
Category	Code
Parental Challenges	Parent resistance
	Parental selfishness
	Family background
Financial Issues	The economics of companies
	Economic status of families
	Lack of funds
School conditions	Rural or Urban School
	Physical facilities

Other findings of the study revealed that there are barriers and challenges about social justice leadership practices in schools. First category of the emergent “barriers and challenges” theme is “parental resistance”. School principals think that most of the parents from rural areas and low-income status don’t believe the benefits of education. They believe in child labor and motive their children to work in farms

and factories instead of “losing time” in education. Another issue on the theme of “parental challenges” is selfishness. Especially, parents of the children with special educational needs believe that their children are unique and want extra-ordinary care for their children. Principals show extra effort to equally deliver the sources for the students with special educational needs. Family background is another determinant in parental set of behaviors in schools. The families they were grown in and educational status effect their beliefs in social justice and equitable use of resources. School principals’ expressions were as follows:

*“Family resistance is one of our most important problems. Poor families and low-income families living in rural areas do not believe in the benefits of education. Therefore, they do not want to send their children to school. They want their children to help them. They want their children to work in the farms and industry. So, they believe that their children will have a better life.” (P10).*

*“Families are so selfish. They want the education programs in the support education rooms to be arranged according to the hours they want. Everyone wants more intensive courses for their child. They don’t care about the rights of other children.” (P2).*

*“The families of the children in my region have low levels of education and come from low socio-economic backgrounds. This affects their cultural level and their perspective on education” (P1)*

According to experiences of the principals “financial issues” is another barrier factor of social justice leadership. There has been economic contraction since the pandemic in the world and especially in Türkiye. In a country where official inflation is %60, most of the companies most do not want to donate and sponsor for education. This also effected

point of view of the parents. Due to the economic conditions, parents don't like to involve in extracurricular activities that they have to pay for. They don't want to buy extra materials for their children as well. In that case school leadership tries to cover the fees with the donations that poor families cannot afford. The economic crisis in Turkey has led to a reduction in central government budgets for schools and the postponement of many school projects, within the scope of austerity measures. School principals' opinions were as follows:

*"The economic problems are challenging us. Resources are dwindling. The economic crisis is increasing every day. The schools have very little funding, and it is not enough for many expenses. For example, especially during the pandemic, we had difficulty finding white paper, can you believe it?" (P5).*

*"The economic crisis is getting worse day by day. Companies that used to help our schools and students either do not want to help or reduce the amount they help. We have parents who have been laid off and cannot find a job due to economic conditions. The economic crisis is also limiting families' spending on education. They prefer to spend more on basic food requirements. For example, they don't want to buy extra books to support daily lessons." (P2).*

School conditions are other important barriers and challenges to ensure equality and justice. There are differences between the physical conditions of schools. In order to reduce these gaps, school principals make an extra effort. School principals sometimes seek sponsorship from companies to improve physical conditions of the school and sometimes they even work physically to repair the school. In their opinions, there are gaps between urban and rural schools. For instance, weekend courses cannot be operated in rural schools. However, weekend courses are active in some of the urban schools. Hence, while

students who live in the city center can easily reach these schools, students who live in the urban area have difficulties in accessing these opportunities. School principals' expressions were as follows:

*"There are many differences between schools. The rural-urban divide is huge. The physical conditions of schools are not equal. When I started working in this school, the doors were broken, the floors were old concrete. Can you believe it? I couldn't find workers because they wanted a lot of money. As a school principal, I repaired the doors myself. A parent from the school supported me and we bought tiles for the floors. We laid the tiles on the floors together with our teachers."* (P4).

*"Weekend courses are held at schools in the city center. It is impossible for children in rural areas to access these courses. Children in rural areas cannot benefit from these weekend courses. It is not easy for them to commute to the city center. It is not possible for them to pay for public transportation or even buy a snack at the course."* (P7).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

There is an increasing academic attention concerning matters connected to social justice and their roots, the evolution of social justice leadership, and the results of initiatives for social justice. However, despite the growing interest, our understanding of social justice leadership still remains limited. Hence, my aim was to understand the experiences and challenges of school principals in social justice practices and their efforts for reducing inequalities. Defining principal's role is a complex and challenging task, due to the constantly evolving and diverse responsibilities they encounter. Apart from overseeing the school's physical infrastructure, maintaining a safe and orderly atmosphere, and fostering a sense of belonging for students



and staff, principals are also tasked with creating a welcoming environment for parents and the community. Furthermore, they are entrusted with cultivating a conducive learning environment and ensuring that highly effective instruction takes place in every classroom. Overall, the role of principals is demanding and multifaceted. Participants of the study believed themselves in a positive orientation toward educational social justice and equity. These viewpoints and their implications are in line with Wang's (2015) emphasis on the necessity of social justice school leaders who are aware of the social inequalities that their schools have in relation to their practices, policies, and structures. Therefore, the first of the findings of the study was the actions and strategies applied for social justice leadership. The strategies and actions implemented by school principals in the process of social justice practices were categorized under three categories. The strategies of school principals for social justice leadership included the categories of "Caring Students", "Supporting Staff" and "Promoting Positive Organizational Climate". "Caring students" is something related to aids, supports, inclusiveness and extra courses. "Supporting Staff" is related to fairness, professional development opportunities and teacher leadership. Moreover, "Promoting Positive Organizational Climate" is related to democracy, being inclusive and respectful, heterogenous and collaborative. These findings were consistent with the theoretical bases of social justice leadership. Similarly, literature on social justice leadership highlights the importance of inclusiveness and supporting disadvantageous groups. Educational leaders actively strive to establish inclusive practices within their schools in response to social justice and marginalization issues (Cooper, 2009; Lopez et al., 2010; Merchant & Shoho, 2010; Ryan, 2006; Wasonga, 2009). These inclusive practices for social justice are partly associated with student engagement

(Büyükgöze, et., al, 2018). Engaging students has also focus on inclusiveness according to findings of this study which is similar with the literature indicating that social justice leadership behaviors exhibited by school principals play an important role for students in disadvantaged groups to benefit from quality education services at the highest level (Özdemir & Pekdaş, 2017). Indeed, inclusion practices are commonly seen as closely aligned with achieving outcomes related to social justice. These practices consist of integrated learning opportunities and environments for all students, including those with special education needs (Frattura & Capper, 2007). Hence, social justice leaders aim to ensure that disadvantaged and minority students benefit from educational opportunities on an equal basis with their peers, and to make others in the organization adopt this idea (Theoharis, 2007). Findings of the study revealed that social justice leadership practices of school principals were limited within the three dimensions called “personal, interpersonal and communal” recommended by Furman (2012). I understood that their practices are democratic and inclusive across the cultural groups and colleagues that corresponds “communal” dimension in Furman’s framework. Young (1990) on the other hand, remarked the importance of democracy which had similar findings with this study. She emphasized the dimension of democracy in education as not only a component of social justice but also a prerequisite for it. The dimension of democracy in education includes elements such as each individual receiving education, being asked for their opinions in educational decisions and having the opportunity for personal development. Emphasis of democracy implies that democratic education system can be regarded as the basis of social justice. Therefore, school leaders need to ensure equal opportunities to achieve primary educational goals (Arar, Beycioglu, & Oplatka, 2017). The findings of the study reflected



the features of “personal, interpersonal” dimensions of Furman (2012) as well. Namely, I understood that school leaders examine their assumptions, values and biases related to race, language, class and other aspects and consider how these factors influence their leadership practices. Besides, participants of the study actively establish trusting relationships with parents, colleagues and students from diverse cultural backgrounds within their schools as response to “interpersonal” dimension of Furman (2012). On the other hand, my findings don’t support the “systemic and ecological” dimensions of Furman’s framework. School principals didn’t have practices on criticizing the system and attempts to change it. Moreover, they didn’t have attempts in designing pedagogical implementations for both students and teachers related to broader issues like economic, sociopolitical and environmental contexts.

Fairness in course schedule and distribution, providing professional development opportunities for teachers and teacher empowerment for their leadership are practices of the participants about social justice leadership. Supporting the staff with fair and feasible actions emerged as an important finding in social justice leadership practices of school principals. According to Wang (2018), realizing social justice requires teachers who share similar values and are willing to collaborate with their principals. Teachers play a vital role not only in students' academic growth but also in promoting equity and fairness across different aspects of students' lives. In his study, principals emphasized the significance of continuous staff development to cultivate a cohesive team committed to social justice values. This development entails fair and equitable set of behavior practices, understanding staff strengths and areas for growth, fostering changes in staff attitudes and behaviors





toward social justice, and empowering them to take risks and assume responsibilities.

Building democracy, valuing diversities, building collaborative atmosphere and heterogenous classes, showing respect for beliefs and political views are practices in promoting positive organizational climate that seems essential in social justice leadership. Similarly, Theoharis (2010) asserted that principals could establish an atmosphere where teaching professionals feel valued, respected, and empowered in school management. According to Wang (2010), these efforts focus on reshaping teachers' mindsets and attitudes while enhancing their ability to promote social justice. To promote learning, principals in his research displayed patience, care, and respect towards parents and community members, employing diverse approaches to cultivate trusting relationships with them. Principals committed to social justice build relationships among the stakeholders, value diversities and actively collaborate in community advocacy efforts to improve opportunities while maintaining high standards that align with the school's mission and vision. Social justice leaders work towards fostering community unity across diverse cultural groups by promoting inclusive and democratic practices within communal environments (Furman, 2012)

The answer for the second research question emerged as a second theme of the study. The challenges and barriers encountered by school principals in the process of social justice practices were categorized under three categories. The strategies of school principals for social justice leadership included the categories of "parental challenges", "financial issues", "school conditions". "Parental challenges" is something related to family background, parental resistance and selfishness. "Financial issues" on the other hand, is related to lack of



budget, lack of funds and economic conditions of the companies and families. Moreover, “School conditions” is related to physical facilities and locational condition of the school. It is not easy to provide social justice in rural schools. My findings are similar with the literature on challenges and barriers in practicing social justice leadership. Marginalized students and inclusive practices for social justice are varied, complex and frequently resisted and contested (Marshall & Oliva, 2017). Implementing inclusive practices that benefit all students presents various challenges for social justice leaders. These leaders encounter numerous barriers, such as school systems and structures, central policies and parental expectations, which impede the progress of inclusion efforts (Cloninger, 2017). Stakeholders frequently resist principal's leadership in social justice, exhibiting opposition that can manifest in subtle or overt forms (Picower, 2009; Swanson & Welton, 2019).

Critical social theory used as underpinnings of this study helped me understand and interpret the findings. Social justice leadership action within critical social theory aims to shift power dynamics to focus on improving academic achievement for students who have been inadequately served by their school, district, or educational system. The approach in critical social theory views education and leadership as tools to equip children and stakeholders in school settings with the knowledge and skills necessary to critically analyze and challenge social injustices, structures, and power dynamics. Education and leadership are seen as tools to nurture thoughtful citizens. Critical social theory promotes democratic engagement and considers education and educational leadership essential for fostering democracy (Tinning, 2002). According to existing literature, central purpose of public education is to develop attitudes and skills of



teachers and children that support democratic life and mentality (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). The results of this study revealed attempts of school principals in building democratic educational organizations and their efforts for caring students and supporting both teachers and students. Moreover, this research emphasizes the significance of socially just school leaders who lead for challenging biased views about cultural norms that negatively influence the school's climate (Cooper, 2009) and actively engaging with the parents, teachers, stakeholders and other community members to gain insights into sociocultural practices and overcome the barriers and challenges. Similarly, critical theory positions school leadership within an ongoing challenge of leveraging the existing system to dismantle its inherent flaws. In this sense social justice leaders should emphasize acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in this struggle, using their power and privilege to advance the interests and empowerment of oppressed groups within their school communities. Education and its leadership, in this context, are regarded as approaches that foster sense of responsibility towards oneself and others, creating an environment conducive to realizing each individual's full potential. Thus, this theory places school leaders in an ongoing struggle, balancing pressures to perpetuate social norms that undermine the empowerment of underserved and historically marginalized students against the interests of school community members who have benefited from this established social order. (Feldman & Tyson, 2013). School principals are committed to struggle for these pressures, barriers and challenges in order to perform social justice leadership. Although there are findings that I can address and discuss on the basis of critical social theory, I was unable to trace some of the assumptions of the theory in the findings. Critical social theory asserts that social justice leadership encompasses aspects beyond mere resource



distribution and economic considerations. Patterns of (dis)advantage in social justice may not be apparent and it prioritizes fairness and equity over specific interpretations of equality (Ryan & Rottmann, 2007). In this vein, social justice leadership practices of school principals do not seem to go much beyond of resource distribution and economic considerations. This may stem from centralized management policies and educational programs. Within the centralized education system school principals have too many workloads and responsibilities with a little authority. However, school principals may pay more attention to invisible patterns of (dis)advantages and prioritize equity and fairness over their own specific interpretations of equality.

#### **Limitations and Future Research**

The limitations of the study include perspectives 11 different school principals from different schools in the province of Eskişehir, Türkiye. Hence, the findings of the study referred to reported experiences and perceptions rather than observed practices, and therefore the findings should be interpreted with attention and cannot be generalized to different contexts without considering these specific conditions. As social justice leadership is vital for equity and inclusive educational settings, it is also necessary to explore how social justice leadership is encouraged in terms of educational policy. Ongoing research is essential to explore how educational leaders advocate for social justice in diverse collectivistic rural settings, investigating the prevalence of an adult-centered and hierarchical leadership approach and its implications for advancing social justice in school leadership. Another potential avenue for future research can involve examining students' and their families' perceptions of social justice leadership.



## References

- Allen, J. G., Harper, R. E. & Koschoreck, J. W. (2017). Social justice and school leadership preparation: can we shift beliefs, values, and commitments? *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 12(1).
- Arar, K., Beycioglu, K., & Oplatka, I. (2017). A cross-cultural analysis of educational leadership for social justice in Israel and Turkey: Meanings, actions and contexts. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 47(2), 192-206.
- Azorín, C., & Murillo, F. J. (2023). Social justice leadership: a tribute to Kadir Beycioglu. *School Leadership & Management*, 1-17.
- Berkovich, I. (2014). A socio-ecological framework of social justice leadership in education. *Journal of educational administration*, 52(3), 282-309.
- Billups, F. D. (2021). *Qualitative data collection tools: Design, development, and applications*. Sage Publications.
- Büyükgoze, H., Şayir, G., Gülcemal, E., & Kubilay, S. (2018). Examining how social justice leadership relates to student engagement in high schools. *Çukurova University Faculty of Education Journal*, 47(2), 932-961.
- Cambron-McCabe, N., & McCarthy, M. M. (2005). Educating school leaders for social justice. *Educational Policy*, 19(1), 201-222.
- Cloninger, K. L. (2017). *Leading for social justice: A qualitative study of school principals in Washington State*. Washington State University.

- Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research: Planning conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd edition.). Pearson Ed. Inc.
- Cooper C. W. (2009). Performing cultural work in demographically changing schools: Implications for expanding transformative leadership frameworks. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 45, 694-724.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd edition). SAGE Publication
- Dicicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B.F. (2006). *The qualitative research interview*. *Medical Education*, 40, 314-321.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x>
- DeMatthews, D. (2015). Making sense of social justice leadership: A case study of a principal's experiences to create a more inclusive school. *Leadership and Policy in schools*, 14(2), 139-166.
- Doğan, H., & Yıldırım, N. (2022). Sosyal adalet liderliği ve okul iklimi arasındaki ilişki. *Uluslararası Liderlik Çalışmaları Dergisi: Kuram ve Uygulama*, 5(3), 174-195..
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press
- Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: A guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.



- Feldman, S. B., & Tyson, K. (2013). Clarifying conceptual foundations for social justice in education. In *International handbook of educational leadership and social (in) justice* (pp. 1105-1124). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Frattura E. M., Capper C. A. (2007). *Leading for social justice: Transforming schools for all learners*. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin Press.
- Foster, W. (1986). *Paradigms and promises: New approaches to educational administration*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield
- Furman, G. C., & Gruenewald, D. A. (2004). Expanding the landscape of social justice: A critical ecological analysis. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), 47-76.
- Furman, G. (2012). Social justice leadership as praxis: Developing capacities through preparation programs. *Educational administration quarterly*, 48(2), 191-229.
- Glesne, C. (2016). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (5<sup>th</sup> edition.). Pearson Education.
- Griffiths, D. (2013). *Principals of inclusion: Practical strategies to grow inclusion in urban schools*. Burlington, ON: Word & Deed.
- Hyttén, K. & Bettez, S. C., (2011). Understanding education for social justice. *Educational Foundations*, 25, pp.7-24.

- Kondakci, Y., & Beycioglu, K. (2020). Social justice in Turkish education system: Issues and interventions. *Handbook on promoting social justice in education*, 309-329.
- Jean-Marie, G., Normore, A. H., & Brooks, J. S. (2009). Leadership for Social Justice: Preparing 21st Century School Leaders for a New Social Order. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 4(1), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/194277510900400102>
- Merchant B. M., Shoho A. R. (2010). Bridge people: Civic and educational leaders for social justice. In Marshall C., Oliva M. (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice* (2nd ed., pp. 120-138). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Lewis, K., (2016) Social justice leadership and inclusion: a genealogy, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 48:4, 324-341, DOI: 10.1080/00220620.2016.1210589
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly, CA: Sage.
- Lopez G. R., Gonzalez M. L., Fierro E. (2010). Educational leadership along the U.S.-México border: Crossing borders/embracing hybridity/building bridges. In Marshall C., Oliva M. (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice* (2nd ed., pp. 100-119). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Marshall, C., & Oliva, M. (2006). Building the capacities of social justice leaders. *Leadership for Social Justice: Making Revolutions in Education*, 1–15.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Sage publications  
Marshall, C., & Oliva, M. (2017). *Leadership for*





*social justice: Making revolutions in education*. Pearson. DOI:  
10.1108/09578230710722502

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2012). *Designing qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage Publications.

McMahon, B., & Portelli, J. (2004). Engagement for what? Beyond popular discourses of student engagement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 3(1), 59–76.

Oplatka, I. (2010). The place of “social justice” in the field of educational administration: A journal based historical overview of emergent area of study, In Ira Bogotch and Carolyn, M. Shields (Eds.), *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Social (In) Justice* (pp. 15-36). Springer.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). SAGE: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Picower, B. (2009). The unexamined whiteness of teaching: How white teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies. *Race ethnicity and education*, 12(2), 197-215.

Rudestam, K. E., & Newton, R. R. (2015). *Surviving your dissertation: A comprehensive guide to content and process*. Sage Publications

Ryan J. (2006). Inclusive leadership and social justice for schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 5, 3-17.

Ryan, J. (2012). *Struggling for inclusion*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age

Ryan, J., & Rottmann, C. (2007). Educational leadership and policy approaches to critical social justice. *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations*, 18 (1&2), 9–23.

- Shields, C. (2010). Transformative leadership: Working for equity in diverse contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 558–589. doi:10.1177/0013161X10375609
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research* (2nd ed.) Sage Publications.
- Swanson, J., & Welton, A. (2019). When good intentions only go so far: White principals leading discussions about race. *Urban Education*, 54(5), 732-759.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational administration quarterly*, 43(2), 221-258.
- Theoharis, G. (2010). Disrupting injustice: Principals narrate the strategies they use to improve their schools and advance social justice. *Teachers College Record*, 112(1), 331-373.
- Tinning, R., (2002). Toward a “modest pedagogy”: Reflections on the problematics of critical pedagogy. *Quest*, 54(3), pp.224-240.
- Wang, F. (2015). Conceptualizing social justice: Interviews with principals. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(5), 667-681. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-07-2014-0080>
- Wang, F. (2018). Social justice leadership—Theory and practice: A case of Ontario. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 54(3), 470-498.
- Wasonga T. A. (2009) Leadership practices for social justice, democratic community, and learning: School principals’ perspectives. *Journal of School Leadership*, 19, 200-224.



Kavrayıcı (2024). Social justice leadership in school settings: A qualitative study.  
<https://doi.org/10.30828/real.1431311>

---

Yin, R.K. (2003). *Case study methods: Design and methods* (3rd. Edition).  
Sage Publications.

Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton  
University Press.

**About the author:**

**Ceyhun Kavrayıcı** is an associate professor in the field of Educational Administration in the Faculty of Education at Anadolu University, Türkiye. He received his Ph.D. in Educational Administration from Anadolu University. He teaches both undergraduate and graduate-level courses. His research interests include teacher identity, organizational identity and commitment, classroom management, school leadership and supervision of education.

**E-mail:** [ckavrayici@anadolu.edu.tr](mailto:ckavrayici@anadolu.edu.tr) or [ceyhunkavrayici@gmail.com](mailto:ceyhunkavrayici@gmail.com)