

The Adaptive Challenge of Social Justice in Educational Leadership

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JELPS Special Issue #3 on Educational Leadership and Social Justice

This JELPS Special Issue #3 contains the four final articles of the Educational Leadership and Social Justice Series. These articles contribute to the rich research and conversation facilitated by the earlier 11 articles in Special Issues #1 and #2. All articles are described briefly below with links to the full articles.

The impetus for this series was to create one more forum in which the crucial intersection of social justice and educational leadership could be explored. The focus on educational leaders was intentional. As I argued in the [series' introductory editorial](#), "...if education has a disproportionate role in the process of attaining social equity and justice, then educational leaders have a disproportionate responsibility." Whether Pre-K-12, higher education, or adult education; the leaders in educational institutions (we) strongly influence the teaching and learning that takes place. They (we) also strongly influence school culture and climate and, thus, the ways in which educational institutions reproduce or interrupt inequity. However, while issues of educational equity such as achievement and opportunity gaps, homelessness, poverty, "minority" teacher/leader recruitment and retention, food insecurity, and other forms of trauma are increasingly evident; educational leaders in development and in the field (we) are not necessarily exposed to critical leadership approaches that prepare them (us) to understand and effectively address these complex, adaptive issues. Rather, these leaders and leaders-in-training (we) learn to focus primarily on the technical requirements involved in running schools and school systems day-to-day.

Most leadership students (we) have been exposed to the distinction between technical and adaptive challenges advanced by Ronald Heifitz, Donald Laurie, and various collaborators. Technical challenges may be difficult, but there are clear answers to issues, problems can be solved within a relatively short period of time, and solutions tend not to disrupt values or require much individual or organizational learning. In contrast, adaptive challenges require substantial changes in systems, knowledge, behavior, and outcomes. Adaptive challenges are complex and require both individual and organizational learning and flexibility. They are a long-game effort that is difficult and uncomfortable, but that results in deep and lasting change. So, if we seek a more equitable and effective society, we need to seek out and embrace adaptive, not technical, work. "Adaptive work is required when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge... Adaptive problems are often systemic problems with no ready answers." 2

1 While the inclusion of (we) (our) (us) may be awkward and distracting, I include it to make the point that we must look at our own choices and contributions to (in)equity and (in)justice.

2 Heifitz, R., & Laurie, D. (1997). The work of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, p. 124.

It certainly is crucial to prepare leadership students (us) to address the myriad technical activities required of schools and school systems. School leaders (we) need to understand and support compliance with laws and policies. They (we) need to be able to gather and present attendance, assessment, and student achievement and progress data to demonstrate need and success. They (we) need to be able to effectively manage school budgets, schedules, personnel, resources, stakeholders, and emergencies. Indeed, there is much technical work to be done to support quality school environments, teaching, and student achievement. However, if educational leaders (we) are going to educate and support ALL of the children and adults in their (our) charge, they (we) must serve as advocates for equity and justice. To do this, they (we) need to learn about, and learn ways to address, what Terah Venzant Chambers calls the “Receivment Gap” – the inequitable structural inputs that disadvantage students as soon as they enter school and colleges³. In addition to pertaining to students, this Receivment Gap also pertains to many schools and colleges as well. Unlike their well-resourced and supported institutional peers, many schools and colleges have been structurally disadvantaged in their ability to offer robust educational programs and environments that result in strong learning.

Unfortunately, critical approaches in leadership development programs are not the norm; nor are they typically included in in-service leadership professional development or coaching efforts. Most educational leadership programs include curricula on leadership styles, organizational structures and change, education law, school finance, learning theory, ethics, staff supervision, and interpersonal communication. Increasingly, programs have included curricula on culturally relevant and/or responsive schools, restorative justice, and supporting English Language Learners. However, most programs are still not ready to explicitly and unapologetically expect their students to learn about structural inequity and how to advocate for anti-racist, anti-oppressive practices and relations in their schools. Even fewer programs are willing to accept that white privilege exists as a result of structures and “norms” built, over time, through white supremacy – structures from which they (we) benefit and continue to reproduce.

Educational leaders (we) are also largely responsible for their (our) own in-service professional development because it is not mandated in the same way that it is for teachers. It is a professional expectation that leaders (we) will keep current in the field and will seek out opportunities to do so. Yet, when educational leaders (we) do not see the inequity in their (our) schools, or do not see it as a problem, they (we) are not likely to seek out information or supports to help understand and advocate for improved conditions, relations, and outcomes.

It is unlikely that this state of affairs will change when university or program leadership and key faculty (us), whom, currently, are primarily white, may not have a social justice orientation or may not deem it important. This is also true of current educational leaders. They (we) may find broaching and discussing equity issues uncomfortable and conflict-laden; particularly if their (our) students or teachers or parents show discomfort

3 Chambers, T. V. (2009). The “Receivment Gap:” School tracking policies and the fallacy of the “Achievement Gap.” *Journal of Negro Education*, 78(4), 417-431.

or opposition and have not bought in to the importance of this value orientation for their (our) students and broader society. Being oblivious to, being able to choose to avoid, or denying the existence of inequity and injustice is an unfortunate result of personal or structural privilege based on race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, ideology, and inheritance. It is also a perpetuation of such privilege to the detriment of those who do not have it and a society that does not recognize the significant loss that is the result.

For many, what I am saying is elementary. However, there are many others for whom this is unfamiliar or uncomfortable territory. For these leaders (us), there must be an on ramp; especially if their (our) leadership development programs and/or on-the-job learning do not draw attention to the many ways in which inequity is advanced in their (our) communities or, more importantly, how they (we) are complicit in constructing and allowing it. In the face of overwhelming evidence that certain students are not flourishing (e.g., students of color, ELL students, impoverished students, students with home or neighborhood trauma), what will open educational leaders' (our) eyes and hearts to these terrible facts and compel them (us) to take action?

One way to create awareness and urge action is through exposure to data that show inequity. Another way is exposure to research that contextualizes such data and helps us understand what the stakes are, why they are important, and why we should care and act. A third way is ongoing dialogue among educational leaders with each other, with faculty and staff, with students and parents, and with other stakeholders. Adaptive work also favors a distributed leadership approach that encourages and values the guidance of stakeholders who may not be formal leaders, but who have knowledge and experience with the issue at hand. The articles in this issue support these approaches.

Adaptive challenges are always paradoxical. The paradoxical challenge of educational inequity and injustice is that there is simultaneously hope and despair. Hope is in the form of educational leaders (us) engaged in substantive, transformative action to advance opportunity in equity in their (our) schools and communities. Despair persists in the form of our, and others', persistent racism, oppression, discrimination, and prejudice. Thankfully, it is possible to change one's values, beliefs, and behavior through learning and to ignite and support such change in others. The key is the desire to learn, to have access to information, and to turn it into action. The authors in JELPS' Special Issues on Educational Leadership and Social Justice have provided strong fodder for this.

This JELPS Special Issue #3 on Educational Leadership and Social Justice contains the four final articles of the Special Issue Series.

The first article offers a conceptual contribution in the form of an Implicit Bias Reduction Framework. In this piece entitled [*Framing Implicit Bias Impact Reduction in Social Justice Leadership*](#), co-authors Drs. Gina Gullo and Floyd Beachum offer a tool for educational leaders to use in their schools to draw attention to, and reduce, implicit bias as one step in the quest for equity in school. The authors begin by outlining foundations in social justice and injustice, social justice in education, and implicit bias – including a summary of implicit bias impact reduction research since 2000. The

framework consists of three practices for Transformative Social Justice Leadership (i.e., Morality, Flexibility, and Relationships) that can be enacted within each of the empirically validated strategies for reducing implicit bias (i.e., decision-making supports, intergroup contact, information building, and mindfulness). The authors argue this framework can help teachers and other educational staff more clearly understand inequity and injustice in their schools as well as help structure ways to check individual and institutional implicit bias as well as change it.

In [*School Leaders' Sense-Making and Use of Equity-Related Data to Disrupt Patterns of Inequality*](#), Drs. Moses Chikwe and Robert Cooper report on a qualitative phenomenological study they undertook to learn about the relationship that 19 California leaders from seven comprehensive high schools developed in order to increase equity and equity-related practices in their schools. Focusing both on how the leaders “made sense” of data and how they “used” it, they found that leaders do not come to data with a neutral orientation; rather, that their “mindscapes” of equity shape what they know and do. Data served as a diagnostic tool, a critical roadmap, a reference point for crucial conversations primarily to identify areas of need for program improvement. Not all leaders have a social justice orientation and data are often delivered in ways that are not meaningful for the context. Thus, the authors recommend professional development to build leaders’ social justice mindscapes as well as attention to data collection, analysis, and representation so leaders can best mobilize it for socially just ends.

In the article [*Rethinking Social Justice: Promoting SEL Opportunities to Achieve a More Just Society*](#), Dr. Raquel Muñiz explores how certain educational leaders have provided socio-emotional learning (SEL) opportunities in an Upward Bound (UB) program. Using the framework of “Capability in Policy Implementation” along with an empirical case study of an extreme and critical case of one UB program of over one hundred urban and rural students, Muñiz found that, despite federal policy not mandating SEL, educational leaders did demonstrate capability for implementing policy that integrally supported SEL learning – an equity stance that they took to advance their students. UB, a program from the 1960s intended to provide educational opportunity to disadvantaged students, is social justice in action. In this study, UB leaders demonstrated capability in implementing SEL through their values, interests, skills and knowledge, disposition, and planning power. Planning power, in particular, emerged as a crucial capability because it drives action, while knowledge and skill were found to be less important in advancing SEL policy initiatives. The study highlights the importance of leaders’ ability and desire to advance initiatives like SEL that will support students’ school and life success.

In the last article of these Special Issues on Educational Leadership and Social Justice, [*The Case for Dual Language Programs as the Future of Public Education*](#), Drs. Jacob Werblow, Luke Duesbery, and Helen Koulidobrova argue that the US should implement a model of two-way dual language programs in PK-8 schools nationwide. Doing this would not only provide a more even playing field for Multiple Language Learners (MLLs) (the term they posit to avoid the deficit connotations of the term English Language Learners (ELLs)), but would also provide monolingual English

speakers with the opportunity to experience what it is to learn in one's native language while also learning in a non-native language. The article reviews different types of language instruction – sheltered instruction, English Language Development (ELD), (Transitional) Bilingual, and Dual Language (Bilingual) – and relevant research. It concludes that dual language programming is “a paradigm shift” from traditional ELL models. It not only promotes linguistic and cultural literacies for MLLs, but also for monolingual English speakers and, in doing so, can level the playing field for disadvantaged students. A current lack of bilingual teachers, the need to develop faculty and staff to undertake this type of education, as well as a lack of political or fiscal support in some areas, are issues that need addressing. However, these issues do not diminish the policy argument overall and its attempt to improve all students' global knowledge and skills through school instruction in more than just English.

To recap the articles in the earlier issues of this series, JELPS's Special Issues #1 and #2 on Educational Leadership and Social Justice contained the 11 following articles:

- Dr. Michael McIntosh wrote on the importance of a [trauma-informed approach to schooling](#) as part of a Social Justice Framework;
- Drs. Eleanor Drago-Severson and Jessica Blum-DeStafano focused on [awareness of the developmental nature of social justice understanding and commitments](#) among educational leaders;
- Dr. Donna Kowlchuk shared specific [social justice principal practices](#) from a Canadian lens;
- Ph.D. students Kayla Crawley, Christine Cheuk, Anam Mansoor, Stephanie Perez, and Elizabeth Park offered a proposal for [building social capital among low-income students](#) to support increased college readiness and access.
- Dr. Heidi Von Dohlen and colleagues Jan Moore, Lisa Von Dohlen, and Beth Thrift provided a data-based view of [the limits to what pre-service educational leadership students know about homelessness and poverty](#) with suggestions for improvement,
- Drs. Tiffany Wright and Nancy Smith and colleague Erin Whitney explored [LGBT teachers' experiences of feeling safe and being “out” in their schools](#) to benefit policy makers, professional development, and administrative interventions.
- Drs. Brad Porfilio and Katie Strom described how technically [converting the Ed.D. doctoral program at their university to a semester system created an opportunity to revamp the program's content and pedagogy](#) to focus on equity, access, and the critical and transformative capacity of education,
- Drs. Kendra Lowery, Renae Mayes, Marilyn Quick, Lori Boyland, Rachel Geesa, and Jungnam Kim reviewed the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and American School Counselor Association (ASCA) standards to suggest [what social justice might look like when advanced through a collaboration between educational leaders and school counselors](#),
- Dr. Sosanya Jones shared rare [insights into the important, challenging, and often delicate role of the higher education diversity worker](#). She shows the difficult tightrope diversity professionals walk as their commitment and passion for the work are sought, but are also misunderstood and used as tactics

to undermine the individual social consciousness, anti-racism, and institutional learning, required for substantive change.

- Dr. Aaron Griffen and Ph.D. student Nneka Greene provided an [overview of a urban-defined K-12 school's reform through its explicit advocacy for social justice culture and programming](#). A Cultural Competency Series for students, staff, and faculty; and implementation of a grassroots Oral History Course and a Study Abroad Program formed the core elements of institutional change that improved student and community outcomes.
- Drs. José Cardoza and Kathleen Brown outlined their study of [differences between the achievement of non-English-speaking 4th and 5th grade newcomer students who were taught mathematics in their native Spanish from those who were taught through English only](#). They argue that this approach should be considered more seriously in school systems nationwide.

The scholarly and activist contributions in this series are beacons for the field. Feedback on the series' first two issues has been that these articles have opened eyes and changed minds and behaviors. It is heartening that more educational leaders are seeing the importance of advocating for, and demanding, social justice in their schools and communities. This is the adaptive work that must be done.

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