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# Ironies and Limitations of Educational Leadership for Social Justice: A Call to Social Justice Educators

*In this article that reviews this special issue, we identify 5 ironies and limitations of educational leadership for social justice: (a) the meaning of inclusive practice, (b) the intersection of identity and difference, (c) the emphasis given to student achievement, (d) the lack of policy and practice coherence, and (e) the separation of superheroes from critical collaborative leadership. Although*

*we discuss each issue separately, these conceptions are interrelated and intersecting. We conclude with a call to educators for social justice to change their work in several fundamental ways.*

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**W**HAT DOES IT MEAN TO practice socially just educational leadership? The editors of this special issue take the position that socially just educational leadership must be inclusive. Operating from that value, we identify 5 ironies and limitations of educational leadership for social justice and draw on examples from this special issue to illustrate our points: (a) the meaning of inclusive practice, (b) the intersection of identity and difference, (c) the emphasis given to student achievement, (d) the lack of policy and practice coherence, and (e) the separation of super-

heroes from critical collaborative leadership. Although we discuss each issue separately, these conceptions are interrelated and intersecting. We conclude with a call to educators for social justice to change their work in several fundamental ways.

### **Inclusion/Integration**

In this article, we use the terms *inclusion* and *integration* interchangeably, building on the definitions in this special issue. Theoharis and Causton (this issue) define inclusion as “students with disabilities being educated in the general education classroom and having full access to the general education curriculum, instruction, and peers with needed supports” (p. 83). Horsford defines integration based on Olgetree’s (2004) concept of moving beyond “mixing bodies” to “creating a new community founded on a new form of respect and tolerance” (p. 301) and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s definition of integration as “genuine, intergroup, interpersonal doing” and “the ultimate goal of our national community” (1962/1968, p. 118).

Ironically, the concept of inclusion is not central in the educational leadership for social justice discourse; rather, it remains marginalized, ill defined, and undebated. Furthermore, it is typically applied only to students labeled with disabilities. Scholars have yet to explore the similarities and differences in the inclusion/integration of students of color, students who are linguistically diverse; students labeled with a disability; students from low-income families, including those who experience homelessness; and students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

Despite research showing the benefits of integration, the push to segregate students continues. Examples extend from court directives requiring districts to dismantle integration plans based on race (Enyia, 2010) to parental pressure to create separate tracks for students labeled *gifted* (Worthy, 2010). Schools catering to a particular population, such as alternative schools for academically underachieving learners, continue to proliferate (Foley & Pang, 2006). Response-

to-intervention approaches—mandated by federal policy as a means of preventing the overidentification of students for special education—often remove students from general education classes, thus increasing segregation, typically along race and class lines (Orosco & Klinger, 2010).

Importantly, stories of success in closing achievement gaps between different student populations are often told with little or no explicit consideration given to inclusion or integration (Chenoweth, 2007, 2009; Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Education Trust, 2013). Only a few scholars draw a direct connection between the inclusion/integration of all students (beyond disability and race) and academic achievement (Capper & Frattura, 2008; Frattura & Capper, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2009).

One irony of the scholarship of inclusive practices is relying on metaphors that may be exclusionary to describe these practices. For example, Ashby, Burns, and Royle draw on a heteronormative metaphor (i.e., marriage) to ground their inclusion work. They frame the inclusion of students labeled with disabilities as a marriage between general and special education and similarly characterize the collaborative work between general and special educators. Their articulation of marriage relies upon examples of heterosexual marriage relationships. In so doing, these authors, regardless of intent, perpetuate heteronormativity, heterosexism, and the marginalization of LGBT individuals. In short, the inclusion/integration literature and practice can ironically exclude students yet remains uncontested in educational leadership for social justice.

### **The Intersection of Identities and Differences**

A meta-analysis of the educational leadership for social justice literature would reveal some disappointing patterns. One would find much literature that focuses on specific student groups, such as race and social class (O’Malley & Capper, 2012); limited literature that discusses the implications of social justice leadership for LGBT identity or students from low-income

homes, including homeless students and individuals with disabilities (Capper & Green, 2013; Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; O'Malley, 2013); and a paucity of literature that examines the intersection of more than one student identity group (e.g., gender and homelessness, LGBT and race).

The articles in this issue reveal such patterns. For example, Theoharis and Causton focus on ways to include students with disabilities. López and Iribarren describe a tripartite conceptual framework for addressing the needs of linguistically diverse students. Yet, students have multiple and intersecting identities and effective practices for one area of difference can often be applied to other student differences. For example, López and Iribarren could discuss how their framework for linguistically diverse students could apply to students labeled with disabilities who struggle with language or for students of color and other cultural differences. Along similar lines, Horsford's argument that educators become racially literate, might explain how her four stages (i.e., racial literacy, realism, reconstruction, and reconciliation) might unfold for other areas of difference and identity, such as ability, religion, sexuality, and gender.

We do not argue that educators should never think about the needs of particular student differences or the implications of specific student identities for social justice leadership practice; however, we do assert that more work to extend thinking across student differences and their intersecting identities is needed. Consider the following questions: What if educators are racially literate (Horsford), but illiterate with sexuality, social class, gender, disability, religion (Marshall, this issue), and their intersections? If an educational leader is literate in one area, is that enough? According to Hernandez and Fraynd's article in this special issue, it is not. These authors point out that youth of color perceived to be LGBT are more likely to commit suicide than White youth perceived to be LGBT; thus, knowing only about race or LGBT identity would not be enough to understand the pervasive homophobia in communities of color (Ward, 2005), or White racism in the LGBT community (Han, 2007). In sum,

leaders for social justice must consider how and to what extent promising practices in one area of diversity/difference might address the full range of student differences and their intersections.

### **Achievement**

The field of educational leadership for social justice is significantly divided around the issue of achievement. McKenzie and colleagues (2008) argued that achievement matters and should be a core goal in socially just schools. Furman and Gruenwald (2004) however, believed that academic achievement is overemphasized to the detriment of other benefits of schooling, and Shields (2013) decentered the role of achievement in the work of transformational leaders. Other social justice scholars have argued that the perseveration on high-stakes achievement testing and resulting prescriptions for teacher practice not only undermine teacher professionalism, but they also impede social justice work (Anderson, 2009; Kumashiro, 2012). On rare occasion (e.g., the Miller, Pavlakis, Lac, and Hoffman piece in this special issue), scholars take a both/and approach.

Theoharis and Causton are clear that when students with disabilities are included, they learn and achieve at higher levels. Several articles in this issue, however, do not address achievement in their description of inclusive, social justice practices. Ashby, Burns, and Royle, for example, describe how one school district implemented a federal Reading First program. Through this work, the school decreased the number of students labeled with disabilities; however, the authors did not report the results of the school's efforts to improve reading achievement. Similarly, although research has found that LGBT students who feel safer in school have higher grade point averages and higher educational aspirations compared to LGBT students who experience more victimization (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012), Hernandez and Fraynd do not address this in their article.

Similarly, in their review of one state's initiatives to address achievement gaps and the

overrepresentation of students of color in special education, López and Iribarren do not reveal that, for some of the programs, student achievement is not a measurable goal. Specifically, Culturally Responsive Education for All: Training and Enhancement (CREATE) is a 3- to 5-year statewide initiative designed to “close achievement gaps between students from diverse backgrounds and to eliminate race and ethnicity as predictors of special education referrals” (Hoogstra, Tanyu, Tucker, & Loignon, 2011, p. 1). However, student achievement neither is a measurable goal nor is it identified as an outcome in the 125-page external evaluation of the initiative.

Illustrating the possibilities of embracing high expectations while recognizing that students must be supported to reach such expectations, Miller and his colleagues describe a social justice leader with “unwavering faith in students’ abilities” to academically excel, coupled with both a recognition that differences in students’ home and neighborhood environments have tangible implications, as well as “a constant commitment to ‘meeting them [students] where they were’” (p. 136). In sum, in the current educational policy context that emphasizes student learning and achievement, scholars and educators for social justice send mixed messages on the role that student learning and achievement should play in this work.

### **Equity Policy and Practice Incoherence**

A fourth irony and limitation of educational leadership for social justice practice is the lack of policy and practice coherence to address inequities. This lack of coherence can be quite challenging for educators attempting to meet the needs of their school communities. Two aspects that contribute to this lack of coherence are the sheer number of uncoordinated, and sometimes contradictory, federal and state policies and initiatives, and a lack of policy fluency experienced by most educators, as suggested by Miller et al. Also contributing to this incoherence is the lack of attention to inclusion/integration in these policies and initiatives.

Although all the articles in this special issue describe, in detail, promising and proven practices for high-achieving, socially just, inclusive schools, they also illustrate the challenges facing educators dealing with the plethora of equity initiatives and policies thrown at them from the local, state, and federal levels and from social justice scholars. More specifically, the special issue does not address how educators should coalesce and implement all the suggested practices, including the eight steps to inclusive schools that Theoharis and Causton describe, along with the four initiatives addressed in the López and Iribarren article for students who are linguistically diverse, in addition to the four strategies for welcoming and including LGBT students as suggested by Hernandez and Fraynd, suggestions for addressing religious diversity in schools (Marshall), how to engage the community (Miller et al.), how to act as boundary spanners (Scanlan and Tichy), and move through the four steps toward racial reconciliation as suggested by Horsford while engaged in all this work. Not only are educators called on to make sense of, and then to implement, these multiple practices, which would be quite difficult to do, these practices are at times in conflict with each other as related to inclusive practices, to what extent and how they address different identities, and the role that achievement plays within them. These multiple equity policies and initiatives require educators to become policy fluent, according to Miller and colleagues, and to retrofit and shape initiatives, policies, and practices to their inclusive setting and student needs.

Additionally, most federal, state, and local equity initiatives, as exemplified in the López and Iribarren article, do not pivot on inclusive/integrative practices. Thus, educators for social justice are faced with a similar challenge as the educators in the Ashby, Burns, and Royle article on inclusive literacy. These authors describe how one predominantly White school district leveraged a federal reading policy that typically perpetuates student segregation, to further inclusive practice for students with disabilities, improve reading achievement, and lower special education identification. To accomplish this, the school—

which had been engaged in inclusion for 25 years prior to this reading initiative—kept inclusive practices as the nonnegotiable centerpiece of implementation. In this way, the Sandy Creek educators resembled leaders in the Scanlan and Tichy article, for whom the Catholic mission of inclusion became the moral imperative that anchored all their work.

Purposely anchoring all equity and policy and practice in inclusion/integration at the district and school levels as exemplified in the Ashby, Burns, and Royle and Scanlan and Tichy articles cannot be overemphasized. Research suggests that even when principals, teachers, and district leaders are fully committed to and have extensive experience with inclusive/integrated practices, when district and school policies and practices are not centered on inclusion/integration, these educators lose direction and compromise their way back to segregating students (McKinney, 2010).

An anchoring philosophy of inclusion/integration across student differences, measured in part by student achievement embedded and frequently reaffirmed in a school or district culture, can help educators decide which policies and innovations should be adopted and how to coalesce policies and practices to have the most significant impact on inequities. Regardless of the policy fluency or efforts of social justice leaders, the plethora of equity policies and practices where inclusion/integration, student learning and achievement, and the range of student identities are not central, work against educational leadership for social justice.

### **Superhero/Collaborative Leadership**

Sandy Creek illustrates a *best case* scenario where educators were able to retrofit policy and practice successfully to their inclusive setting. Practicing social justice leadership, however, should be the norm, not the exception. Many scholars have criticized research on schools that have decreased or eliminated achievement differences between students for promulgating superhero leadership (McBeth, 2008). Instead, this research suggests that leadership for social justice

is, or should be, shared or distributed across the school setting (Brooks, 2012). Indeed, the overused image of educational leaders who, on their own, can make everything right for all student populations regardless of the challenges put in their path, merely by sheer will and moral fortitude, does little to advance social justice practice. At the same time, research affirms that moving socially just practice from the margin to the center requires a school or district leader who capitalizes on and develops educator leadership and capacity toward this end, igniting and sustaining the vision (Theoharis, 2009). To move social justice forward requires a combination of superhero/collaborative leadership, as exemplified in the Theoharis and Causton article. They identify eight steps for school leaders to cocreate and sustain inclusive, socially just schools. They preface these steps, however, by insisting that the steps be carried out in a democratic and transparent manner with a representative leadership team, and that the team communicate with the entire staff throughout the process.

In future scholarship, we hope to learn more about how leaders work with their leadership teams, teachers, and communities to collaboratively build inclusive and integrated communities and hold one another responsible for effective practice, positive student experiences, and strong student and community outcomes. In sum, leaders for social justice must act in ways that combine superhero/collaborative leadership.

### **A Call to Social Justice Educators**

Given the ironies and limitations identified here, we call those who care about social justice to make four fundamental changes in their work. First, an agreed upon understanding of what inclusion/integration means should be the central, visible, unambiguous anchoring feature of all scholarship, policies, and practices aimed toward eliminating educational inequities. It is clear, across student differences (e.g., race, gender, social class, ability, sexual identity, language, religions, and their intersections), all students benefit socially and academically in heteroge-

neous, integrated settings. It is essential that those in positions to frame, fund, and implement new learning environments understand the power of inclusion/integration. As such, social justice educators and scholars must provide unambiguous evidence and develop persuasive arguments for how tracking and separate programs often demanded by White middle/upper class families harms their children and how, as an act of interest convergence (Alemán & Alemán, 2010), heterogeneous settings will, in fact, extend their children's opportunities.

Second, educators for social justice should make increased student learning and achievement the primary goal of their work. One can debate how learning is best measured, one can agree that learning gains represent just one facet of a student's wellbeing and that educational practice needs to be linked to community transformation; but in the end, if a child cannot read, write, communicate, and compute at grade level or beyond, that child's educational and life odds are severely diminished.

Third, educators for social justice must attune themselves to, and become experts on, the range of student differences and their intersections. Public school educators for social justice are expected to reach and teach students of all differences—they do not have the option of choosing which student differences they will succeed with and which students of difference they will ignore in doing so. If, as one example, inclusion advocates for students with disabilities expect all schools to be inclusive, then these same advocates should school themselves in White racism, heterosexism, and inclusive practices for linguistically diverse students. As advocates for social justice, educators must stop creating and implementing policies, practices, and scholarship as if differences other than the one we are promulgating or addressing do not exist.

Fourth, suggestions for creating more socially just schools must be understood as the responsibilities of a principal for social justice along with leadership teams and community members rather than the domain of single individuals. The field needs more examples of how leaders work with their colleagues and communities to

collaboratively build inclusive communities and hold one another responsible for strong student and community outcomes.

In sum, if educators truly embrace these commitments, they will make significant strides toward creating more inclusive/integrated and equitable communities, communities founded on respect and focused on providing full access and equitable outcomes. In so doing, educators for social justice can truly make an immediate and lasting difference.

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