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Despite Best Intentions: A Critical Analysis of Social Justice Leadership and Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between social justice leadership and organizational decision making in order to make recommendations for how principals can make more socially just decisions in difficult school contexts. This article begins with a discussion of social justice leadership, facets and theories associated with social justice, and how facets can be contradictory and problematic in practice. Then, rational choice theory is presented to detail key assumptions and criticisms that are associated with decision-making in complex organizations. Next, rational choice theory is utilized as a straw man for analyzing principal decision-making in complex organizations in order to highlight how competing facets of social justice or inherent leadership dilemmas can arise and complicate decision-making. This article concludes with practice oriented recommendations for principals and other leaders seeking to create more socially just schools.

Keywords: social justice leadership, decision-making, principals, urban education

A cross section of historically marginalized student groups continues to be discriminated against in public schools. African American students, Hispanic students, students in poverty, and students with disabilities remain more likely to be suspended, expelled, drop out, fail to meet state proficiency levels, and/or less likely to be included in general education classrooms, attend schools with sufficient resources, and interact with well-prepared teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The field of educational leadership has more recently posited that principals with social justice orientations can help alleviate these inequities. Empirical research describes principals achieving degrees of success: closing the racial academic achievement gap (Giles, Johnson, Brooks, & Jacobson, 2005; Jean-Marie, 2008; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2008); establishing more culturally responsive pedagogies and practices (Cooper, 2009; Kose, 2007; Santamaria, 2014); including students with disabilities, English language learners, and racial minorities (DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhiney, 2014; Jansen, 2006; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011); engaging in community outreach, community improvement, activism and advocacy (Brooks, Jean-Maria, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007;

Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Lopez, Gonzalez, & Fierro, 2010); and practicing democratic and shared decision-making with marginalized families (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Wasonga, 2009).

Although a social justice orientation is vital to creating more socially just schools, principals must also be knowledgeable about decision-making processes and pitfalls so that they can select the best possible alternative and also recognize the implications of their actions. The process of decision-making in organizations is highly relevant to the practice of social justice leadership, because principals confront choices that must be made “between competing sets of principles in a given, usually undesirable or perplexing, situation” (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006, p. 137). Consequently, principals can fail to identify the best possible decision because they 1) lack the cognitive capacity to consider all possible alternatives, 2) are subjected to influences and pressures, and 3) struggle with organizational uncertainty and legitimacy. Thus, a principal’s social justice orientation or worldview is necessary and important to the creation of more socially just schools, but not sufficient given the complexity of schools and decisions.

The purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between social justice leadership and organizational decision-making and provide recommendations for social justice oriented decision-making. This article begins with a discussion of social justice leadership, facets and theories associated with social justice, and how facets can be contradictory and problematic in practice. Then, rational choice theory is presented to detail key assumptions and criticisms that are associated with decision-making in complex organizations (Beach & Connolly, 2004; Cabantous & Gond, 2011; Pettigrew, 2014; Simon, 1997). Next, rational choice theory is utilized as a straw man for analyzing principal decision-making in complex organizations in order to highlight how competing facets of social justice or inherent leadership dilemmas can arise and complicate decision-making. This article concludes with practice-oriented recommendations for principals and other leaders seeking to create more socially just schools.

SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP DECISION MAKING

Many principals think they lead for all students, but can this truly be the case given the persevering racial, ethnic, linguistic, disability achievement, discipline, and graduation gaps? What does it mean to lead for social justice? Theoharis (2007) defined social justice leadership as the means by which “principals make issue of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision” (p. 223). Dantley and Tillman (2006) asserted that a social justice leader “interrogates the policies and procedures that shape schools and at the same time perpetuate social inequalities and marginalization due to race, class, gender, and other markers of otherness” (p. 19). DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) expanded on these definitions by focusing on the day-to-day realities of creating more socially just schools in inequitable societies:

...the gritty experiences of social justice work, particularly under the most difficult circumstances, do not always result in positive outcomes, at least not in the short term. The fact that persistent historical and structural marginalization not only exists but is pervasive in

education underscores the fact that eliminating inequities is an ongoing struggle rather than a singular battle fought and won over the course of a school year. (p. 846)

These characterizations describe social justice leadership as an approach to leadership that identifies, focuses, and acts to address marginalization in schools and communities, but also an ongoing struggle complicated by personal, cultural, societal, and organizational dimensions associated with the leader, school, community, and society as a whole.

Facets of Social Justice Theories

Theories of social justice tend to be centered on three facets of justice: distributive, cultural, and associational (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2005; Gerwitz & Cribb, 2002; North, 2006, 2008). The distributive facet of social justice is concerned with economically defined classes struggling to end exploitation for the purposes of winning redistribution. Distributive justice is focused on the way organizations or institutions “distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the distribution of advantages from social cooperation” (Rawls, 2009, p. 7). Schools and programs that serve marginalized student groups (e.g., African American students, students in poverty, students with disabilities, English language learners) should not be confined to poor, undesirable, and substandard schools that are under-resourced, understaffed, or that offer separate and inadequate education programs. The cultural facet of social justice is related to cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect (Fraser, 1997). Cultural justice is about the recognition and establishment of mainstream conceptualizations of marginalized groups as communities of value. This facet of justice aims at addressing deficit thinking, stereotyping, disrespect, and blaming the student or community for perceived educational shortcomings (Paris, 2012). The lack of a genuine, multicultural, and culturally relevant curriculum is one central concern. Most curricula in the US fail to represent the range of ethnic and cultural diversity in society, while glossing over social problems, realities of racial and ethnic identities, and challenges of poverty and urban/rural life (Gay, 2015; Paris, 2012). African American students and others living in poverty are often exposed to poor instruction, “drill and kill” teaching methodology, a barrage of standardized tests, and a “pedagogy of poverty,” where classrooms are structured around control and tightly scripted instruction that fails to see worth in students, families, and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Haberman, 1991).

The third facet of social justice is associational justice. Associational justice is attentive to self-determination and eliminating the “patterns of association amongst individuals and amongst groups which prevent some people from participating fully in decisions which affect the conditions within which they live and act (Power & Gewirtz, 2001, p. 41). It is about ensuring all previously subordinated groups are able to fully participate in decisions that impact their lives (Taysum & Gunter, 2008). Thus, a goal of associational justice is to cultivate critically-minded and politicized students (adult, youth, marginalized communities), who assess power dynamics, recognize opportunities to influence, become involved in political matters, and generate new identities and possibilities through participation, learning, and political struggle (Anyon, 2009).

Redistributive, cultural, and associational justice appear straightforward; that is, a focus on any one of these facets might appear difficult, but realizable with sustained effort. Yet, social justice simultaneously

concerns each of these facets through an intersectionality of marginalized groups with different interests, values, and preferences. The achievement of one facet of social justice can sabotage another facet, or at least limit the achievement of another. For example, principals interested in associational justice through engaging marginalized parents in school governance can find parents against the inclusion of students with disabilities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). The consequence can put associative justice in conflict with redistributive justice. Principals may also be in a position to choose decision alternatives that are beyond their control. Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) contended that scholars have not “adequately engaged with the tensions that may arise between different facets of or claims to social justice” (p. 499). North (2006) called for scholars to consider “complex, frequently contradictory, and relational aspects of social justice theories” (p. 528). Social justice leadership under these conditions cannot always be optimal.

Difficulties of the Principalship

Empirical research has consistently documented the interrelated demands and challenges principals face when leading schools, such as organizational complexity, demand environment, and dynamic issues of marginalization. The organizational complexity of schools constricts a principal’s ability to make optimal decisions. Schools are subjected to a torrent of unwanted, uncoordinated policies and regulatory pressure from hierarchical bureaucracies (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Greenfield, 1995; Johnson & Fauske, 2000; Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1976). Theoharis (2007) found many principals leading for social justice were challenged and obstructed by “the momentum of the status quo, obstructive staff attitudes and beliefs, and insular and privileged parental expectations” (p. 240). DeMatthews and Mawhiney (2014) identified how under-resourced districts, budget shortfalls, policy misalignment, and disgruntled parents hindered equity-oriented school improvement and created decisions requiring trade-offs with harmful side effects.

The principal’s position as an intermediary and middle manager confounds his or her ability to select optimal choices. Spillane and colleagues (2002) describe a dilemma:

principals are also caught trying to meet the demands of a policy system that operates on political time and that wants quick results, and classroom teachers, aware of the fads that plague the education policy arena, who want to introduce more incremental changes. Negotiating these two worlds, as school leaders is not easy. (p. x)

The recognition of a broad collection of voices may cause disputes. Principals must attempt to make decisions in ways that represent all stakeholders, but stakeholders can embrace conflicting objectives and alternatives that make selecting one optimal choice very difficult, if not impossible (Parnell, Bresnick, Tani, & Johnson, 2013). The nature of the school—a loosely coupled organization—further complicates decision-making because it generates uncertainty, ambiguity, and competing tensions for principals (Weick, 1976; Bossert et al., 1982).

Principals operate in a demanding environment that impacts their capacity to make optimal decisions. Greenfield (1995) reviewed multiple studies on principal work and found that the principalship involved

extensive face-to-face communication, is action oriented, the presented problems are unpredictable, decisions frequently made without accurate or complete information, the work occurs in a setting of immediacy, the pace is rapid, there are frequent interruptions, work episodes themselves tend to be very brief in duration, responses often cannot be put off until later, resolution of problems involves multiple actors, and the work is characterized by pervasive pressure to maintain a peaceful and smoothly running school in the face of a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty. (p. 63)

Leadership demands, and a high-speed workplace creates, exhausting workdays that take a physical, emotional, and mental toll on principals (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). The principalship is busy and dispersed across simple one-time decisions and more significant medium- and long-term decisions. Since principals are physically pulled from meeting to meeting addressing a variety of issues, their cognitive and informational capacities are limited, making them prone to sloppy, shortsighted, or acceptable (but not optimal) decisions.

Decision-making is further complicated when schools have limited human and financial resources. Schools with higher proportions of marginalized students tend to have fewer resources, including well-prepared teachers and administrators (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Diverse schools serve a dynamic student body with intersecting race/ethnicities, disability, poverty, language, and sexual orientation. When principals are forced to make choices about school staffing, curricula, program development, and budgeting, significant tensions can arise. These choices can be forced by timelines and policy mandates, with significant implications for particular groups of students, that cut through the intersectionality of marginalized groups, potentially providing equity to some but not all.

DECISION MAKING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Defining Decisions, Decision-Making, and Rationality

Decision is commonly defined as a cognitive process of selection among alternative possibilities, making a choice from a set of alternatives, a conclusion or resolution, the action of deciding something, a formal judgment, or an irrevocable allocation of resources. Decision-making has also been defined as a choice selected from a number of alternatives, directed toward an organizational goal (Simon, 1945, 1997). The need for decisions arises when internal or external changes surface, or when an earlier decision is found to be wrong or not producing the intended results. To make sense of these changes, the decision maker puts events in the proper context to draw on previous experiences and decide what to do next (Weick, 2012).

How individuals make decisions has been a topic of study across different disciplines, including history, law, economics, political science, sociology, and behavioral psychology. Each discipline defines decisions and regards decision-making in different ways with different tools, and with different theoretical constructs and models. A broad consensus of scholars recognizes that well-intended people can make poor decisions and certain organizations or contexts complicate decision-making (Pettigrew, 2014). Interests and preferences direct a principal's decisions, but decisions often have an effect contrary to

such interests because decision makers access incorrect information, miscalculate, or do not perceive unintended consequences.

Scholarly thinking about decisions and decision-making, particularly in economics and organizational theory, embraces or acknowledges rational choice theory. Rational decision-making models are conceptualized as how decisions ought to be made based on clearly stated problems, goals, and alternatives (Beach & Connolly, 2004; Etzioni, 1968; Walter, Kellermanns, & Lechner, 2012). Rational choice theory commonly consists of three steps: 1) identification of all alternatives; 2) determination of all consequences resulting from each alternative; and 3) comparison of the accuracy and efficiency of each consequence/alternative (Simon, 1997). Individual decision-makers choose from a group of alternatives in accordance with previously established preferences although rationality does not imply self-interest or selfishness. Gintis (2014) notes, "There is nothing irrational about caring for others, believing in fairness, or sacrificing for a social ideal" (p. 2). Social justice can be a preference for decision-making.

Theorists and researchers emphasize a number of important areas that influence decision-making and add distinction to purist notions of rationality (Pettigrew, 2014). Rational choice theory provides a guide for intelligent action, as well as a straw man for analyzing principal decision-making. To meet this aim, three distinctions of rational choice theory are presented: 1) the impact of context on rationality; 2) limited cognitive capacity to select optimal alternatives; and 3) status quo tendencies.

Real World Context. Rational choice involves two types of guesses: guesses on future consequences of current actions and guesses on future preferences for those actions (March, 1978). either guess is easy, but both guesses are more complicated when ambiguity or uncertainty exist. Pure rationality requires total knowledge of all alternatives and their consequences, but in schools such conditions are rarely met. Bellman and Zadeh (1970) contended that "decision-making in the real world takes place in an environment in which the goals, the constraints and the consequences of possible actions are not known precisely" (p. 141). So how do principals make rational decisions when the conditions for rationality are not met in a school? The short answer is that they do not. Conflicts arise in organizations and cause "a breakdown in the standard mechanisms of decision-making so that [the] individual or group experiences difficulty in selecting an action alternative" (March & Simon, 2013, p. 112). Difficulties, conflicts, constraints, and the 'unknown' impact how decision alternatives are selected. Ambiguities influence the way decision-makers interpret their situations, alternatives, preferences, and predictions of the consequences to each alternative (Dietrich & List, 2010; Hodgson, 2012). Principals frequently make decisions under these conditions with implications on their future preferences and subsequent decisions. Research on sensemaking has elucidated how principal experiences, social interactions, and previous experiences interact to shape principal actions (Abrahamsen, Aas, & Hellekjær, 2015; Coburn, 2005; DeMatthews, 2015; Evans, 2007; Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Preferences are revised based on decision-makers' perceptions of what is good (Rawls, 2009), but what is good is not fixed.

Limited Cognitive Ability of Decision Makers. Principals have informational and computational limits, with implications for their ability to make rational decisions (Hindness, 2014; Salant, 2011; Simon,

1997; Weick, 1995). Simon (1997) argued that decision makers must reduce information processing demands by constructing “small worlds” or limited representations of the problem at hand. Only the most salient information is used in decision-making processes, called “satisficing,” or developing sensible decision procedures to select satisfactory, but not always optimal choices. Rationality is bounded by these small worlds and decision procedures. Simon’s theoretical contributions have been subsumed, extended, and elaborated in more recent decades. Limited rationality describes how individuals and groups simplify a decision because of the difficulties of considering all information and alternatives (March & Simon, 1993). Posterior rationality describes the process of discovery of purposes and intents stemming from action and social interaction (Weick, 1969). Theorists also consider how behavior, choice, and rationality are impacted by learning, interaction, and environmental feedback (Levinthal, 2011; March, 1994). The way principals interact with environments, the small worlds they create related to their preferences, and the decision procedures or rules they apply have implications for decisions that logically limit rationality (Findlay, 2014). As March (1997) noted, “Ideas that emphasize the limits on rationality and inconsistency of preferences and identities have become the received doctrine underlying most theories of organizational decision making” (p. 28).

Maintaining the Status Quo. The real world context of decision-making creates ambiguity and makes choice selection difficult and even risky because a principal cannot always predict the future. Schools consist of multiple stakeholders often maintaining conflicting preferences and demands. March and Simon (1993) proposed, “Where conflict is perceived, motivation to reduce conflict is generated” (p. 115) because “internal conflict is not a stable condition for an organization and that effort is consciously directed toward resolving both individual and intergroup conflict” (p. 129). One possible decision alternative that emerges for principals when there is conflict, uncertainty, or a lack of trust is to do nothing, or maintain the status quo (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Many scholars argue that decision-makers disproportionately select the status quo rather than a new and potentially risky course of action (Bazerman & Moore, 2012; Maner, Gaijot, & Butz, 2007; Tversky & Kahneman, 1991). Most decisions have a status quo alternative that decision-makers disproportionately select (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Maintaining the status quo can provide a “psychological anchor,” allowing decision-makers to stop looking for new alternatives and resolve the conflict or uncertainty at hand. The impact of such a passive approach to decision-making can be detrimental to social justice outcomes because of the historic and deep-rooted nature of educational inequities. Tschannen-Moran (2014) noted, “Schools are likely to flounder in their attempts to provide constructive educational environments and meet the challenging goals ... because the energy needed to solve the complex problem of educating a diverse group of students is diverted toward self-protection” (p. 24).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE DECISION-MAKING

Empirical research and principal preparation frameworks describe the personal orientations and attributes of social justice-oriented leaders and provide tools for building critical, social justice orientations (Brown, 2004; 2006; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Furman, 2012; Jean-Marie & Normore, 2009; McKenzie et al., 2008; Ryan, 2006; Shields, 2004; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia & Nolly, 2004). These frameworks have identified value systems, foundational

components, and theoretical models for instilling an awareness of oppressive elements in schools and a commitment to action. In addition, this work provides recommendations for teaching and learning strategies (e.g., life histories, prejudice reduction workshops, cross cultural interviews, diversity panels, and activist action plans, equity audits). However, how principals should make decisions is not discussed in detail. The following section offers five recommendations to improve principal decision-making. Each consideration is bound to assumptions that schools are complex, social justice work can be contradictory, and principals' rationality is limited.

Recommendation 1: Focus on Values

The idea of a desirable or undesirable choice must be driven by values aligned to the principal and community's beliefs. A fundamental question to decision making is: "What are our values?" and not: "What are our alternatives?" More desirable consequences and more appealing (less contradictory) problems can emerge when principals focus deeply on understanding a community's values. Value-driven decision-making starts by identifying what is best for the school and what meets its values and then taking steps to make that a reality through a set of decisions (Keeney, 2009). Principals must be catalysts for exploring, understanding, and articulating values and using them to direct decision-making, create better alternatives, and to evaluate more carefully the desirability of alternatives as well as the tradeoffs of selecting from alternatives.

Consider the following example of an elementary school principal along the US-Mexico border planning to implement a dual language program (English/Spanish). She knows teachers need professional development and new curricular resources. She recognizes a dual language program can positively impact all students, while valuing the importance of linguistic diversity and cultural inclusion. The standard approach would be to review different models implemented in similar schools and districts and select one. She identifies a team of teachers and parents to review potential dual language models. The group identifies three different dual language program options. Next, the principal considers the three alternatives, and that seems like enough. First, she eliminates alternatives that seem an unsuitable fit with the school's context or are too expensive. She then considers ranking programs and also speaking with colleagues in different schools. Ultimately, the principal and her group make a selection. As a result, the school gets a program entirely defined by outside groups who developed the program and which may be only marginally aligned to this school's values.

This situation is ideal for value-driven decision-making if the principal began the process by clarifying what she wanted based on values. She might have engaged in discussions with teachers and parents, reflected on the types of teacher training, co-teaching models, and types of curricular and pedagogical resources, and identified core features of a dual language program that that would be reflective of the school's values. In each of these areas she could have been more specific about what she wanted. She might have asked all stakeholders: "What skills are important for teachers to have?" "What types of stories, images, and histories should be a part of the curriculum?" "What percentage of time should instruction be in English and Spanish?" The principal and team might have been able to identify other programs to meet the school's desires and needs by using the school's values to guide the identification

of alternatives. Then, the decisions would not be selecting from a few options, but seeking out what would most fit the school's needs.

Recommendation 2: Ethical Principles

Ethical principles can direct decision-making processes by reframing decision problems and establishing new possibilities. Although understanding and clarifying ethical principles will not always resolve all dilemmas, principals can provide a more coherent rationale for decision-making in perplexing situations. Starratt (2004) defined ethics as "a study of underlying beliefs, assumptions, principles, and values that support a moral way of life" (p. 5). When principals are evaluating alternative choices, they can draw upon their own personal or organizational ethical principles to divide the possible alternatives into two groups: those alternatives that are consistent with their ethical principles and those that are not. A principal with an ethical principle to ensure curricula are culturally relevant to the students in the school might find it difficult to assess whether or not the principle is followed given the nature of curriculum and instruction in schools. However, an assumption exists that when the principal made the decision to select a professional development model, purchase textbooks or library books, or invite guest speakers for assemblies, the ethical principle is being followed.

When principals fail to consider ethical principles in their decision-making, discrepancies can emerge between an organization or individual's ethical principles and constructed decision problems, objectives, and decision procedures/processes. Principals may miss viable alternatives that are more socially just, poorly construct objectives with less focus on outcomes and consequences, and select illogical choices misaligned to objectives (Keeney, 2009). Principals must recognize "the serious limitations of failing to connect leadership theory and practice to broader critical and social issues" (Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 157). Ethics can support principals when contradictions within social justice leadership arise. Consider a new principal taking over a low-performing, high-poverty urban high school with discipline, academic achievement, and community involvement difficulties. Early in the school improvement process, the principal seeks to direct decisions toward impacting the greatest number of students. As the school improvement process continues and necessary policies and practices are put in place, future decisions may be guided by non-utilitarian principles that focus on marginalized subgroups (e.g., students with disabilities, English language learners, students in foster care system or juvenile justice systems). Of course, principals may choose to focus on subgroups from the start of the school improvement process. Forethought, discussion, and reflection can facilitate the development of guiding ethical principles.

Recommendation 3: Soft Skills and Decision Analysis

Social justice-oriented principals need soft skills to conduct decision analysis processes. The concept of decision analysis was initially defined as a collection of knowledge and professional practice for the commonsense explanations of decision problems (Howard, 1966). Raiffa (1968) defined decision analysis as an approach that "prescribes how an individual faced with a problem of choice under uncertainty should go about choosing a course of action that is consistent with personal basic judgments and preferences" (p. 10). Others describe decision analysis as a form of applied common sense (Keeney, 2009). Decision analysis can be viewed as a process of organizing a problem into a structure that can be

analyzed and includes courses of possible action, potential outcomes, likelihood of potential outcomes, and eventual consequences (Clemen & Reilly, 2014). The purpose of decision analysis is two-fold: (1) to provide understandable and credible insights for decision-makers; and (2) to identify the probability, value, and utility of potential choices in an uncertain organizational environment (Parnell, Bresnick, Tani, & Johnson, 2013). Or, put simply, to make the decision as clear as possible.

Parnell et al (2013) identified a group of nine soft skills, of which, six relevant to principals are provided: (1) thinking strategically; (2) leading teams; (3) managing decision analysis projects; (4) surveying stakeholders; (5) facilitating groups; and (6) effective communication. Thinking strategically requires principals to contemplate context, consider the problem at hand, and begin to identify strategies, rules, and criterion for decisions. If appropriate, consideration is given to building a team around the challenge and providing clear goals or directions. Leading teams does not mean delegation; it means guiding teams toward goal achievement. Leading also includes developing plans, scheduling activities, and managing the completion of potential tasks. Surveying is a tactic to collect knowledge dispersed within and across teacher, student, and community groups. Principals should facilitate groups to frame decision problems, share knowledge about their preferences, needs, or values, and discuss risk, tradeoffs, and innovative ideas. These processes can illuminate key values and guiding ethical principles. Ultimately, principals must communicate important results and insights so decisions can be made without controversy and attain stakeholder support.

Consider a principal seeking to engage parents and community members in creating an inclusive school for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are socially isolated and not receiving the same educational experiences as their non-disabled peers, but choices must be made about how fast to move, what types of professional development are necessary, and precautions to be considered. This is an opportunity to establish a team with the goal of studying challenges to creating high-quality inclusive classrooms. Stakeholders might engage in projects to reconsider school schedules, teacher caseloads, and logistics necessary to make inclusion possible. The principal can guide groups and projects and provide stakeholders with valuable leadership opportunities. As the principal learns more about inclusion and its potential challenges, he or she may seek to survey stakeholders and experts on specific issues in order to collect knowledge, expertise, and identify competing priorities. Surveying allows the principal to learn about concerned parents or teachers who distrust the idea of inclusion or worry classrooms will be unsafe or lose meaningful instructional time. Principals can calm tensions, learn more about different preferences and potential risks (e.g., teacher burnout, disgruntled community members, students that may be unprepared emotionally for large classrooms or whom may be bullied) and make more strategic decisions about how to move closer toward an inclusive school by facilitating groups and discussions. The principal will be more able to communicate a narrative with key insights that are understandable to various audiences.

Recommendation 4: Critical Reflection and Group Discernment

Principals must critically reflect on power, privilege, and inequities in society if they wish to lead for social justice (McKenzie et al., 2008). This includes looking inwards at themselves, their leadership practices, decisions, and actions. Principals are privileged actors, benefiting from middle class status and

a degree of control. They must be reflective of their values, attitudes, conventional wisdom, and preferences. Although critical reflection has been defined in many ways, its emphasis on questioning past practices in relation to power dynamics is central to reaching social justice-oriented decisions and adapting or modifying decisions that may have had negative consequences for marginalized groups despite the best intentions. Brown (2004) notes that the purpose of critical reflection is to “externalize and investigate power relationships and to uncover hegemonic assumptions” (p. 84). Brookfield (1995) described critical reflection through three interrelated processes: 1) questioning and replacing uncritical and common perceptions; 2) generating alternative perspectives for previously taken-for-granted ideas, logic, and beliefs; and 3) recognizing and acknowledging the impact of dominant cultural values. Principals must be aware of the oppressive, unexamined, and taken-for-granted notions that impact the development of decision problems, procedures for making decisions, and decision alternatives. To act rationally (or as rationally as humanly possible under real world context), principals must engage in a discourse with themselves and within decision-making groups guided by critical questions:

- Do I have the most accurate and complete information available?
- How should I weigh information, evidence, and ideas objectively and based on my own ethical principles and values?
- Have I been open to alternative perspectives and have I heard from all voices?
- Has there been an opportunity to challenge, question, or refute information, decision-making standards, and decision alternatives?

These questions are derived from Mezirow’s (1996) seven ideal conditions for rational discourse and are inward and outward looking. These adapted questions enable principals to consider and reflect upon information they have received and the personal biases that each individual brings to decision-making. As Kramer and Enemoto (2014) noted

Leaders must be willing to examine and critique their own views with as much scrutiny as they give to others. Critical to such an examination is the leader’s attitude, being open and willing to model sharing and self-scrutiny while asking the same of all participants. This attitude promotes the necessary investigation and analysis of the problem. It takes a situation beyond protecting one’s perceptions to describing most accurately the reality from many points of view. (p. 100)

This type of discourse enables the selection of better decisions rather than selecting from lesser choices that require tradeoffs.

Critical reflection and the production of a rational discourse about problems establish a culture of critical group discernment. Group discernment is used here to describe a process in which groups engage in critical reflection together to gain clarity and understanding of particular issues at hand, but also as an organizational culture and skillset that fosters an environment of group dialogue, rational discourse, and questioning and debating. Recommendation 5 will highlight the idea that decision-making on a particular issue can be incremental and ongoing. The value of critical group discernment

under these conditions is enhanced because principals do not have to continually prepare stakeholders to be reflective. Stakeholders will build experience with critical reflection and establish a safe culture for discussion and practice critical and reflective thinking.

Consider a curriculum committee asked to adapt more culturally relevant books and materials for a school that serves primarily African American students. Stakeholders engage in a rational discourse to analyze and question their current curricula and resources while reviewing potential resource alternatives. Through their outlined decision process, they select certain materials, but find that some of their initial selections are not appealing. Because the group has already considered alternative voices, they are more prepared to receive feedback from students and parents, question their own taken-for-granted notions about the types of resources that are best for students, and can more aptly go back to the drawing board to modify curricular choices and decisions.

Recommendation 5: Incremental and Continuous Decisions

Rational models of decision-making place a high degree of control with the decision maker, as if the decision maker controls the decision making situation and context. As Lindblom (1959) noted, a rational model “assumes intellectual capacities and sources of information that men [or women] simply do not possess” (p. 80) and requires time and resources most principals do not have. Lindblom’s critique of rational theory applies to principals. Many principals do not have the time, resources, or capacity to obtain all the information they need to make a rational choice, and the competing social objectives of different stakeholders across different social justice issues limit potential alternative choices that could be selected. Lindblom’s critique prompts the question: To what extent can principals “decide what their course will be, and to what extent are they compelled to follow a course set by forces beyond their control?” (Etzioni, 1967, p. 385). It is doubtful that principals are in complete command of many important situations.

An alternative model of decision making assumes that principals have less control over their environment and thus, must “muddle through” decision making in an incremental manner (Howlett & Migone, 2011; Lindblom, 1959, 1979; Martens, Matthyssens, & Vandenbempt, 2012). The challenges and contradictions that arise when leading for social justice complicate decisions and often leave room for revision and adjustment because not all changes can be made in the immediate present. Kramer and Enemoto (2014) noted that

no dilemma or program remains static over time. New information arises, old information becomes less credible, different perspectives become available, and people’s views evolve... Faced with complex dilemmas, we might work toward a partial resolution but keep returning again and again as other factors play out. (p. 4-5)

The context of schools and the nature of social justice leadership create a need for continuous and ongoing decisions to address small and large issues, despite some criticism by organizational theorists (Cates, 1979; Etzioni, 1986; Rehn & Lindahl, 2012). Martens, Matthyssens, and Vandenbempt (2012) stated, “Incrementalism in strategy is viewed as a natural phenomenon to be managed, rather than a

deliberate choice course of action that is skillfully executed” (p. 720). This assumption emphasizes the need for principals to recognize the value of managing incremental approaches to change.

Consider the decisions necessary for limiting suspensions in a school that has suspended high proportions of African American and Hispanic students as well as students with disabilities. The school may lack the resources to provide high-quality options for suspensions, staff may lack the knowledge and ability to deescalate issues and identify antecedents or triggers to student misconduct, and parents may not believe administrators are accurately portraying student misconduct or providing fair and consistent disciplinary consequences. Students trickle into the principal’s office with discipline referrals for a variety of serious and non-serious behavioral offenses. The principal is well aware that many teachers are ill prepared to provide high quality lessons to the diverse student body. To begin addressing these issues the principal starts a discipline committee of teachers, students, and parents to develop priorities. Priorities identified are positive behavioral supports programming, teacher training in the area of cultural sensitivity, and child study teams to discuss the needs of struggling students. In the short-term, the principal will have to consider her options when determining if and when to suspend a student because alternatives are not in place, teachers are struggling to manage discipline, and serious and potentially dangerous instances of student misconduct are occurring. However, the principal can reconsider her approach to suspension as teacher capacity and interventions improve. The discipline committee can revisit dilemmas, consider new information, and deliberate on the impact of evolving teacher, student, and parent perspectives in relation to discipline.

CONCLUSIONS

Social justice leadership is a daily practice and struggle for principals. Despite principals’ preferences and best intentions, decisions and actions can go awry. The intention of this paper is to be provocative and stimulate greater discussion about what it means to lead and make decisions for social justice. As scholars continue to advocate for social justice, recommendations to improve practice cannot ignore the realities faced by schools: social justice leadership is complicated and may inadvertently create or maintain educational inequities for marginalized student groups. Researchers must continue to consider the lived experiences of principals to acknowledge contradictions to social justice leadership and to identify practical tools, decision-making procedures, and skillsets that can be used to better manage contradictions and challenges. This includes exploring social justice leadership within unique schools and communities, while at the same time identifying and analyzing principal action in the context of district, state, and federal policies and looking across the intersectionality of marginalized student groups. The relevance and applicability of social justice leadership will remain limited without a more robust understanding of context and contradictions.

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