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Woven in Deeply

Identity and Leadership of Urban Social Justice Principals

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This article comes from an investigation into the identities and leadership traits of seven urban school principals committed to social justice across elementary, middle, and high school levels. These administrators believed that enacting social justice for marginalized students was instrumental in their desire to become school leaders and central to their practice. A qualitative approach combined with principles of autoethnography has guided the research methods. Findings include varied personal experiences that sound their call to leadership and three common leadership traits. These traits are arrogant humility, passionate leadership, and a tenacious commitment to social justice. The article concludes with a metaphor explaining these leaders and their connection with their social justice work.

Keywords: *principal; equity; social justice; leadership*

I do this because there are not enough other principals who deeply care about the kids from the margins and who can make equity and justice happen.

Principal Meg

If I don't do this, who will?

Principal Scott

I can't separate what is leadership and what is justice and equity work. It all has to be about social justice. There can be no separation.

Principal Dale

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The sentiments expressed above come from urban principals who came to their positions with a desire to enact social justice. These leaders provide real examples of what the field of education administration describes as leaders for social justice. Within the field of educational administration, issues of social justice leadership have captured the interest of increasing numbers of scholars (e.g. organization of a newly formed AERA SIG: leaders for social justice), and this interest has led to a developing body of scholarship (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Capper & Young, in press; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Grogan, 2002a, 2002b, Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Marshall, 2004, Marshall & Olivia, 2006, Marshall & Ward, 2004; Scheurich, 1998; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, Shoho, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Tillman, Brown, Campbell-Jones & Gonzalez, 2006). This literature has shown that there are no constructive models or real-life examples of principals doing this work (Marshall & Ward, 2004; Theoharis, 2004).

Marshall and Ward (2004) and Theoharis (2004) asserted that to make equity and justice a meaningful part of current and future administrators' agendas, real-life descriptions and models of socially just leadership are critical. These real-life models help create a sense that social justice in schools is not just educational theory or rhetoric but actually practiced by leaders and indeed possible. To begin to understand the principals committed to social justice, it is necessary to investigate who social justice leaders are and why they do this work. Providing this description about seven principals who entered the urban principalship with a commitment to social justice is the central objective of this article. This article seeks to begin to fill this identified gap in the literature on leadership for social justice with an analysis of urban principals who are committed to leading for social justice. With this purpose in mind, I will provide the operational definition of leadership for social justice used in this endeavor, the research questions used to frame this analysis, the research methodology of the qualitative study on which this article is based, the findings from the analysis, and a discussion of this type of leadership.

Defining Leadership for Social Justice

Blackmore (2002), Bogotch (2002), Dantley and Tillman (2006), Furman and Gruenewald (2004), Gewirtz (1998), Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002), Marshall and Ward (2004), and Theoharis (2007) all provided definitions of leadership for social justice. Gewirtz described social justice as a response to disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote

marginalization and exclusionary processes. Goldfarb and Grinberg defined social justice “as the exercise of altering these arrangements (institutional and organizational power arrangements) by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions” (p. 162). Marshall and Ward maintained that “social justice means ensuring that laws for individual rights are observed so that access to educational services is available . . . social justice can mean finding ways to ‘fix’ those with inequitable access.” (p. 534). However, Bogotch asserted that social justice is a social construction and “there are no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices” (p. 153).

Building on scholars’ definitions and heeding Bogotch’s (2002) challenge, I use a definition of social justice that is grounded in the daily realities of school leadership. For this article, I use Theoharis’ (2007) definition of social justice leadership to mean that these principals advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. Addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools is a critical component of this definition. Thus, inclusive schooling practices for students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and other students traditionally separated in schools are also necessitated by this definition. Sapon-Shevin (2003) stated, “Inclusion is not about disability. . . . Inclusion is about social justice. . . . By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us” (pp. 26, 28). The definition I used for this study and article builds on Sapon-Shevin’s groundwork linking inclusive schooling and social justice.

Method

I employed qualitative methods using a positioned subject approach (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 2001) for this research endeavor. In designing this study, I borrowed from the tradition of autoethnography (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Ellis, 2004; Meneley & Young, 2005) and included myself, a principal driven to enact social justice, as one of the subjects. In doing this I combined the qualitative, positioned subject methodology with principles from autoethnography.¹ I grounded this study primarily in critical theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Carspecken, 1996; Roman & Apple, 1990) and

aligned my desire for social change with the tradition of activist research (Apple, 1994; Fine, 1994; Gitlin, 1994).

Using purposeful and snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Maxwell, 1998), seven principals from Midwestern urban schools, across elementary, middle, and high schools participated in this study. The method of data collection relied on a series of in-depth interviews, a review of documents or materials, a detailed field log, and a group meeting of the principal participants. The principals were selected for the study based on the following four criteria. The principals (a) led a public school, (b) possessed a belief that promoting social justice is a driving force behind what brought them to their leadership position, (c) met the previously stated definition of leadership for social justice by advocating, leading, and keeping at the center of their practice or vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation and/or other historically marginalizing conditions, and (d) had evidence to show their work has produced a more just school. I used the constant comparative method of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).²

Research Questions

This article comes from a secondary analysis of a larger study on principals, social justice, and resistance. For the purposes of this article, the following research questions guided the analysis: (a) Who are real-life examples of social justice principals? (b) What motivates them to do this work? (c) In what ways do these principals share common dispositions or leadership traits?

Findings

This section contains (a) a description and analysis of who these social justice principals are, including background information collected about what motivated each of the principals to lead for social justice during the study, and (b) an analysis of the principals' common dispositions, critical consciousness (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006), or leadership traits. For the purpose of this article I will use the phrase leadership traits to describe these common beliefs, dispositions, or aspects of their critical consciousness. The analysis of aspects these leadership traits primarily came to bear because of data from the larger investigation that did not fit into the study's initial conceptual framework. This secondary analysis of this

specific data provides an avenue into seeing who are social justice urban principals and what they bring to their positions.

Description of Principals

Following is the description of the principals who participated in this study and their paths to social justice leadership. In wrestling with issues of confidentiality and in seeking to protect these principals from harm for participating in this study (Gates, Church, & Crowe, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001), I decided that I could not provide a detailed narrative about each principal and her or his school. For example, if I provided details about a gay principal in a certain type of community, at a certain level of public school, involved in specific projects and initiatives, numerous people could identify that principal regardless of whether I used pseudonyms for the school and principal. In this article, I gave them each a pseudonym and at times referred to them directly by that pseudonym. In more sensitive situations I referred to each of them as *one principal*. I provided general descriptions of the group, and more specifically I have provided an individual description of each principal's path and contributing factors that he or she attributed to his or her calling to social justice leadership. In addition, although understanding the local context where these principals work is appealing to both readers and me, the principals in this study were adamant that their social justice work is not context specific. They felt that enacting social justice can and must happen in every school. More important, it was their experience that context was often used as a reason not to engage in this kind of struggle. In the interest of greater anonymity and respecting their conviction that their work is not about context, I did not link those descriptions to the specific schools, school levels, or specific settings.

Seven principals participated in this study. All seven are principals in urban public schools. All lead urban schools and work in midsized to large districts in the Midwest. Three principals work in elementary schools and four in secondary schools. The secondary principals are split evenly between middle and high school—two principals from each level. One principal is an Asian and the other six are White. Three principals are women and four are men. One principal is gay and out in the community and the other six identify themselves as heterosexuals. At the time of the initial data collection, all seven had been public school administrators for at least 3 years. Their ages range from the early 30s to the mid-50s—three are in their 30s, two are in their 40s, and the remaining two are in their 50s. All seven principals attended K-12 schools in the Midwest. Six attended public

schools kindergarten through twelfth grade and one attended a private Catholic grade school and then attended a public high school. Four graduated from suburban public high schools outside of major Midwestern cities. Two graduated from the public high school in their small town. One graduated from a large urban high school and is now principal at that same school. These principals are referred to by the following pseudonyms: Principal Eli, Principal Taylor, Principal Dale, Principal Natalie, Principal Meg, Principal Scott, and Principal Tracy. The descriptions that follow are in no particular order.³

Principal Eli. Principal Eli grew up in a family that owned local community-oriented grocery stores. This major influence in his life helped develop his personal commitment to community involvement in terms of both being active and responding to community needs. Eli described himself as a White Jewish male, although he stated he is not very religious. He grew up in a neighborhood in a large urban area that changed from being a predominantly White and significantly Jewish middle and working class neighborhood to almost entirely African American and largely poor. He still lives in the same neighborhood today. Both his family's grocery stores as well as the school he leads are in that neighborhood.

He started his professional career as a high school history teacher but then left teaching to operate the family grocery business. Eli ran this family grocery business for 15 years. After selling the business, he returned to work in public schools. He was an assistant principal for 2 years before he moved into a head principalship. Principal Eli attributed his orientation to do social justice work to running a small community-oriented and community-responsive business as well as to the political climate of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. Principal Eli is in his early 50s.

Principal Taylor. Principal Taylor was born in Vietnam and lived there until about the age of five. She fled with her family after the Vietnam War and lived on a boat off the coast of Malaysia for 2 to 3 months. Her family was sponsored by an uncle and moved to a large Midwestern city in the United States. By leaving Vietnam her family lost everything—status, money, land, and possessions. Taylor described this experience as quite a “hardship for her parents” but remembered that they were always “adamant about a better life and an education” for their children. She attended public school in the United States, starting in kindergarten.

She attributed her personal commitment to social justice to her parents, the Catholic Church, and her family's experience leaving Vietnam. Taylor

described that these forces taught “me to do the right thing . . . that we’re not here just for ourselves but for the good of everyone . . . [and] the whole idea of treating people with kindness and dignity.” She began her career as a school counselor. That experience lasted 3 years and cemented in her mind the need to do equity and justice work as a school administrator. As a Vietnamese American principal, Taylor discussed her own racial identity as contributing to her ongoing resolve to deal with racial issues in school. She shared that she does not remember being a victim of discrimination as a public school student. Taylor spoke of becoming acutely aware of how community members, teachers, and other administrators enact their understandings of race toward her, a Vietnamese American principal. She is in her early 30s and was in her third year as principal during this research.

Principal Dale. Dale has been a principal for 16 years. He relayed that his parents instilled in him the notion that “education was the route to a better life.” Dale described his family as a major influence in fostering a sense of fairness and equitable treatment. As a White male, growing up in a small town in the Midwest, he shared that he began developing his commitment to justice when he was an adolescent. Dale recalled what he described as an “awakening” in high school when he first realized how and why some students were treated as “misfits.”

Dale talked about his personal interest in history and how that allowed him to better understand discrimination, prejudice, and struggle. He discussed how labor history, Black history, and the relationship between the United States and Japan were examples that helped frame his commitment to equity and justice. That historical perspective combined with the values of “fairness for everybody” and “education as the great equalizer” is what Dale described as the foundation of social justice beliefs. He felt his commitment grew in conviction and action by growing up in the 1960s and 1970s and living social change and unrest. Dale is in his mid-50s. He taught for 10 years in a variety of positions in middle and high schools, became a talented and gifted coordinator for the school district for 6 years, and then became a principal.

Principal Natalie. Principal Natalie attributed part of her commitment to social justice coming from her childhood in a very close rural family. She described her White, middle-class family as “pretty affluent” for the area and that they were “always doing stuff for the community but not in a way that was pretentious, but in a way that they truly wanted to make things better.” Natalie described her family as “instrumental in getting Title IX truly followed (at the local high school) . . . always doing these extra church

things like going on missions . . . supporting other families like one where a parent was dying of cancer, (as kids) we always saw that you are a part of something bigger than yourself.” In addition to her rural family upbringing, she attributed hating high school and feeling ostracized to building her conviction that no child can fall through the cracks in schools. She is a lesbian who is “out” at her school. Natalie remembered wrestling with and questioning her sexual orientation and how that contributed to being ostracized in high school. She shared that she felt “no support” from her school or community and only received “negative and confusing” messages about lesbians. Natalie discussed how her personal struggles growing up combined with her interest in history contributed to her commitment to “leave things better than you came onto them.”

She worked as the director for community organizations, such as the YMCA and nonprofits that care for people with developmental disabilities, and then she held administrative positions at a technical school. Natalie shared that those experiences continued to shape her convictions to enact social justice. Following those positions, she taught public elementary school physical education for 4 years and high school for 2 years. She became an athletic director, an assistant principal, and had been a head principal for 5 years before this study. Principal Natalie is in her mid-40s.

Principal Meg. Principal Meg indicated that her commitment to social justice developed at the end of college and when she started teaching. She shared that she noticed discrimination and developed a sense of fairness growing up as a White female in suburban Midwest. She said that she did not feel the need or call to take action until the beginning of her professional career.

She attributed her study of philosophy as an undergraduate as a significant factor to the logic she sees in working for equity and justice. Meg described that her commitment to social justice has come from the positive influences of her brother and her cooperating teacher when she student taught as well as her own personal struggles growing up and being a White teacher in a Black school with predominantly African American staff. Meg taught at this elementary school in a large urban area for 4 years before becoming a principal in another urban district. She is in her mid-30s and was a principal for 8 years before this research started.

Principal Scott. Principal Scott attributed his social justice development largely to his family’s church growing up. Although he shared that he is not active in this church anymore, he described being a part of the Church of

the Brethren as “a peace church similar to Mennonites.” He felt that the church exposed him to issues about the Vietnam War, social activism of the 1960s and 1970s, conscientious objectors, volunteer service workers, refugees, and issues of race. Scott, a White male, described an agitating moment in his early days of teaching that continued to propel him to do equity work.

I started to see all the white kids in jazz band, no black kids in jazz band, you know jazz is essentially invented by black people and now the black kids are not included in this particular activity in school . . . so I started to work harder at it. (Theoharis, 2007, p. 230)

Principal Scott started his educational career as a music teacher, even though his undergraduate degree was in engineering. He received licensure to teach music and taught middle and high school band and choir before becoming an administrator. He stated his wife, family, and a community of “equity-oriented friends motivated him to further justice and equity in his daily work. He was an assistant principal for 3 years and was in the first year as a head principal during this study. Principals Scott is in his early 40s.

Principal Tracy. Principal Tracy is a White male in his mid-30s. He reported that his commitment to social justice came largely from being a part of an activist family. Starting when he was young, he participated in social justice grassroots activism alongside his parents and sisters. He stated that “being socially responsible and taking action to create a more just world” was a familial expectation.

He recognized that he was talented with children when he was in high school. As an undergraduate he made the connection between social justice and education. This combined what he saw as his talents with children with his drive to do social justice work. Tracy taught for 7 years in urban elementary schools—primarily in kindergarten and first grade and was never an assistant principal. He was a head principal for 3 years before this study began.

In looking across the experiences of these principals, four of the principals attributed at least part of their commitment to justice from their family instilling in them a sense of social responsibility to the community—local or global. Three principals described the political era of the 1960s and 1970s as contributing to their beliefs about social justice and equity. Three principals felt that a personal struggle helped shape their commitment to justice. Three discussed a personal awakening about discrimination and

inequity as shaping their own pursuit of justice. Three described their undergraduate studies as critical to their thinking about working for justice, and two principals shared that their church, in part, shaped this commitment.

Although there are similarities between and among what brought them to the social justice principalship, there is not one common path that led these leaders to seeking social justice through school administration. Through the study of these leaders, although what influenced them to enact justice in school differed, they all personified a number of common leadership qualities. These are discussed next.

Social Justice Principals' Common Leadership Traits

Through this analysis, it became apparent to me the need to delve into these principals' leadership traits as a way to understand more deeply who they are and how they work. In describing these common traits, I do not mean to imply that this is a monolithic group of principals. As described previously, they have come to this position by way of different routes, but they also differ greatly in leadership style and personality. Some of these principals are soft spoken and reserved, and others are gregarious and outgoing. Some of the principals in this study have a commanding presence when they enter a group and others are much more unassuming. A couple of them enjoy the spotlight and are often in front of the entire school, whereas others organize events to minimize the need for them to take center stage. A couple of these leaders are spontaneous in their daily schedules and others are methodical in their use of a detailed calendar or appointments. Their offices range from being visually tidy to containing piles of paper and materials strewn throughout. Some of these principals are most passionate about racial issues, others are most passionate about inclusive schooling, and still others do not identify a central guiding issue. Some of these principals arrive hours before schools start and others work late into the evening. In many ways these principals are as different as they are similar.

However, they all possess a series of common leadership traits that are central to their social justice work. These leaders embody a complicated mix of arrogance and humility, lead with intense visionary passion, and maintain a tenacious commitment to her or his vision of social justice while nurturing and empowering their staff. I begin with explaining the sense of arrogant humility. It was the least straightforward throughout my analysis and I feel a need to provide more illustrations to be clear to the readers than the following two.

Arrogant humility. Throughout the interviews, these principals showed a personal sense of arrogant humility in various ways. I operationally define this to mean a paradoxical blend of arrogance and humility. In many ways, this is similar to what Collins (2001, 2005) referred to as Level 5 leadership. The arrogance means that these principals have a headstrong belief that they are right; they know what is best, and they feel they are the ones needed to lead toward that vision.⁴ The humility comes from their continual self-doubt of their abilities and knowledge, their willingness to admit mistakes both publicly and privately, and their questioning whether they are doing any good in their positions. This humility echoes with Skrla's (2000) writing on mourning silence and the reflective nature of school leaders who challenge discrimination.

One principal captured this complex nature with statements like, "I am the keeper of the flame. . . . I am the one who has made this happen. I kept it going. I provided the vision and resources. . . . Me, I did it" in combination with "I'm doing all I can but is it really making a difference? I wonder if I have done any good. I wonder if someone else could do more."

To further understand this arrogant humility, another principal within the same few sentences displayed real confidence and self-importance to this work and at the same time was self-deprecating and unsure. She said, "I know I am right. I run this national organization. . . . I have made a difference, I continue to make a difference. Clearly I am good at what I do or all this [raises in student achievement and positive changes in curriculum and climate] wouldn't get done and I would not be able to run this school and the national organization" in combination with "I'm very ignorant in some situations. I realize how small my knowledge base is . . . I don't feel like I've done anything right."

The arrogant side of the seemingly contradictory combination can additionally be seen as Principal Meg shared thoughts on how to improve leadership preparation. "Me presenting at leadership classes at the university would make them better. . . . I've been invited to be on this [national commission]. . . . I received this national award. I am as good as it gets. Bring those leadership students on. I could teach future principals a lot and they'd be better for it."

Her humility is evident as she shared times when her actions and changes in the school had perhaps unjust or negative consequences for particular people. Principal Meg reflected on their schoolwide restructuring:

Two veteran teachers [Judy and Karen] left the school to work elsewhere when it became clear we were going forward with this [restructuring]. While ultimately the restructuring was more inclusive, the right thing to do, and

better for all of our students and in particular our students of color and students learning English, there must have been negative consequences on Judy and Karen. . . . Was this *just* for them? It's hard to say "yes."

She explained that she clearly believed in the direction she had taken the school but knew that that these two teachers' lives had been affected, and she was certainly reflecting on the injustice and power relationships in those negative consequences for the two teachers. Principal Meg provided an example of this complex combination of headstrong, confident leadership wound tightly with a reflective, humble perspective.

Principal Tracy provided another view at this combination of arrogant humility. In terms of his arrogance, he said,

Look at our student achievement gains, look at the changes that have happened. It is comprehensive . . . achievement gains, structure, climate, community services, family relations, stronger curriculum, and a positive and welcoming atmosphere, you name it, it happened. I did that. I am responsible for this happening. I am damn good. Tell me, who else does all that?

In understanding the combination of arrogance and humility, I felt it was essential to position this arrogance alongside his reflection on supervision of staff. Principal Tracy shared,

One year, I needed to take disciplinary action on a teacher of color. And, while this was the right thing to do for the kids—many of whom were students of color, to advocate for the students involved, their rights, and interests, I have come back to this time and time again. Am I being the oppressor to a teacher of color? We all know their voices have historically been devalued; their actions are misrepresented often times in negative ways. Just as with students of color, they are disciplined more often for the same thing white counterparts do. Am I enacting injustice? Am I being a tool of oppression? . . . I question myself everyday, not only about this but I wonder, am I the right person to do this? Am I the one this school needs? Some days I feel like I just can't do this job.

In seeing his arrogance next to the kind of reflective troubling of when his actions may have had negative affects, Principal Tracy provided an example of this complicated mix of arrogant humility. These leaders shared examples of situation where they recognized that there was a possibility of injustice being perpetrated by them. It is this ability to reflect and see these possibilities of injustice that contributes significantly to both humility and in turn to the complexity of their leadership.

In sum, one principal explained the arrogant humility that this group embodies.

I wear my heart on my sleeve. I am a real person with my staff, families, and students. I know what I think is best, and I know what I think needs to happen, but I'm willing to be silly and make fun of myself and also I'm very serious about the kind of school our kids deserve, but I'm always passionate, I laugh and even cry with these people . . . yes I am full of myself and yes I make plenty of mistakes, and yes I admit both freely.

This arrogance, self-confidence, and being comfortable with themselves in combination with sincere humility, insecurity, and self-doubt create a very complicated and dynamic leader. I feel that this is one aspect that truly makes these leaders unique. The mix of knowing they are right and freely admitting when they are wrong or do not know something conveys to people around them the sense that they are real people. Their willingness, ability, and constant reflection on their actions, mistakes, and decisions set these social justice leaders apart from traditional leaders.

I felt in meeting and getting to know these leaders that this is a group of very intelligent people. This intelligence adds to their arrogance because they know that they are smart. Their intelligence also adds to their ability to get things done because they understand the technical aspects of the job, culture, people, special education, and curriculum; they have language and skills to talk about race; they understand ELL and scheduling; and they possess the ability and drive to learn and learn quickly. In addition, this intelligence cannot be separated from either the successes they achieve toward justice (Theoharis, 2005b) or the toll or discouragement they felt personally as a result of the resistance they faced in their social justice work.⁵ I have come to believe that this intelligence is truly a double-edged sword. It allows them to understand issues and creatively work toward solutions. At the same time, this intelligence forces them to see problems and the weight of those problems bears heavily on them (Theoharis, 2007). They believe it is their responsibility and their calling to fix these problems. A dramatic tension exists, I believe, because of their intelligence. The cliché Ignorance Is Bliss fits with how these leaders described their work. One principal stated:

I looked around at other principals and realized that some people just didn't care or understand these things [special education, social justice, ELL] . . . they weren't worrying about them; they weren't losing sleep . . . sometimes that seemed like an easier and softer way to live. They did not get it, so they did not have to worry about it.

It is not only the intelligence and arrogance but also the humility that allows success in moving toward justice. This humility brings a willingness to be open and genuine with staff and families. Combining a desire to learn with an attitude that will let the learning become part of their practice, this humility brings self-doubt, which like the intelligence, adds to the struggle and the pain. This group of principals leading for social justice act both confident and uncertain at the same time. They know they are right, yet are unsure whether they are doing any good. They make big changes and they question whether they belong in this position. They act larger than life but also come across as regular, down-to-earth people. This core aspect makes them able to do remarkable things and causes them certain discouragement. This arrogant humility helps to define them. Their arrogance and their humility create part of the passion that drives their work.

Passionate visionary leadership. These social justice principals work not as bureaucrats or middle managers but as passionate leaders. Operationally, passionate leadership is having a tightly interwoven connection between the principal position and the person doing that job. It is caring so deeply, having such commitment, and maintaining sincere enthusiasm about this work that there is little separation between the leadership and the leader. They achieve this by holding, maintaining, and championing a strong vision while embodying the qualities that Shields (2004) and Furman and Gruenewald (2004) described about transformative leadership. This passionate leadership seeks to change people's beliefs and values from self-centered to other centered. In addition, they complement that effort with working toward the moral purpose of social justice. In explaining his passion for social justice leadership, one principal described the difference between a good principal and the social justice leader.

[Traditional] good leaders are technocrats. They write good memos, they write good reports, they stay out of trouble, and they're ok, they're in ok places but they don't have any passion for anything, they're just technically very adept but they have no sense of passion or feel or vision. They just go through life and they're proficient in what they do. . . . Principals are like musicians. There are some musicians who play all the right notes, but there's no feel to them. Then there's some people who do everything, they play all the right notes and have a passion. Then there are people who are less technically gifted and the passion compensates.

This principal sees the social justice leader in both of the last two descriptions but attributed the big difference in their work to the passion.

The work of these social justice leaders is deeply connected to who they are, their passion, and their inner personalities. They see themselves tightly interwoven with their positions. One principal stated, "This is my life . . . it's all consuming." Another principal said, "This isn't a job [for the social justice leader], this is a life. . . . It's not something I can leave when I leave this place, it encompasses me. It fully encompasses my whole life . . . this is my life." These principals typified the personal nature of the social justice leader. In our discussions they shared a deep connection to the positions and to their schools. One principal stated, "I live and breathe the school."

I am not arguing that all passionate leaders who work extremely long hours are social justice leaders. This is not an exclusive characteristic of social justice principals. There are many principals who have a zest for their position, their school, and improving their educational environment, who also work day and night. However, this personal, passionate, and visionary nature helps to make the social justice leaders successful.

These leaders feel this personal connection to their schools and to social justice and can translate that into seeing a better way. It is this personal vision that allows them to focus their efforts and the work of their staff in achieving equity and social justice for the marginalized students. This passion comes across as sincerity, and although these principals encounter tremendous resistance, their sincerity and personal connection to the school and their children are recognized and respected by allies and resisters alike. This passion, vision, and personal nature also add to the struggle, the discouragement, and the toll. They are tightly connected to their work and their schools. The issues and problems feel personal, and when they cannot change things or cannot change things fast enough, that feeling of dissatisfaction becomes their inner turmoil.

Their personal involvement and passion make these leaders a vital part of their school community. They play active roles and maintain highly visible profiles with the students, staff, and families. One principal put it, "How are you going to know what's going on, if you're sitting in your office? You've got to get out in the hallway, in the classroom, on the school grounds, in the community." This visibility is not unique to social justice leaders, but in combination with the passion, vision, and personal nature of their work it takes on different meaning and aids in accomplishing particular justice goals.

Tenacious commitment to justice. These leaders maintained a fierce commitment to their vision of social justice. The working definition of this tenacious commitment is that these principal sustained a steady and persistent focus on equity and justice for their staff as well as for themselves.

Scheurich and Sklra (2003) described this as “learning to believe the dream is possible” (p. 9), and Rapp (2002) illustrated this tenacious commitment with an image of the “1989 photo of the Chinese dissident before the tank in Tiananmen Square” (p. 236). Although they may share some characteristics with other leaders, their ability to see a better and more just way (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, in press), maintain a course in getting there in the face of great resistance, and lead people around them to create richer and more equitable schooling sets them apart from other principals who work hard, who seek school improvement, or who are extremely committed to their schools. In part, what makes these leaders unique is this tenacious commitment to enacting justice.

The principals described in great detail the resistance they faced as they pursued social justice (Theoharis, 2005a). They felt that resistance did not shut down their commitment to their vision of equity and justice. In fact, these principals shared how they felt their vision remained solidly intact.

“I don’t think the core feeling behind it [vision and ideals] has really changed. . . . I don’t think they’ve extinguished the internal fire at all,” commented Principal Natalie.

In responding to whether her vision or passion has changed, “I don’t think so, I don’t think so! And I didn’t hesitate to say that,” replied Principal Taylor emphatically.

Two other principals felt that through their experience and the resistance they faced, they felt a greater commitment to their vision about social justice. Principal Tracy shared,

I became even more resolved in what I believed that this is what’s right and it’s possible. It’s not only what’s right in the abstract, it can happen and in fact it does happen when we really believe in it.

Principal Eli discussed how he felt in response to the continual resistance he faced, “[The resistance] makes me tougher, stronger, more dedicated to having success . . . it makes me feel like I want to do even more . . . like I don’t want to give up.”

In working against the unjust norms of schooling, these principals maintained a tenacious commitment to their vision of social justice. For many of these principals feeling even small successes fueled their commitment and helped cement their vision. For some, the resistance they faced made them even more resolute in their ideals and beliefs about equity in schools. This unwavering commitment to their own vision would imply that these leaders are autocratic and lead in a very top-down manner. This is far from the truth.

Although these principals set the course for their schools in terms of social justice and equity, they led in collaborative, democratic, and empowering ways. They did not impose curriculum or practices, but they relied on staff, supported teachers, and facilitated schoolwide shared decision-making. Blending headstrong commitment to their vision with a strong belief in empowering and trusting teachers and simultaneously with building staff leadership created a dynamic school atmosphere and environment. This is clearly distinct from schools where the principal is autocratic and imposes decisions in a top-down manner. It is equally distinct from schools where committees and the entire staff discuss the direction and priorities of the school, in what one principal referred to as “A holding hands, singing *kum-ba-ya*, *namby-pamby*, everyone on staff feels good, but the needy kids are not at the center” style of decision making.

Although enacting social justice in the face of resistance, they have adopted a leadership style that embodies a hybrid of democratic leadership and principal-driven change. This style resonates with the leadership Capper, Theoharis, and Keyes (1998) described necessary to implement and sustain, inclusive schooling. Capper et al. depicted leaders who set the course for making their school inclusive for students with disabilities but decided collaboratively with staff on how to accomplish that task. The principals leading for social justice in this study follow a similar pattern. They decide the direction of the school in terms of enacting equity changes, but they rely on their staff’s professional knowledge to decide on how to best reach that set destination. This combination of headstrong persistence to their own agenda of social justice with an empowerment of those they work with creates a complex and dynamic leadership style.

In sum, to better understand social justice leadership, it is necessary to come to grips with the notion that social justice leadership is not a job someone does from a distance and is not a position for which a principal punches in and punches out. This work with all the bold possibilities and all the turmoil requires grounding in social justice and a complex, highly intelligent, passionate, personal, and humble leader.

Discussion: Woven in Deeply

The three leadership traits appear central to these principals’ work and identities as school leaders. The description and analysis of each individual trait illustrate how each was enacted in their work and the significance it

had to their abilities to lead for social justice. The resulting combination of the three traits coming together within each of these principals allows them to see a better way, commit to more equitable practices, and help to bring school staff and families with them in moving in the direction of social justice. It is this powerful combination that helps describe these leader identities.

To better understand who these social justice principals are, I believe it is necessary to understand the distinction between a good and highly regarded leader and a social justice leader (Theoharis, 2007). To accomplish this, I use a metaphor of a t-shirt. I explain this difference between social justice leaders and other good leaders as the metaphorical difference between using purple dyed thread to make a t-shirt and silk screening a purple design on top of a plain t-shirt. The social justice leader is the shirt made with dyed thread. Just as the dyed thread is woven into a shirt, the social justice is woven so deeply into the leader that there is no separation. Every moment of the job is filled with a desire, an eye, and a will to do social justice work, just like every inch of the shirt is now filled with the dyed thread. This is representative in many ways of the leadership trait—tenacious commitment to justice. It is impossible to separate the color from the shirt, and with these principals it is impossible to separate the social justice work from who they are and from the rest of their position—as is with their passionate leadership.

With the silk-screened shirt, it is possible to print beautiful, ornate, and complicated patterns on the shirt, but the fabric of the shirt will remain the same. These “silk-screen” leaders can learn to enact certain reforms, desegregate their schools, and take on socially just tasks, just as it is possible to silk-screen the desired design onto a given shirt. The difference remains: the silk-screen will always be on top of the shirt and never part of the fabric. It can be worn or scratched off; it is not all encompassing; it does not permeate the entire shirt. Perhaps the leader who has learned to execute the proper changes may be slowed down or may adopt a less just vision in the face of resistance. Perhaps the silk-screened leader lacks the broad understanding of justice and focuses only on specific reforms (e.g. reading first, class size reduction) not embedding justice into every facet of the school. Possibly they lack the tenacious commitment to justice combined with the arrogant humility to see it through.

Social justice ingrained into the very being of the social justice leader means that each decision, every aspect of that principalship, and all details of the school are examined and seen from a social justice perspective. When social justice is so interwoven into the leader, transforming a school is

not only about enacting a particular reform or making the school more inclusive or participating in professional learning in mathematics, each interaction—each decision—becomes about enacting justice. All aspects of the school are no longer distinct but interrelate in creating a just school. Indeed it is the interrelation that wears on the social justice leader because decisions are never about only one thing. They are never just contained to the playground, after-school programs, transportation, passing time, the schedule, attendance, literacy materials, hiring, safety, teaching teams, curriculum, class placement, or specific room usage. The social justice leader sees and feels the connection between these issues and the principles of justice that underlay them. Principal Tracy described this as seen in the following paragraph.

When a Latino boy is sent to the office for being disruptive before school, the impact is not only on the actual time it takes for me to solve the particular discipline issue, but I also immediately struggle with why this Latino boy is in trouble and why other students were not sent to the office. I wonder and later know that the incident involving this particular student happened because the boy did not have a permission slip for a particular after-school program. The slip needed to be turned in that day, and there are transportation issues regarding the boy and his family, which meant that the boy could not return home to find it or get a family member to come to school with the permission slip. I felt this huge tension because the only thing this boy was looking forward to that day and perhaps that month was this after-school program and working with the after school staff. I wonder and ask questions about whether there was adequate [culturally and linguistically responsive] communication with the boy's family about this after-school program and the permission slip. Did an interpreter call? We have Spanish and English language permission slips? Did an English-only permission slip go home? I struggle with the fact that because this student was sent to the office, not only did the child miss breakfast and went hungry until lunch, but parents and other students saw this Latino boy sitting in the office for getting in trouble. This public sighting not only negatively labels this child as a troublemaker, but it also reinforces negative stereotypes for families passing the office about this child, about Latino students, and about the climate and nature of our school. I feel caught in the tension between the institutional racism that lowers behavioral expectations for students of color and the institutional racism that labels students' of color behavior as deviant and severely and frequently punishes for this behavior. In terms of leadership, I immediately feel the weight of

all of those issues from just one incident. Understanding that this “discipline” incident was not truly about a child being disruptive but about a series of justice embedded issues, I feel the need and responsibility to address the justice concerns at the heart of it. This is much harder than talking to this boy about behavior. These are huge issues; I can only change so fast . . . these things weigh so heavily on me.

Principal Tracy clearly articulates this interconnected nature of social justice leadership while he simultaneously demonstrates the three leadership traits discussed in this article. It was evident that he was passionate about this situation and every situation like this. It was clear that he maintained a fierce commitment to what he saw as socially just or unjust ways to handle situations. He comes across as both responsible for this injustice as the leader, the one who should be able to do something about it (confident and arrogant) and also modest and humble in his uncertainty about events. It is necessary to understand not only their work but also their perspectives and experiences with that work. Seeing the arrogant humility, passion, tenacious commitment to justice, and full participation that informs social justice leadership creates an important understanding about social justice leadership.

Conclusion

This leadership moves beyond present day definitions of good leadership. Social justice leadership is a calling, not a position for which you apply. Ironically, some of the social justice leader’s greatest gifts (passion and commitment) also make the work significantly more difficult. Future work is needed to go beyond the identities and leadership traits of these leaders. Work is needed to better understand the knowledge and skills these leaders possess that make them successful at leading for social justice. It is their knowledge and abilities along with their vision and passion that allow for great advances in justice. I see real hope for marginalized students’ education by studying these leaders. According to one principal,

[They demonstrate] what is right is also what is possible. It’s not only what’s right in the abstract, it can happen and in fact it does happen when we really believe in it, when we understand the intricacies not only of schools but also the details of equity and justice. When we deeply commit ourselves to this, when it is woven into our lives, that’s where we see results. That’s where we find promise.

Notes

1. Although I included myself in this study, I write in the third person and use pseudonyms for all participants including myself. I do this because using the first person or my real name would make an unnecessary shift of emphasis to my experience over the experiences of the other leaders. I recognize that in using the third person and a pseudonym, I move away from autoethnography, which is why I describe this as borrowing from the principles of autoethnography and not a true autoethnography.

2. A detailed description of the methods of this study can be found in Theoharis (2004, 2007).

3. These principals are described in other scholarly works (Theoharis, 2004, 2007). The descriptions of these principals in this article contain similar information as the descriptions in these other publications.

4. It is important to note that many scholars with whom I have shared these findings feel that arrogance appears to be more accurately described as intense confidence. However, during a group debriefing of this study with the principals, they preferred the phrase arrogant humility over confident humility and felt it resonated authentically with their understanding of their identities. Thus, I defer to their preference.

5. The significant resistance these principals faced as well as the toll it took on them are documented in Theoharis (2007, 2005a).

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