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Social Justice Leadership in Europe's Multicultural Schools: Lessons from Cyprus

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Introduction

- Significant challenges for educational leadership in multicultural societies (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Pitre, 2014)
- A growing body of leadership research (e.g., Bogotch & Shields, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Potter, Torres, & Briceno, 2014; Taysum & Gunter, 2008) **calls for educational leaders to be social justice advocates**
- **‘Social justice leadership’**: principals who make issues of social justice and unequal conditions of schooling central to their leadership vision and practice (Theoharis, 2007, 2009)

Why Cyprus?

- **Cyprus:** a deeply divided society, troubled by an ‘intractable conflict’ (Bar-Tal, 2007) → impact on Cypriots’ understanding of justice
- Increasing number of migrants and refugees arriving on the island in recent years due to regional wars and conflicts
- It is necessary to recognize how these socio-cultural and political realities contribute to or reinforce educational inequity to understand the challenges that social justice leaders face within a given country

Questions driving today's talk

1. What dispositions and practices are needed to enact social justice leadership in a divided and multicultural society such as Cyprus?
2. What distinguishes social justice school leaders within such a setting?

Social Justice Leadership (I)

- The notion of ‘social justice’ is contested
- **‘Social justice’**: an “egalitarian society that is based on principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights, and that recognizes the dignity of every human being” (Zajda, Majhanovich & Rust, 2006, p. 10; see also Bogotch & Shields, 2014)
- Achieving social justice is very much related to the social and political circumstances that exist within a particular setting

Bogotch and Shields (2014, p. 10)

The challenge facing educational leaders in every nation-state in the world is to reprioritize practices so as to address the pragmatic needs to successfully lead schools, school systems, and universities effectively and efficiently, while at the same time to ensure, despite the busyness of their lives, that they address the difficult challenges posed by social, political, and economic realities, by issues of disparity, poverty, oppression, conflict and prejudice and by inappropriate uses of power.

Social Justice Leadership (II)

- School leaders make issues of social inclusion and multiculturalism (race, class, gender, disability and other historically marginalized conditions) central to their leadership practice and vision
- Ask questions about how social, political, and economic realities within a particular society influence school organizational structures and cultures (Berkovich, 2014)
- There are distinguishing characteristics and inclusive practices of school leaders who are led by values of social justice, diversity and equality in their school communities (Goddard, 2007; Leeman, 2007; Mahieu & Clycq, 2007; Walker, 2007)

Social justice leadership practices (MacDonald, 2019, 2020)

- **focus on pedagogy** i.e. on improving student learning outcomes (Brown et al., 2011; Day, 2005; Hayes et al., 2006; Smyth, 2012; Theoharis, 2009; Thomson, 2002).
- **promote a shared ethos of social justice as a key part of the school's agenda** (Anderson, 2009; Arar et al., 2017; Blackmore, 2006; Brooks, 2012; Brown, 2004; Day, 2005; Furman, 2012; Hayes et al., 2006; Horsford, 2011; Niesche, 2017b; Smyth, 2012; Taysum & Gunter, 2008; Theoharis, 2009; Thomson, 2002; Wilkinson, 2018).
- **distributed leadership** (Brooks, 2012; Brown et al., 2011; Hayes et al., 2004; Lingard et al., 2003; Smyth, 2012).
- **seek to develop networks and partnerships with local organizations and businesses which create powerful educational connections** (Robinson et al., 2015).
- **champion supportive social relationships with and between staff, students and in the community** (Brown, 2008; Furman, 2012; Hayes et al., 2004; Smyth, 2012; Theoharis, 2009) e.g a culture of care and trust
- **be activist and political** (Brooks, 2012; Smyth, 2012). For example, school leaders who have a social justice focus recognize forms of racism and seek to openly acknowledge and address where it occurs. They will challenge power relations and structural inequalities and deficit discourses, promote equal opportunities for marginalized children (Anderson, 2009; Smyth, 2012).
- **be critically reflective on and take action that makes a difference in students' everyday lives** (Furman, 2012; Smyth, 2012; Young, 2015).

The social and political context of Cyprus

- The wider political realities within a society suffering from intractable conflict add several layers of complexity
- The dividing issue often prevent other social concerns (e.g. social justice for all; solidarity for immigrants or those who don't belong to the same religious group) from finding their well-deserved place into everyday school discourses and practices
- There seems to be a 'selective' approach toward respect of social justice and implementation of others' human rights (Zembylas, 2008, 2015; Zembylas & Iasonos, 2014, 2015).

Synthesis of findings from my research studies

1. Taking a firm stance against racism and nationalism
2. Enacting empathy;
3. Taking into consideration the ethnic division of Cyprus and the sensitivities around it;
4. Forging a strong connection with the community; and
5. Taking action to make school a catalyst for social change.

Three short stories

- George
- Eleni
- Maria

Main points

- Social justice leadership is inevitably **'contextualized'** in a society, therefore, social justice issues need to be considered through the interactions of multiple levels and systems of interaction to gain a **socio-ecological perspective** on how school contexts are culturally, politically and socially positioned (Berkovich, 2014; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Hallinger, 2018; King & Travers, 2017; Miller, 2021)
- These principals show us through their everyday leadership how they create **'small openings'** and **'cracks'** (Zembylas, 2008, 2015) that raise new prospects framed in social justice terms

Recommendations for social justice leadership

1. School leaders are encouraged to critically explore their own understanding and perspectives on justice
2. Social justice leadership needs to be examined through a socio-ecological framework to gain understanding of the contextual complexities of schools and how those shape school leaders' beliefs and practices
3. It is important for school principals to come into contact with other school leaders who espouse beliefs and values of social justice and hear stories of how they have the power to make changes in their own school despite adversary political conditions

"If you join a fight for social justice you may win or lose, but just by being part of the struggle, you win, and your life will be better for it."

~ Howard Zinn

"History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.