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Micro and Macro Contexts of Schooling:
Understanding Social Justice from a Global Perspective

Purpose

The BELMAS-UCEA International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) grew out of discussions that first took place at the UCEA Convention in 2008. Since then the Network has developed and two 'strands' have formed. The purpose of this session is to share some of the early work of the strand focused on 'social justice leadership' (SJL). Members of the SJL strand have commenced data collection, guided by the research questions for the project, which include:

1) How do social justice leaders *make sense* of 'social justice'?
2) What do social justice leaders *do*?
3) What factors *help and hinder* the work of social justice leaders?
4) How did social justice leaders *learn* to become social justice leaders?

In keeping with the theme of the UCEA 2013 conference, we propose an international session comprised of researchers from the US, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Hong Kong, Ghana, and China, who have studied local and national communities in light of their connections to the global issue of social justice. Following initial data collection, the SJL research team turned attention to the influence of the micro and macro context where the schools under study are located, examining the extent to which this context shapes the responses to our research questions. Thus, the purpose for this session is to:
1) Examine the role of context in the enactment of social justice leadership
2) Present and apply a framework for a micro and macro context to schools in international settings.

Rationale

Many of the issues that face principals, and that frame the policy context within which principals operate, are located within a globalised policy environment, referred to by Sahlberg (2012) as the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). There can be little doubt that there is a globalised policy orthodoxy informed by a commitment to quasi-markets (and the associated use of standardized testing), so-called choice policies and privatization. However, despite clear evidence of a neoliberal global hegemony in education policy it is important to recognize that such policy agendas, and their impact and influence on school Principals, still look very different in Finland compared with Tennessee, a southern state in the US (both locations included within the ISLDN Social Justice Leadership strand project). It is important therefore to understand the nuances of a globalised world, and the complex ways in which local contexts remain stubbornly varied in the face of globalised standardization. The vernacularization of policy (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) cannot be ignored and highlights the need for an international perspective.

The research contained in this proposal seeks to enhance our understanding of school leaders' actions as they work to promote socially just practices and/or outcomes in a range of different national contexts. Schools, and those who lead them, influence and are influenced by the context in which they operate. Social justice leaders cannot disconnect what they do from where they practice. As the SJL members gathered and analyzed data, it became apparent that the guiding

principles of decisions, challenges, behaviors, and successes emanated from the context in which the social justice leaders worked. The SJL research team has collaborated on the construction of a frame (see Figure 1), which we have applied to our varied international contexts, in attempts to understand the extent to which the context influences the practice of social justice leaders (Barnett & Stevenson, forthcoming).

Figure 1.
Framework for Micro-Macro Examination of School Context.
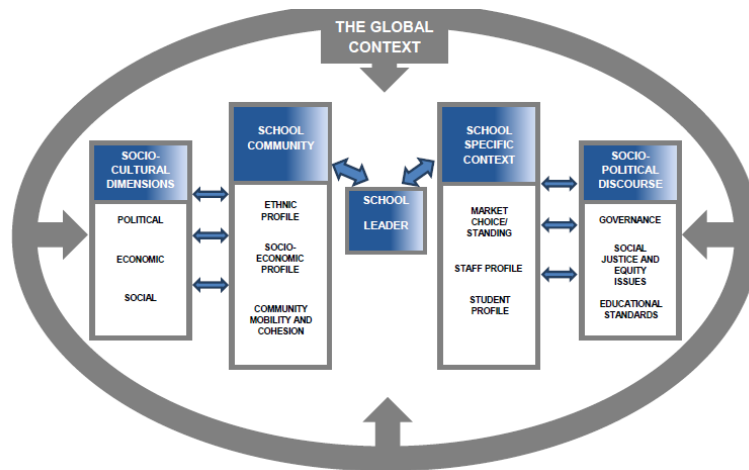
The micro context indicators on the framework include the local school community and the school specific context. Elements of the school community encompass the ethnic and socioeconomic population of the area in which the school under study is located. The community type refers to the stability of the community, including circumstances which may result in a gain or loss in population, the mobility of the population, as well as the 'climate' of the community, that is, the tensions or harmony surrounding the school. Elements in the school specific context may include the market in which the school operates; for example, the competitive nature of school choice and the parent's voice in that choice. In addition, school specific context addresses the school's standing in the community as well as student population profile (ethnicity, students with disabilities, students living in poverty, and gender) which may be particularly critical to social justice if the student population is markedly different from that of the community population.

The macro context indicators frame the larger national influences on the school, including socio-cultural dimensions and the socio-political discourses of the nation in which the school is located. The dominant political culture, the economic wealth and distribution of that wealth, and social implications of the role of religion and the homogeneity of the population figure largely into the philosophy of the school level social justice leader. Socio-political discourses may include debates over who actually owns the schools which brings to bear questions of accountability and autonomy. The importance (or not) of social justice issues at the national level as well as discourse surrounding the need for equity and questions of what equity actually looks like all influence decision making at the school building level. Finally, the debate over standards, national curriculum, and high stakes testing take center stage in discussions of social justice.

Format
Within this workshop, the project researchers seek to share the local and national context of the schools under study and to invite conference attendees to participate and enrich the dialogue. The framework in which schools are placed will be presented and the workshop will seek to engage all participants in a discussion of the influence of the larger community and global context in the decision making, behavior, and philosophies of social justice leaders. We hope to glean tentative conclusions that can help shape our own understanding of what we mean by social justice and how this understanding then informs the further development of the project itself. The session will be interactive and will seek to engage all attending.

National contexts:

USA

This school is located in one of the premiere urban school districts in New York State. The school configuration is Pre-Kindergarten through 8th Grades, with more than 400 students, 46 teaching faculty and 2 administrators. Student characteristics include 93% African American and Hispanic and 5% white with 94% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch. This school's mission is to build a partnership between school, parents, and the community to develop and enhance academic, emotional, and social growth. However, the school's surrounding area is unsafe with a relatively high crime rate, and lacking job opportunities in the region results in the loss of population in general. The principal has both teaching and administrative experiences (8 years) with a master's degree and is now in a doctoral leadership program.

New Zealand

New Zealand's education system is primarily secular, state owned and state funded. The prevailing neoliberal discourse emphasizes market competition and parental choice. School governance is devolved to locally elected Boards of Trustees who set policies in accordance with national regulations and community priorities. In comparison with OECD developed nations, New Zealand has high average educational performance and large variance. While the Zealand Curriculum states that students will be encouraged to value equity through fairness and social justice, these concepts are contested and enjoy little prominence in the current political climate. The case study school is situated in a low socioeconomic community and caters for secondary students. Enrolment is unrestricted. The roll is predominantly Māori and rising.

Costa Rica

This Costa Rican school has 64 teachers and 697 students from primary through secondary grades. The emphasis is on English for employment and admission to university. The wealth of students varies broadly; 44% of live in poverty; and 84% have lived in the community for less than five years. The county has a population of 56,000 inhabitants and is located 25 kilometers north of the capital. The school admits students from inside and outside of the neighborhood. Local families object to students coming from other communities because of possible negative influences. The director has been at the school for one year and has 14 years of experience in education.

Hong Kong

Located in Kowloon City, the school is government aided with 200 students, including 10% non-Chinese speaking students (very high in contrast to an average of 2% in Hong Kong schools) and 25% of students are low income who receive full or half grants for school textbook financial assistance (slightly higher than that of Hong Kong domestic households. The school is led by one principal (10 years experience) who is an alumnus from a low income family and 15 teachers. As a non-profit-making sponsoring organization, 90% of the funds are provided by government and small fees (< US$350 annually) can be charged for school activities upon pre-approval by the government. According to the external school review report inspected by the Education Bureau in 2009, the school principal was highly regarded in the community and active in seeking community collaboration.

Ghana

A female head teacher leads this inner city coeducational day secondary school in Accra, capital of Ghana. Students are required to pay to access secondary schooling and are accepted by schools on the basis of their examination scores on the primary school leaving examination. Students from this school travel long distances, or have to board in hostels to access the school, and are from socio-economic groups that struggle to find the fees. The head, an experienced school leader, is committed to ensuring students complete their secondary education and pass the leaving examinations with high enough scores to allow them to access tertiary education despite the many factors that work against this.

China

The Chinese school is located on the outskirts of Shanghai. Due to the national free 9-year compulsory education law, the lower secondary section (Grade 7-9) is obliged to admit school-aged migrant students in their neighbourhood schools. Statistics show that more than 65% of the students in the school are migrant students from all over China. Migrant students' families live on peddling, farming, and other unstable jobs such as building construction and babysitting. Some of the students live on the garbage recycling site under shabby shelters. In contrast to the Shanghai economic booming, these migrant students with their low socio-economic backgrounds share common features such as high mobility, low commitment to schooling, behaviour and discipline problems, as well as a hostile resentment toward the local Shanghai people and culture.