Female Secondary School Leaders:
At the Helm of Democratic Schooling and Social Justice

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Abstract: We chose the philosophical tradition of phenomenology as the qualitative methodology to study four women school leaders. Semi-structured interview data indicated that their professional experiences impacted how their leadership practices advance social justice in their education organizations, espouse the belief that equity matter, and exemplify the torchbearers of democratic ideals.

The impact of major political agendas and policies that emerged since the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (Ogletree, 2004*)* decision have prompted many school leaders to assume a more active role with respect to the economic, social, and political struggles of marginalized students (Jean-Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006; Valverde, 2003). Based on interviews with four female secondary school leaders (two Black, two White) who are committed to social justice and democracy, this paper begins to document how these women engage in their work within two specific contexts, urban and suburban. The study aims to: (a) identify how these four women leaders engaged in social justice leadership and democratic schooling with focus on ethical responsibilities as guiding forces in their actions, and (b) capture their motivations and actions for engaging in core values of social justice, democracy, and equity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework was drawn from three themes: (a) socialization, (b) social justice, and (c) democratic schooling.

Socialization and Women

Socialization involves the processes by which school leaders learn the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required to perform their role in an effective manner (Normore, 2004). Because of how the socialization process unfolds, women have developed values and beliefs that translate into specific behaviours arising in their leadership styles (Furman & Sheilds, 2005; Noddings, 1992; Trinidad & Normore, 2005). Research has indicated that women are socialized to show their emotions, feelings, compassion, patience, and intuition - that female leadership styles in education are more democratic, participative, inclusive and collaborative (Shakeshaft, 1993). Furthermore, women leaders value having influence more than having power (Brunner, 1998). This is where the non-traditional view of power meets the gender-role expectations that women are not dominant or in charge. When teaching in classrooms, women have learned to motivate students without the need to use domination. Other researchers (e.g., Trinidad & Normore, 2005) have asserted that women leaders in education incorporate 'power with' into the transformational leadership model through empowerment. Power also serves to build an environment of mutual trust and respect and is linked to the principles of social justice, fairness, and responsible behaviour towards others (Noguera, 2003).

Social Justice Leadership

The discourse of social justice and leadership are inextricably linked which calls to question if there exists a definition for social justice leadership. Some research (e.g., Bogotch, 2005) insists that social justice has no one specific meaning. According to Bogotch (2005), "its multiple *a posterori* meanings emerge[d] differently from experiences and contexts" (p. 7).

Furman and Shields (2005) argue the "need for social justice to encompass education that is not only just, democratic, emphatic, and optimistic, but also academically excellent" (p. 123). While a review of the literature on leadership and/or social justice does not present a clear definition of social justice, there is a general framework for delineating social justice leadership. Lee and McKerrow (2005) offer such framework in two dimensions: First, social justice is defined "not only by what it is but also by what it is not, namely injustice. . . by seeking justice, we anticipate the ideal. . .by questioning injustice, we approach it. . . by integrating both, we achieve it" (p. 1). The second dimension focuses on the practice of social justice. Individuals for social justice seek to challenge political, economic, and social structures that privilege some and disadvantage others. They challenge unequal power relationships based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, and other systems of oppression. Interest in social justice is a renewed, and many women in leadership are advancing its causes.

Democratic Schooling

Lum (1993) suggests that "human beings are not objectively determined in their existential condition by universal laws of nature, but they are phenomenal 'happenings' as a consequence of a plurality of socio-historical effective forces, mindful purposes, and cultural conditions" (p. 39). Such a claim suggests that for democratic leaders, their being and becoming are socially constructed through the very practices in which they engage, thereby encouraging a leadership praxis of self-reflection (Lather, 1986) and ethical self-understanding not gained through merely observing facts but in their value-laden narrative renderings of those facts (Lightfoot & Gourd, 2004). Consequently, a transformation of the democratic leader's self unfolds through the interaction with the social relations and daily struggles considered necessary for promoting a democratic culture in schools. Democratic schooling includes issues related to civil, political, and social rights (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2002) as well as values associated with concepts such as "deep democracy" (Furman & Shields, 2005, p. 126). According to Furman and Shields, social justice is not possible without deep democracy nor is democracy possible without social justice because each holds within itself the notion of both individual rights and the good of the community. These and other (e.g., Lather, 1986; Valverde, 2003) researchers further assert that educational leaders need to create conditions under which all children can learn well, within a socially just, moral, and democratic context.

Research Design

We chose the philosophical tradition of phenomenology as the qualitative methodology for this study. Because the phenomenological approach probes only for participants' perceptions of a subject, in this case, how leadership evolved in the professional experiences of school practitioners, it was an appropriate construct to guide the interviews (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The original study examined the professional experiences of eleven female secondary principals. The purposeful sampling of female principals represented six urban and suburban districts with two or more high schools located in each district. Aligned with Patton (1990), the participants in the original study were generated from a purposeful sample of 15 women (i.e., secondary school principals), of which eleven chose to participate. Open-ended semi-structured interviews were used to guide the original research. Similar to Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich (2000), all participants were provided with opportunities to reflect on their experiences as female secondary school leaders. Interviews were subsequently transcribed and analyzed according to Giorgi, Fischer, & Murray (1975) phenomenological steps.

For purposes of this article, we revisited the original data to conduct secondary analyses (Heaton, 1998) of specific experiences of four women – two Black (pseudonyms - Gertrude and

Jocelyn) and two White (pseudonyms - Linda and Annette). These women were selected because they exemplified a values-orientation around issues of social justice in their leadership practices and warranted further analysis. First, we revisited each transcript to get an overall sense of the whole and then identified transitions in the experience (each transition signifying a separate unit of meaning). Second, we eliminated redundancies in the units of meaning and began to relate the remaining units to one another. As further themes and patterns were developed, we transformed the participants' language into the language of science (Giorgi et al., 1975). Finally, we synthesized the insights into a description of the entire experience of leadership practices.

Findings and Discussion

The four female principals in our study identified how they engaged in transformative leadership that supports social justice, democratic, and equitable schools. They described their leadership experiences through their own understanding of social justice and democratic schooling, motivations, and actions from a values-orientation exemplified in their practices. They closely paid attention to the silenced voice of marginalized students and brought their struggles to the forefront of school policies and initiatives without negating the needs of more privileged students. For these women, their interest in students' success began with how they engaged in self-reflection and how they developed an authentic relationship between themselves as school leaders and their students. Two dominant themes emerged from data analysis: (a) a social justice agenda for democratic schooling and (b) leadership praxis.

A Social Justice Agenda for Democratic Schooling

All four women promoted discourse through their leadership practices about various aspects of social justice. The discourse had a huge influence toward gaining a better understanding of experiences that best promoted democratic schooling, equity, and social justice. They were opened to critique and engaged in democratic discourse and practices by creating identities informed by principles of equality and social justice (Giroux, 2002). In support of Furman and Sheilds (2005) and Noddings (1992), these women leaders worked to create a climate, culture, and community that exemplified values they espoused. Gertrude explained that she provided instructional time and development programs for low-performing students: "Some of the programs to help students succeed include 'Saturday for Success' – which is a two hour program scheduled on Saturdays for students who have less than a C average. We also have academic lunchtime for students who need individualized instruction by the myself and assistant principal, and, some afterschool tutoring." Gertrude articulated the importance of fostering high academic achievement for all students by rewarding students (i.e., academic lunch bunch), recognizing higher achievers as an 'academic bowl' (i.e., all subject-area preparation for ACTs), and giving a 'letter jacket' (i.e., indication of school pride) at school assemblies to motivate students. Echoing a similar sentiment, Linda emphasized an equity focus for 'all' students. She explained:

> There's no elitism. We don't engage in the practice of 'good for some kids, and not good for others'. . . the kind of education provided for all children ought to be one that 'touches another person's life'. . . raising students' self esteem. . . broadening horizons and awareness of diverse issues. . . providing opportunities to change a life…doing something right for each child – as long as each child has a fair chance for success.

They continued to critique the definition and enactment of democracy in order to develop school initiatives that were inclusive, understanding, and supportive of diverse constructs and knowledge of all students and parents. Both Annette and Jocelyn shared their perspectives about quality education for every student despite students' past and present life circumstances. Annette

discussed a commitment to recruit teachers who were interested in her Black, Latino, Asian students – all students. She commented: "My school is 88% Black." With a cynicism towards culturally insensitive teachers, she asserted:

> I call administration at the Board and request that they not send me teachers who don't want to come to my Black school because they're uncomfortable. They're also culturally disconnected and can't make it here…anyone who is recuited for this school must want to be here. Otherwise, an unhappy teacher makes an unhappy student which is reflected in the teaching and learning process.

Jocelyn believed the responsibility for educating and caring for all students is attainable through a collective commitment with her staff. Drawing from research-based knowledge (i.e., Marzano et al's., 2001 instructional strategies, Pass Key, Skill Banks, etc.), she asserted, "We [teachers] are doing book studies on classroom instructions that work and on building background knowledge. We also engage in professional learning communities really stressing the emphasis on teacher professional development." Similarly, Annette challenged her staff to be the 'experts' of their content areas, to be civil rights advocates, continuously 'work in the ideas' and set high expectations for all students. For both Annette and Jocelyn, the critical focus of attention was on the behavior of teachers as they engage in instructional practices and activities that directly improve the students' quality of life.

The actions of the four women leaders were representative of how they instructed, guided, and led on a daily basis (i.e., Gertrude's hands-on approach on teaching about and modeling diverse learning styles; Linda's study groups on instruction, black achievement, and diversity issues; Jocelyn's staff development on Marzano's instructional strategies for the organizational health of her faculty; Annette's recruitment of culturally sensitive teachers and practice of teaching students about the Civil Rights Movement). These actions are further supported by a growing number of scholars who have pointed out that in order to address inequities for diverse student populations, educational leaders must be reflective practitioners and have a heightened awareness of social justice issues in a field struggling to meet the needs of all children (Bogotch, 2005).

Leadership Praxis

According to a body of research, praxis involves self-reflection, critical thinking (Freire, 1998; Lather, 1986), values-orientation within democracy (Furman & Shields, 2005), and social justice and equity (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2002; Valverde, 2003). The four women in this study were concerned with exercising democracy in their leadership practices. They engaged in forms of self reflective, critical, and collaborative work relationships which created conditions that empowered people with whom they worked. To ensure that their schools were led in a democratic and ethical manner, they encouraged leadership practices among many actors (i.e. teachers, students, parents, and community). The learning and democratic leading practices of the four women helped them to foster a transformative culture. Notions of caring and collaborative working relationships resonated with the principals because they believed that their teachers needed to take ownership of the school. The choices these women made on a daily basis in their actions and interactions shaped their ability to affect change beyond the school into the broader local school community. Practicing an ethic of care towards those who work for and with them was a critical dimension of their transformative leadership style. As leaders, these women demonstrated a selfless desire to both serve and prepare others and simultaneously created an organizational system that was committed to developing relationships that drove goodness. Annette stated:

Recently, a teacher committed suicide. It was tragic for the school community. I met with my teachers and invited ministers to come and lead us in prayer. After the prayer, I explained to the children the importance of sharing truths about suicide. We talked about what happened and shared some positive things about the teacher. While it's risky to do that in public schools, I believe if you live in a God-like fashion, then your spiritual connection is solid.

Upon reflecting on their roles as school leaders, Linda explained that her spiritual beliefs helped and guided her work as a school leader. She stated, "The Lord doesn't promise us it's [leadership] going to be an easy path. . . sometimes I just wish it were easier. . . I think that you develop a following by being kind to people. I try to guide them on the right path – even if I've helped a few kids I've made a difference." Jocelyn echoed a similar belief: "My relationship with my Lord determines how I interact with everybody." Gertrude mentioned, "I didn't talk about my religious belief during our conversation because I didn't think it was appropriate to do so. But, how I lead is influenced by my religious beliefs and values, and practices." Although Gertrude was silenced about how her religion connected to her leadership, she was sensitive to her beliefs and sometimes was willing to refrain from engaging in a religious-oriented discourse in their schools. These women leaders' acts of hope were extensions of their spiritual and religious beliefs and practices.

Conclusion and Implications

In broad terms, there are implications from this study that have to do with school reform – a need to shift the focus from the leadership of the principal alone to a more inclusive form of leadership, to the collaborative empowerment of school leaders, and to the recognition of the importance of community and commitment in promoting social justice, democratic schooling, and positive relationships. There is a clear focus on leadership praxis that includes critical reflection about issues of inclusion, social justice, diversity, and expansion of the opportunities for diverse leadership styles and religious convictions. Efforts to increase the capacity of schools by broadening educators' work beyond conventional notions of teaching and administration would be improved by paying attention to how, in concert, a social justice and democracy agenda shape and influence possibilities and desires for careers in education and educational leadership. These mutually inclusive concepts are indispensable ingredients to improving schools for the benefit of all students and for a democratic society. Given the demographic shift of the U.S. population, which is becoming increasingly more diverse, and to commit to *Brown's 1954* legacy of advancing social justice and democracy, there is a need to look at practices (i.e., the types of discourse, experiences, processes, and structures) that promote the development and support of principals committed to social justice and democratic principles. Policy makers and practitioners have an opportunity to share in discourse about how to shape the quality of leaders they help produce for the good of society if the Brown legacy is to resume its advance.

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