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Troubling Unintended Harm of Heroic Discourses in Social Justice Leadership

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We aim to problematize the ways in which school leaders who seek social justice conflate heroic leadership discourses in their practices. Using qualitative data collected from an urban school principal, this study examines heroic metaphors utilized by the principal when describing social justice leadership and how heroic-centered approaches contradict with achieving social justice goals in school. The findings suggest that the principal's idea of social justice leadership relies on discourse around "battles to win", a savior complex, and seeing herself as the central model for driving change. Such heroic discourses reflect the principal's sole reliance on herself as a savior for her staff and community, which ultimately contradicted the social justice ideals that she sought to accomplish. Our inquiry provides a window to problematize heroic discourse embedded in social justice leadership and address how school leaders must be cognizant to how their practices might conflate with social justice outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Conventional leadership theories have roots in heroic notions describing leaders as charismatic males who can solve problems that others may not (Allison et al., 2017). While recent studies have challenged such an individual-driven Eurocentric approach (Alston, 2005; Khalifa et al., 2019; Liu, 2020) and suggested leadership as an ongoing interactive process with multiple actors (Woods, 2004; Spillane, 2005; Harris, 2013; Ishimaru and Galloway, 2014; Kim, 2020; Torres et al., 2020), the literature and daily practices of school leaders often illuminate person-centered heroic traits that could dramatically fix problems and bring necessary changes (Ehrensals, 2015; Fleming et al., 2018; Schweiger et al., 2020). In urban schools with high needs in the United States (U.S.), images of social justice leaders, who dismantle the unjust systems and transform the status quo for equitable practices, have tended to be in favor of superhero-like individual principals in achieving social justice outcomes by school leaders and also researchers to some extent, glorifying leaders' martyrdom in making radical changes (Theoharis, 2007, Theoharis, 2008; Armstrong et al., 2020; see films like *Lean on Me*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Hard Lessons*). However, such a view also contradicts democratic and shared approaches, one of the key theoretical constructs of social justice (Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2008; DeMatthews et al., 2016; Wang, 2018; Shields and Hesbol, 2020).

It is not surprising that heroic discourses are prevalent and embodied in current practices of social justice leadership as opposed to its intention. Educational leadership research and reform policies have focused on the school principal as one of the most significant factors that drives change (e.g., Hallinger and Heck, 1996; turnaround school policy). Moreover, the prevalence of heroic discourses in social justice leadership can be attributed to the existing systems (e.g., having one principal per

building) that do not necessarily invest in structures and resources to develop shared forms of leadership (e.g., Ehrensals, 2015). However, we address concerns that the unintended relationship between conventional heroic approaches and social justice leadership may undermine the realization of achieving social justice goals. While we acknowledge heroic approaches are a form of resistance to the status quo, the reliance on individual leader-dependent approaches can undermine sustainability of changes (Theoharis, 2008), expect social justice leaders to bear high level of pressures on their wellness (Armstrong et al., 2020), and reproduce Eurocentric epistemology in leadership (Alston, 2005; MacDonald, 2019; Lopez, 2020), without taking into account complexities and multiple layers residing in the success of social justice work.

The purpose of this study is to problematize the ways in which school leaders who seek social justice merge heroic leadership discourse into their social justice efforts. We examine the use of heroic leadership metaphors as well as the implicit assumptions behind said metaphors in our investigation of the daily practices of an urban elementary school principal, Mrs. Dee.¹ We apply metaphorical analysis as it reveals an individual's cognitive processes and implicit assumptions behind the symbolic language and daily practices of leadership (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Alvesson and Spicer, 2010; Witherspoon and Crawford, 2014; Guilherme and Souza de Freitas, 2018). Further, metaphors reflect dominant ideologies and typologies used in the field (Wilkinson, 2008; MacDonald, 2019; Armstrong et al., 2020). With this in mind, we find that examining the use of heroic metaphors in the practice of social justice leadership is helpful to interrogate the ways in which heroic discourses intertwine with social justice leadership. While our aim is to examine the use of such metaphors in leadership practice, we also acknowledge that these practices are informed by dominant discourses centering heroic approaches as status quo. We define discourse as trends that emerge in practice with current school leaders but also trends found within educational leadership literature that focus on socially just and culturally responsive principal leaders. We find that the literature is saturated with individual centered examples that might illustrate exemplary school leadership but that leadership remains centered on the individual and their actions of transforming schools, policies, and academic outcomes.

Our inquiry addresses two research questions: 1) What types of heroic leadership metaphors are utilized by the principal when describing social justice leadership?; 2) How do heroic leadership approaches contradict or misalign with achieving social justice goals? By answering these questions, our goal is not to undermine the social justice work of Mrs. Dee but to highlight the coalescence of heroic discourse and the practice of social justice leadership as a reflection of implicit norms and ideology that are prevalent in the current environments of policy and educational practices. Thus, we call for a critical

dialogue about the application of social justice leadership in a K-12 school context where systemic and policy driven oppression is the status quo.

GUIDING PERSPECTIVES

Heroic Discourses in Educational Leadership

The idea of heroic leadership has a long history rooted in “Great Man” theories which characterized great leaders as males who are charismatic problem solvers (Allison et al., 2017). Similar models of this standard of leadership are reflected in charismatic (e.g., Weber, 1954) and transformational models of leadership (e.g., Burns, 1978; Bass, 1990). For instance, Reh et al., 2017 found that the “charismatic effect” often attributed to leaders who are said to inspire followers and their motivations, may be linked to leader signaling which consists of values, symbols and emotions embodied by the leader. This embodiment perspective of charisma also accounts for how follower first impressions of a leader shape their later interactions. Further, the literature that denotes charismatic leadership can be measured by physical attributes like height and facial features relies on white male leaders as standard for these types of determinants (Alston, 2005). Elements of charisma are also found in transformational models of leadership, describing a leader as one who uplifts morale, motivations, and morals of their followers (Burns, 1978). These leaders also are said to move the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration (Bass, 1990).

Studies applying a decolonizing lens explain this reliance on heroic discourses as a result of normalization of white Western Eurocentric views in theorizing leadership (Mackey, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2019; Lopez, 2020). For instance, Max Weber's views on charismatic authority, one of the foundational theories of leadership, is bound within the context of Western male oriented worldview, but has been adopted as a default view in multiple approaches to theorizing leadership and practice (Liu, 2020). Moreover, Pheko and Linchwe (2008) argued that such an individual-driven approach to educational leadership reflects Western models of thinking that highlight the importance of self-expression over collective thoughts and communities. These studies suggest that heroic discourses have manifested in the field of educational leadership as a form of coloniality—excluding other knowledge traditions and ways of thinking that are rooted in different cultures and regional contexts (Takayama et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2019; Liou and Liang, 2021).

Recent studies have challenged the conventional heroic paradigm by offering a “post-heroic” view which suggests leadership as an ongoing interactive process involving multiple organizational actors (see Marks and Printy, 2003; Woods, 2004; Spillane, 2005; Harris, 2013; Ishimaru and Galloway, 2014; Kim, 2020; Torres et al., 2020). These perspectives sought a way to shift the concept of leadership from focusing on individual attributes to collective processes where multiple individuals co-construct leadership (Sobral and Furtado, 2019). Nevertheless, the literature

¹Pseudonym.

and daily practices of leaders often depict the image of leadership as relying on person-centered heroic traits that could *fix problems* and *save* the organization (Ehrensals, 2015; Fleming et al., 2018; Schweiger et al., 2020). Moreover, policies, systems, and even professional standards for school and system leaders embed the individual capacity and responsibility into the work (Gilman and Lanman-Givens, 2001). In their conceptual analysis, Franco et al. (2011) suggested that heroism refers to actions that nobody *should* take, but some people do anyhow under the circumstance of high-levels of risk taking. They become a “hero” only if the person successfully achieves outcomes; failure lets them become a “fool” (Franco et al., 2011). This sentiment has been often reflected in the educational leadership literature framing school principals as a significant factor to drive changes and solve existing problems (Hallinger and Heck, 1996).

Metaphor as a Theoretical and Analytical Tool: Reflection of Dominant Ideology

Given the prevailing assumptions of individual heroic leadership, we apply a lens of metaphor as a conceptual and analytic tool to understand assumptions and ideas of leadership. Use of metaphors reveal not only language but also the way that individuals think and interpret the world by uncovering ontological and epistemological stances along with specific frames of references (Leary, 1994; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). In addition, individuals’ use of metaphors can affect their decision-making process (Allison et al., 1996). In this respect, metaphors play a critical role in constructing discourse that implicitly and explicitly shapes daily practices as “once we have accepted a particular metaphor into our discourse, it becomes difficult to think of the concept otherwise” (Henze, 2005 p. 246). Research has explored metaphors utilized by individuals to reveal various perspectives on meanings and practices of leadership (e.g., Alvesson and Spicer, 2010; Guilherme and Souza de Freitas, 2018; Heffernan, 2019; Burkinshaw and White, 2020). Spicer and Alvesson (2011) suggested that analyzing metaphors is useful to capture the local knowledge grounded in practitioners’ understandings of leadership and explore imaginative insights that might not be achieved by conventional approaches. Moreover, Guilherme and Souza de Freitas (2018) argued that the analytical use of metaphors can catalyze new ways of thinking and understanding of leadership.

Studies examining principal leadership have utilized metaphorical analysis to reveal implicit and underlying assumptions about the ideas of leadership and practices within the specific context where leaders interact with multiple factors. Critical examination of leadership metaphors suggests that the use of metaphors is not neutral but the *reflection of dominant ideology* in the field of leadership. This line of inquiry has problematized several perspectives in conceptualizing educational leadership. Studies have revealed that commonly used metaphors in leadership heavily rely on gender-binaries and muscularity (Ashcraft and Muhr, 2018; MacDonald, 2019; Randell and Yerbury, 2020), middle-class and Anglo-centric norms (Wilkinson, 2008; MacDonald, 2019), as well as

military-centered vocabularies (Ashcraft and Muhr, 2018; Armstrong et al., 2020). For example, pointing out the fact that military metaphors are commonly used for schools and educators, Armstrong et al. (2020) explored the way school principals achieved social justice goals and strategies using war-normalizing metaphors. Findings from such critical inquiry revealed that school leaders tend to rely on aggressive and superhero-driven metaphors as a reflection of their strong will to challenge the status quo and realize social justice goals (Theoharis, 2008; Liu and Baker, 2016; Heffernan, 2019; Armstrong et al., 2020).

Heroic Discourses Portrayed by Social Justice Leaders

Research on social justice leadership cannot be excluded from heroic discourse. Individual leaders portrayed in social justice leadership literature show more powerful motivations, wills, and practices to achieve goals that are “non-negotiable” and resist the status quo (e.g., Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2008; Dematthews and Izquierdo, 2017; Shields and Hesbol, 2020). Social justice leaders can be understood as those who advocate, lead, and center their practice of “race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalized conditions” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Studies have shown those leaders as individuals who dismantle the unjust structures and transform the status quo with passion and strong will power (Theoharis, 2008; Dantley and Tillman, 2010; Dematthews and Izquierdo, 2017; Shields and Hesbol, 2020). Recognizing that achieving social justice requires strong commitments of leaders, to some extent, heroic approaches exerted by individual principals are often favored in achieving social justice outcomes (Armstrong et al., 2020). For example, exploring traits of social justice leadership using interviews with school principals, Theoharis (2008) found that traits like arrogance and self-confidence in combination with humility and self-doubt explained this arrogant side of social justice leadership. He notes that the principals’ intelligence (Theoharis, 2007) forced them to “see problems” and take responsibility to fix those problems. MacDonald (2019) used a metaphorical analysis of “thinking with” Daniel Defoe’s novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (1917) to reveal heroic metaphors depicted in the case of an Australian principal, a self-claimed social justice leader. Applying the lens of Robinson Crusoe as a reflection of white-centered, British colonial identity, MacDonald (2019) problematized individual heroism, leadership as a missionary zeal, and cultural imperialism that were enacted by the self-claimed social justice leader. These findings suggested that social justice leaders can unconsciously or consciously adopt and enact heroic approaches which may contradict with theoretical constructs of social justice.

Heroic approaches are frequently evidenced in media portrayals of school principals and teachers in urban schools where their composite characters reflect seemingly radical dispositions but ultimately only accomplish a symbolic victory without changing corrupt infrastructures of the educational institutions depicted within the film (Dalton, 2004). These

models of school principals depicted in films like *Lean on Me*, *Stand and Deliver*, or *Hard Lessons* to name a few, perpetuate the notion that strong leaders are great men who have inherent leadership qualities within them, and that any positive school changes are solely attributed to the individual and their heroic traits. Taken together, it is not surprising that heroic discourses are prevalent even in social justice leadership. This is not surprising when considering that researchers have historically assumed that findings from studies in educational leadership conducted with white male participants could be generalized to understand and inform entire principal populations (Alston, 2005) and further, media depictions of leadership perpetuate this notion of “leader as a hero” in populations that experience marginalization and disproportionate access to resources, equitable systems, and structures that support non-white students.

While we acknowledge heroic discourse as a form of resistance to the status quo along with the sense of urgency in the context of social justice leadership, we address concerns that the unintended blending of conventional heroic approaches and social justice leadership may undermine the realization of achieving social justice goals. One of the possible problems is that individual leader-dependent approaches may not be useful for schools to sustain changes toward social justice goals (Theoharis, 2008). Heroic assumptions also expect individual leaders to bear high levels of risk, placing a strain on their mental and physical health, which can exacerbate the need for self-care for leaders. According to Lopez (2020), such a leader-centered view can reinforce and reproduce White and Western driven epistemology in theorizing social justice leadership, which can oversimplify the complexities and multiple layers residing in the success of social justice work. Overall, we find that examining the use of heroic metaphors in the practice of social justice leadership is helpful to interrogate the ways in which heroic discourses intertwine with social justice leadership.

METHODOLOGY

We used a metaphorical analysis to reveal heroic assumptions and practices using the case of urban school leader, Mrs. Dee, who described herself as a social justice leader working at Sunnyville Elementary School. Instead of focusing on metaphorical language itself, we draw on a “thinking with” metaphors approach (MacDonald, 2019) informed by critical discourse analysis to uncover implicit ideas and practices behind the use of metaphors that could result in unintended harms in the context of social justice leadership. The parent studies of the current study are two different research projects, each of which collected qualitative data from Mrs. Dee and her school. We conducted each of our studies separately—one focusing on principal accountability and the other focusing on student voices—with Mrs. Dee between August 2018–February 2020. Together, we had opportunities to reflect on Mrs. Dee’s leadership and some of her leadership orientations and practices that required a closer analysis. We decided to integrate our data about Mrs.

Dee from separate studies into this study framed by the lens of heroic metaphors in social justice leadership.

Research Context²

Mrs. Dee was a principal in her third and fourth year at Sunnyville Elementary School (PK-3), a small urban school with approximately 260 students in total, located in the Mid-Western region of the United States. At the beginning of data collection for this study, Mrs. Dee had recently taken on the role of principal at Sunnyville Elementary School in an urban district called Hope Field. Prior to her administration position, Mrs. Dee spent 4 years teaching social studies at secondary schools in a large metropolitan city and worked as a reading specialist in a neighboring suburban district for another 4 years. She earned her master’s degree focusing on literacy education while teaching Social Studies and completed her administrator certification at Sky University before she was hired by the Hope Field district. During the time of data collection, Mrs. Dee was enrolled in a Ed. D. doctoral program at Sky University.

Sunnyville Elementary can be described as a small urban school, specifically urban characteristic (Milner, 2012) due to its proximity to a larger city in the Midwest and challenges associated with larger urban districts such as resource allocation, qualification of teachers, and academic development of students. Student demographic reflected 87% students of color with 13% of students identifying as white and more than 80% of students were considered eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. Teacher demographics at Sunnyville Elementary were predominantly white with the exception of two teachers of color among 11 teachers in total. The Hope Field district, a large urban district, serves student populations who have been historically marginalized both economically and by race in the region.

Data Generation

Data sources for this study include a total of eight interviews with Mrs. Dee collected from both authors and fieldnotes that recorded our observations of her work and interactions with teachers, students, and families at Sunnyville throughout the school year. In the larger study, the first author explored accountability perceptions depicted in daily practices of three school principals by conducting shadowing, individual interviews, focus groups and artifacts to generate data over the course of the 2018–2019 school year (August 2018–June 2019). Mrs. Dee was one of her three participants and offered rich information regarding her ideas of social justice leadership and related incidents. Among them, this current study used transcripts generated from four interviews with Mrs. Dee (each interview lasted from 40 to 80 min) and fieldnotes that recorded around 40 h of shadowing Mrs. Dee’s daily work. The second author sought to investigate how school leaders engage the voices of youth of color in the elementary school context which resulted in three 60-min interviews with Mrs. Dee coupled with weekly school observations as well as repetitive dialogue

²All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms, including names of participant, school, and district.

groups and 12 makerspace sessions (each session lasted an hour) with youth at Sunnyville between May 2019-February 2020. While this study was youth-centered, Mrs. Dee was also part of analysis as she considered herself to be a social justice leader committed to student voice. Three interviews were conducted with Mrs. Dee and fieldnotes recording her visits (twice a week, 24 observation sessions) were used for the analysis of the current study.

Data Analysis

Focusing on data which showcased Mrs. Dee's thinking on leadership theory and practice, we conducted cycles of analysis by applying the theoretical lenses of heroic metaphors and social justice leadership. The analysis of metaphor was not applied to our original studies, but the previous analyses of the interview data oriented us toward discourses and assumptions embedded in language Mrs. Dee used. Thus, we first conducted metaphor coding (Saldaña, 2021) to identify Mrs. Dee's use of heroic metaphors (including analogy, allusion, synecdoche, metonymy) in describing her approaches to social justice leadership. The metaphors we identified in this stage of analysis generated three categories showing patterns of heroic approaches: *battle-related*, *problem fixing*, and *placing herself as the model for teachers to follow*. Thinking with these three categories as an analytical tool (see MacDonald, 2019), we then re-read the raw data again to explore underlying assumptions and contexts behind the identified use of metaphors that may undermine social justice principles. Throughout the analysis, we used analytic memos (Charmaz, 2014) to record our analytic account of the ways the highlighted data and assumptions behind them conflict with and/or align with theoretical grounds of social justice leadership. In doing so, we identified an overarching theme of our findings: *situating herself at the center of social justice leadership initiatives*. Each step of analysis was conducted individually and collaboratively, accompanying 12 weekly meetings where we reflected upon individually conducted analyses and collaboratively made decisions for the following analyses.

Researcher Positionality

(Taeyeon Kim) I identify myself as a female scholar of color, with transnational teaching and learning experience. Working on my inquiry about leadership through research projects, my experience with multiple education systems led me to realize that school leadership in the U.S. tends to heavily rely on principal-driven approaches without establishing structures that could sustain teacher leadership and systemic support for principals to meet policy goals, compared to other countries. Especially throughout my fieldwork at Sunnyville Elementary, where Mrs. Dee committed herself to improve racialized inequity and achieve social justice agendas, the source of leadership seemed to heavily weigh Mrs. Dee's individual intelligence and capacities. I admired Mrs. Dee's strong passion and commitments to dismantle unjust education systems and deficit views about students of color; at the same time, I was attuned to heroic discourses prevalent in her leadership ideas and practices, when asking how and why she chose to do them. Moreover, as a

multilingual scholar using English as my second language, I was surprised by the dominant use of expressions that glorify heroic and militarized expressions when describing leadership and school principalship in the language of English. This positionality gave me an outsider view as a transnational scholar who had worked within other education systems experiencing various leadership styles and structures outside the U.S. My insider gaze was informed by my time as a former educator and current leadership scholar examining the complexity of the work of school principals within research.

(Courtney Mauldin) As an interdisciplinary scholar who self-identifies as a Black woman researcher and educator, I was situated as both an insider and outsider in my respective study. My insider status was more prominent in my work alongside the youth where lines of shared racialized, gendered and classed experiences were relatable and familiar from my own schooling and lived experiences. However, as an adult in the space and former elementary educator, I was cognizant of the importance of working alongside the youth to alleviate power struggles and the resemblance of classroom structures in our time together. This required critical listening when engaging with students and critical reflexivity of my research practice and approaches to the study. While working with Mrs. Dee in the context of the study, I was also keenly aware of how our identities differed and where our experiences as former teachers and investment in developing conscious teachers complemented.

In taking together our findings for this particular study, we began by discussing what themes were troubling, especially considering that Mrs. Dee saw herself as a social justice leader. We began to question where social justice leadership principles were reflected as well as where they might be in contradiction. For this paper, *we do not desire to argue that Mrs. Dee is a poor leader. Instead, we use Mrs. Dee's leadership as a case worthy of examining the presence of heroic centered ideologies that could result in unintended harm when doing the work of social justice leadership.*

Limitations

We also acknowledge the limitations of this study. As we use one single case for analysis, we are cautious about generalizing our interpretation of Mrs. Dee's case. Rather, we intend to use Mrs. Dee's case to provoke a wider discussion around heroic discourses in leadership ideology and practices. We also acknowledge that using a single case prevented us from identifying whether or not the principal's use of metaphor was more tied to her contextual factors than individual perceptions. Future studies can further examine this inquiry by involving multiple cases to analyze metaphors around social justice leadership.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our analysis showed that Mrs. Dee's idea of social justice leadership relied on discourse which centered on war-normalized language like, naming herself a "social justice warrior" who often encountered "battles" with others who did not support her ideas. Simultaneously, she placed herself as the

standard model for teachers to follow, embodying a savior complex for both her teachers and students. For each theme, we illustrate data and discuss how these heroic approaches to leadership can result in unintended harms to achieve social justice.

“A Social Justice Warrior”: To Win the Battle

Mrs. Dee often commented that she saw herself as a “social justice warrior” confronting multiple “battles,” “fights,” and what she felt was “chaos” within a system that did not necessarily support equity and even perpetuated inequalities for her students who were identified as majorly Black and Multi-racial in the Sunnyville school community. When she encountered any unjust situations, Mrs. Dee communicated that she had won several “battles” with persistence, reminding herself of non-negotiable agendas to achieve equity, in the context of shaping “culturally responsive” building environments, engaging with families, and making sure opportunities were available for students’ successful learning. While these non-negotiables were well intentioned and can be viewed as an asset of social justice leaders, they often came at the cost of Mrs. Dee breaking the trust of her staff and choosing to exclude stakeholders like her teachers to participate in the process. Therefore, her desires to achieve social justice aims were met with resistance and Mrs. Dee’s non-negotiables ultimately sacrificed her end goals of social justice.

For instance, one of her “battles” was about re-inventing the new literacy curriculum that would work for students who experience marginalization at Sunnyville. Mrs. Dee wanted her teachers to write a lesson plan around one learning objective, instead of multiple objectives, as the district literacy curriculum presents. The rationale behind this initiative was based on her assessment of Sunnyville students who tended to experience difficulties in mastering multiple targets and thus needed “repetition, reteaching, and direct instruction.” As a social justice leader, Mrs. Dee reviewed her student data often and assessed critical yet responsive ways to support student learning. In some ways, this required that Mrs. Dee work with teacher leaders in her building to deconstruct the curriculum in order to ensure that students had adequate time and attention to progress on their reading skills as opposed to forcing students to move on to the next set of standards before they were ready.

To implement this idea, Mrs. Dee had to work through the “battle” with the textbook coach from Intermediate School District (ISD) as well as her teachers who did not want to adopt the new curriculum in their teaching. She described her first encounter with the textbook coach when she and her teachers adopted a new literacy curriculum in October 2018:

So, the battle that I’m fighting that they [teachers] don’t even know, is with the textbook coach. So, what I’m learning through this unpacking process, not only does it take years, but when I have this [new curriculum] done into a working document, if I just handed it to teachers, it’s not going to work. It’s the process of doing it, right? It’s hours of work. My battle now and it gets really ugly, is this new curriculum.

The textbook coach strongly insisted that she follow the “front to back” approach. Essentially, suggesting that she have teachers to follow the respective units in the designed sequence. The textbook coach stated, “that’s what research says.” However, Mrs. Dee questioned that research as evidence by saying “none of them (the research studies) was done with students of poverty, not my demographic.” In her work with a handful of teacher leaders, she felt the choice to unpack and select key standards and objectives to support student literacy was the best approach when taking into account her students’ current literacy data. For Mrs. Dee, a thematic approach to literacy from the district curriculum proved to be more effective, as well as her purchasing of culturally responsive texts for various classrooms to complement the teaching of state standards. Mrs. Dee eventually “won the battle” because the local district approved her approach to the curriculum in the School Improvement Plan meeting in March 2019.

It is important for leaders to adhere to social justice principles in their everyday practices. However, we are also concerned that underlying assumptions behind such metaphors like those used by Mrs. Dee align with the conventional heroic approaches that are often found in military leadership (Armstrong et al., 2020). We argue that the mindset of “to win the battle” (otherwise “to lose”) could consciously and unconsciously undermine the co-constructive processes of establishing social justice norms at the organization level because teachers and other staff members who need to develop social justice perspectives can be excluded and not welcomed as the enemy in her “battles.”

This was found in the strategies Mrs. Dee used to deal with the textbook coach and teachers who were not onboard for using the new curriculum. At the end of the school year, when asked about how she handled the textbook coach, Mrs. Dee explained the way she “played the politics.”

I lied to her [the textbook coach]. I mean, I don’t, I just let her think what she wants. So we do our walkthroughs and she gives me feedback on how to give feedback and I just ‘play the politics’ because we have gone head to head. It’s not going to work. Right? It just causes stress for my boss [interim superintendent]. So I buffer my teachers [who were implementing the new curriculum] and then, my couple of teachers that just are obsessed with front to back. Okay. We go coach them [a couple of teachers using a ‘front to back’ approach]. So, she [the coach] has no idea what we are doing!

Mrs. Dee strategically took the coach to the teachers who used “front-to-back” approaches and made the coach believe that her teachers were implementing “front-to-back” the coach wanted to see. This approach includes teachers following the scope and sequence as outlined in the district curriculum. While Mrs. Dee, as a social justice leader, could have pushed the coach’s thinking and skills to better serve socially and economically marginalized students like youth at Sunnyville, she did not. In an effort to avoid another possible battle with the coach, Mrs. Dee failed to challenge the coaches’ thinking on the use of standard

curriculum. Instead, she thought it was better to showcase the teachers who did follow the “front to back” approach to avoid further conflict.

Moreover, regarding her teachers who were against the new curriculum, Mrs. Dee planned for a “difficult conversation” with them. She gave them the option to choose either to comply with the initiative or leave Sunnyville Elementary School. She said,

Um, so the difficult conversation will come at the end of the year where I show them [teachers who are against the new curriculum] the data. Okay, we did it your way. I respect your professional opinion. Here’s your data, look at your partner’s data. What are we going to do if you’re going to continue to stay here? Um, you need to be on board or there’s plenty of schools in this district that you can just punch the clock.

These responses from Mrs. Dee illuminate that assumptions behind her use of war-related metaphors, such as “warrior,” “fight,” “battle,” or going “head-to-head,” can exclude people who are not onboard with her initiatives. It is important for social justice leaders to firmly stick to equity-related principles in their leadership practices, but her examples also show that, when passions toward social justice are entangled with a binary thinking of winning as a hero (or to lose as a failure), it does not necessarily help the leader to guide people who are not likely to join social justice initiatives to be a part of the co-construction of leadership. Eventually, those who *need to be changed* the most to achieve social justice principles as a team, community, and whole society, can be excluded from the influence of leadership.

“They Were in Survival”: A Savior Complex to “Fix the Problems”

We found some of Mrs. Dee’s practices and language also reflected a savior complex, framing herself as a leader who could fix the existing problems at Sunnyville Elementary. She often emphasized her “big personality” and playing “pivotal roles” in solving multiple problems she framed as having been caused by *others*. Especially in terms of social justice agendas, the idea behind such language was that, without Mrs. Dee, “nobody would push social justice agendas and “the system [the way the school was organized] would collapse.” Commenting on multiple incidents across her interviews, Mrs. Dee highlighted herself as the only source of leadership that would fix teachers’ mindset and problematic practices. She specifically addressed the inequitable system working at Sunnyville, and parents who would “get into each other” without her presence. Overall, Mrs. Dee’s savior complex clouded true social justice practice with actions that sought to “rescue” students, parents and teachers from themselves.

When describing her first year as a principal at Sunnyville, Mrs. Dee repeatedly said, “It was a hot mess.” She stated,

When I walked in 3 years ago, it was a hot mess. I mean, it was a hot mess. ... Everybody [teachers] was just dumping everybody [students with behavior issues] in

the office. Nobody was entering anything for data, for discipline. Everybody was getting sent home instead of problem-solving. And I say this too. They were in survival. So, without a leader at the top, I don’t blame them.

Mrs. Dee immediately linked these problems to the previous principal of Sunnyville, stating, “There’s a long history in this building of leaders being dictators, and if a leader’s a dictator, then it’s much easier to just hate them. . .” She also felt that the influence of the previous principal, whom she called a “dictator,” still remained in her building, which led her teachers to assume Mrs. Dee was also a “dictator.” Thus, she believed part of her teachers’ resistance to social justice initiatives came from their experiences with the previous principal who made teachers easily hate their principal, or whoever was new in the position. Although Mrs. Dee criticized dictator style leadership of the former principal, ironically, Mrs. Dee appeared positioned herself as a savior who had fixed the “hot mess” that resulted from her teachers and the former principal. This approach to Mrs. Dee’s leadership seemed to be supported by and relied on the idea that the school principal, rather than the collective school community, was mainly responsible for driving changes across the school, reinforcing individual leader dependent leadership practices. However, this idea of principal as a significant source of leadership does not align with examples of social justice leaders who successfully transformed schools through shared leadership practices (see Dematthews and Izquierdo, 2017; Wang, 2018; Shields and Hesbol, 2020).

One of the urgent problems Mrs. Dee wanted to fix was the high suspension rate of her students—whom she often called “students in poverty.” Mrs. Dee said, “My goal is, we’ve got restorative justice in the building, I should be seeing at least three times as much restorative justice than suspension.” She further explained,

I believe strongly in the pipeline to prison idea, that my students don’t have the same opportunities as the students across town. And due to turnover at times or family adversity, the relationships are different and we know from brain research that their brains are different. Suspending them not only rewards them at home, but it doesn’t fix the problem. So, I am trying to show staff that it’s not class-by-class that all of these kids or all of our kids and it’s all of our responsibility. So, I’m trying to knock that off. . . . Calling parents 50 million times every day is not going to work, you’ve just lost trust with parents. They are at a loss, often they’re struggling at home and they don’t know what to do and they feel like we’re judging them. We have to teach our parents how to advocate for their own kid and work together.

Challenging her teachers who suspended students without efforts to “fix the problem,” Mrs. Dee emphasized the negative consequences of suspending students. She also acknowledged multiple factors, such as family situations and student brain

development impacted by trauma. As a problem solver, Mrs. Dee wanted to decrease suspension rates by “teaching” her teachers and parents. However, Mrs. Dee failed to recognize that some of her dispositions about students, parents and families reflected deficit assumptions and framing. Similar to that of deficit thinking reflected in a culture of poverty lens, Mrs. Dee emphasized the lack of skills and experiences of students positioning children and families as flawed or in need of *fixing*. Her notion that parents have to be “taught how to advocate” for their own students undermines the realities of an inequitable system that parents encounter when advocating for their students in their own way, or the fact that they need to advocate for their kids in the first place with teachers. Such disposition in fact reinforce power “over” not power “with” approaches to school-family relationships (see Ishimaru, 2019).

For Mrs. Dee, her physical presence was essential; otherwise, teachers and parents would be in “trouble” and not be able to fix the problems by themselves. Mrs. Dee’s language constantly illuminated herself as a person “at the top” who made the biggest impact on every aspect of school practices by setting “a whole tone.” When asked about her daily routines, Mrs. Dee described,

My first priority is families. So, my number one goal to set the whole tone of the day is to greet every student off the bus and my families. Rain, shine, everything. And I have to direct traffic out here because if I’m not out here, I’m not kidding, parents get into it with each other. Because I’m so big on attendance that my families know that I expect all kids to be here on time. And being outside is a way for me to check-in with my families. So, I’m able to check in with every bus driver and I’m able to check in with every family that needs to check in with me.

Like many other social justice leaders, Mrs. Dee highlighted the importance of building relationships with families. However, as noted above, Mrs. Dee emphasized the significance of her physical presence in directing families because she assumed parents would not get along with each other without her. Similarly, Mrs. Dee suggested that her presence *within* the building changed how teachers approach student voice and expressed that “the system is not sustainable” without her for now.

Courtney Mauldin: In what ways would you like to see your students’ voices operate in the school?

Mrs. Dee: . . . if I’m standing there, we still talk to kids differently [implied poorly] than when I’m not standing there. The biggest reason I know that my system is not sustainable at this point is because when I’m out of my building, it runs differently, and I can’t stand it.

Above responses suggest that Mrs. Dee assumed other members of her school were the cause of her system not being sustainable. She felt that this problem would persist without her

presence and that it was one of her personal areas of improvement where she was not sure of how to create a sustainable system for how teachers engaged with students. We acknowledge that Mrs. Dee, like many other social justice leaders, was good at identifying “problems” and developing strategies to “fix the problems” with her “arrogant humility” and capacity as a leader (Theoharis, 2008). However, in doing so, she put herself at the center of *fixing the problems*, implying teachers and parents lack the capability to solve the problems. Although Mrs. Dee noted the instability of her system “at this point,” we argue that this savior complex residing in Mrs. Dee’s perceptions undermine democratic practices of distributing leadership amongst her staff and communities or bringing in minoritized perspectives as social justice ideas might lend itself to. Moreover, Mrs. Dee’s savior complex could perpetuate the “othering” approach, setting a binary of herself as a *problem solver* and the others as *problem makers*, impeding possibilities of co-constructing a sustainable system toward social justice.

“Place Myself Where the Right Teachers Need to See Me Model”

Our analysis revealed that the most salient approach Mrs. Dee used to “fix the problems” was modeling. Mrs. Dee frequently shared that she was the “showcase” and “model” for her teachers. Such views were grounded in Mrs. Dee’s view of herself as being an “extraordinary leader” and “successful teacher” who could increase student achievement; language typically found in heroic leadership approaches (Ehrensals, 2015). Her modeling approaches, to some degree, align with Theoharis’ (2008) notion of “arrogant humility” where arrogance comes from confidence in regards to levels of intelligence and continuous learning. However, in Mrs. Dee’s case, our analysis suggests her attitudes incline toward arrogance instead of humility, placing herself as the only professional figure for teachers to model and follow.

With her previous background as a reading specialist and her Masters in literacy education, Mrs. Dee said, “I really believe in an instructional leader at the top and there’s a lot of principals that are not instructional leaders.” Aligning with this belief, Mrs. Dee positioned herself as an “instructional leader at the top” at Sunnyville Elementary and would spend 30 min teaching daily with a group of six third grade students during recess pods. Walking out from one of her teaching sessions, Mrs. Dee shared,

...So, it’s my job to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. So, I strategically place myself where the right teachers need to see me model. And day in and day out, I am modeling our big initiative and learning targets this year, and criteria for success. And we’re on our second chapter book already. And I run focus groups with them and tape them and play it for staff and they see my level of teaching, my expectations and it spreads.

Mrs. Dee viewed herself as an instructional model for “right” teachers to follow. Arguing modeling needs to be

done by way of “walking the walk,” she wanted to show her own “level of teaching” and “high expectations” for her teachers to adopt.

On another occasion, when talking about state mandated test for third grade students, Mrs. Dee linked her teaching to student scores, by saying:

The kids that you see me work with are my contribution to that state test because I don't want my third-grade teachers to feel that they are alone, and they do feel alone and because of mobility and um. . .poverty. . . if I can contribute even six kids out of the 45, to try to blow those scores away and show them it can be done, then I need to do that and I would argue I'm probably the only one [principal] in the district teaching. So in a perfect world I would be modeling lessons all over the building and I will find a way to get it done.

Because Mrs. Dee wanted to share the third-grade teachers' burdens, she intended to let teachers know “it can be done” through her ways of teaching as evidence and at standard. While modeling is a frequent strategy used by leaders (Szeto and Cheng, 2018), Mrs. Dee's approaches which centered herself in various aspects of teaching seemed to create a further distance between herself and teachers. For instance, when teachers had any complaints about Mrs. Dee-driven initiatives, teachers would send Mrs. Marshall, an instructional coach, to Mrs. Dee's office instead of speaking up in a whole group. Mrs. Marshall, a veteran literacy teacher, was one of two teacher leaders Mrs. Dee relied on when developing the new literacy curriculum in her first and second year. Due to Mrs. Dee's trust built with her throughout the process of curriculum development, Mrs. Marshall seemed to often play a mediator role between Mrs. Dee and other teachers by having 1:1 conversations with Mrs. Dee. Mrs. Dee commented on her teachers' silent resistance.

So people [teachers] gravitate towards her [Mrs. Marshall] to complain. But I think that's just what it is, is to complain. And um, you're in a district that is tough. . . . I want you to practice self-care, but you have to have a sense of urgency for these kids that your data represents you and your instruction and whatever you have to do to get them there. It is your responsibility. . . . Um, I understand that you can't hold yourself to my standard because I'm insane and have the kids and the doctorate and like I get that, I get that. But I was also a teacher and I did a very good job. I did not go to my boss for every single one [problem] and I put money in my classroom.

Mrs. Dee wanted her teachers to have “a sense of urgency” for her students and to commit more as she did, assuming student data was a reflection of her teachers and their teaching. She brought her own accomplishments and commitments where she was a “successful” teacher to set criteria for her teachers. Mrs. Dee acknowledged that being herself as an exceptional leader herself

could intimidate her teachers, but she seemed to enjoy highlighting her extraordinariness as a model teacher who could be successful despite extremely difficult circumstances lacking resources and systemic supports, which aligns with heroic leadership—i.e., ordinary, other individuals would not be successful (Fleming et al., 2018). At the same time, she insisted her teachers needed to follow her because she had been successful. We argue that the underlying assumptions of placing herself as an exceptional heroic model can create and reify a hierarchy between a leader (principal) and multiple followers (teachers and students) in schools, not necessarily positioning teachers and students as *leaders* who can lead changes for social justice. This eventually could have led her teachers to remain silent and resist Mrs. Dee's initiatives, undermining co-constructing efforts to build a sustainable system for social justice.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As demonstrated in our findings, the use of metaphors in Mrs. Dee's discourse offered insight into her dispositions about leadership practice and the ways in which she enacted social justice leadership. Although Mrs. Dee sought to uphold social justice in her leadership, it is evidenced that her practice mirrored that of a savior complex as well as seeing herself as a hero who had to prepare for “battle” in the name of social justice. While Mrs. Dee was well intentioned in this approach, there were apparent gaps in how she understood and enacted social justice leadership. Most apparent was the need for critical self-reflection which Khalifa (2018) describes as fundamental to the process of developing a culturally responsive leadership. Similarly, “ongoing actions, skills, habits of mind, and competencies that are continually being greeted, questioned, and refined” (DeMatthews and Mawhinney, 2014, p.847) are required when pursuing social justice leadership. Throughout our analysis, we have been careful to illustrate Mrs. Dee as a leader who was committed to social justice but often found herself in contradiction to these socially just aims which resulted in unintended harm such as deficit framing and assumptions of students and families. Seeing herself as a *problem solver* while viewing her teachers as *problem makers*, as well as positioning herself as a superior model for teachers ultimately produced outcomes that were not favorable to her intended social justice goals. While school leaders are imperfect and are on a continuum of growth, we argue that one cannot position themselves as a social justice leader without doing the fundamental reflection needed to combat perpetuating harm to students and the school community. Further, listening to all voices is essential in the work of leading schools. It is especially important that leaders craft and listen to the histories and stories of students, teachers, staff, parents and communities (Byrne-Jiménez & Yoon, 2019). Without making these contradictions of Mrs. Dee's leadership assumptions and leadership practice visible, these unintended harms are likely to remain silently cloaked under the visible self-claimed agenda of “social justice leadership” that may miss leaders' authentic engagement in social justice principles and practice. These illustrations highlighted in our study misalign

with theoretical constructs of social justice leadership of valuing democratic and shared approaches to sustain social justice goals (Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2008; DeMatthews et al., 2016; Dematthews and Izquierdo, 2017; Wang, 2018; Shields and Hesbol, 2020).

While sentiments of heroism are evidenced throughout her engagement with her school community, this was not entirely alarming. We find several explanations for heroic assumptions pertaining to mindsets and practices in social justice leadership. First, Mrs. Dee's heroic discourses can be understood as a reflection of white male Eurocentric views that are prevalent in the roots of leadership theories and practices (Alston, 2005; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2019; Liu, 2020; Lopez, 2020; Liou & Liang, 2021). For instance, Khalifa (2018) notes that schools continue to remain disconnected from the communities they claim to serve. This is a by-product of colonizing models of leadership that have prevailed over time. Recognizing that school leadership models were situated in colonial schooling (Mackey, 2017; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2019) and were therefore intended to create good citizens, schools and their leadership have difficulty breaking from these models that position one individual as all knowing as well as the engagement of expected assimilation under the person in position of the central leadership role. This historical view of schooling may be pertinent to Mrs. Dee's ideas and practice of leadership.

Another explanation is that the current school systems and policy environments are not designed to support schools achieving social justice goals. We acknowledge this reality as relevant but not a justification for battle minded approaches to rely on one individual. These systems can lead to self-claimed social justice leaders—who identify problems and resources needed for social justice initiatives—to feel isolated and rely heavily on their own knowledge and capacities to lead, rather than having systematic support (see Theoharis, 2008; Armstrong et al., 2020). As shown in our findings, with the principal-centered school model, leaders can easily reinforce “power over” approaches to teachers, parents, and families, by positioning principals as a central source of leadership thus neglecting the critical insights and vantage points these communities bring. Moreover, compared to other countries where school systems are well invested in shared leadership through policies, resource coordination, and professional teaching culture (Kim and Lee, 2020; Kim et al., 2021), school systems in the US demand school principals take on multiple roles and responsibilities. Although researchers have pushed against such a trend by advocating for distributed or shared leadership (e.g., Marks & Printy, 2003; Spillane, 2005; Harris, 2013), the reality of US school systems is one that does not fully support a distributed leadership amongst multiple stakeholders but one that positions an individual at the top with both management and instructional leadership responsibilities.

Lastly, the current policy environments driven by accountability measures, such as standardized scores and other types of data, can increase a sense of urgency for

measurable outcomes (Kim, 2020) and reify “false claims of ‘social justice’ to close achievement gaps” (DeMatthews et al., 2016, p.759). Accountability policies entangled with capitalist ideologies (Lipman, 2013) also promote a performative nature of leadership. In fact, Mrs. Dee's commitments to prioritizing visible standards and data, advancing student test scores, and rapid improvement of student outcomes were salient in our data. These commitments were admirable and important but not in service of social justice outcomes. Mrs. Dee's priorities shown in our findings overlooked critical elements of social justice leadership such as reflecting on the larger sociopolitical context that shaped much of what she observed and critiqued with a deficit lens at Sunnyville Elementary.

We argue that leadership development and leadership practices need to be cognizant about these sociohistorical contexts that shape and reify the heroic leader narratives. Individual leaders also have to be aware of how power dynamics and privilege that they possess interact with teachers, students, and families in the work of social justice. More research is needed on how principals enact social justice sans the gaze of a “hero” or savior. Additionally, we believe that social justice leadership must be grounded in democratic processes that include communities and various stakeholders (DeMatthews et al., 2016; Wang, 2018). Traditional theories that heavily focus on individualistic leadership and organizational effectiveness to transform schools and systems, undermine the core of social justice leadership and creates potential for socially just outcomes to come at additional costs that do not ultimately foster an inclusive and just school community of belonging. Further, to do this work without teachers committed to unlearning former practices that are unjust, the school leader is burdened with doing this essential work alone.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because our raw data contains information that can be used for potential identification, we do not share the raw data publicly. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to TK, tkim@unl.edu.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Michigan State University IRB. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors collaboratively analyzed data and wrote the manuscript collaboratively. TK as the first author led analysis and setting an overarching argument of the study.

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