Understanding the emotional aspects of social justice leadership

Helping to prepare future school leaders

The emotionality of school leadership is an area that has not been explored in depth to date. However, there is growing evidence that the affective world of school leaders is both complex and intense. School leaders are confronted on a daily basis with a variety of emotions that are inextricably linked to personal, professional, relational, political, and cultural issues.

The school leaders’ emotional struggles have significant implications for their decision making, well-being, and overall leadership style. For instance, there is research that shows how school leaders are constantly engaged in emotion management processes, often with serious implications not only for their emotional health but also for their professional effectiveness; at the same time, however, research also documents how mechanisms of emotion management help school leaders promote their own agenda, survive the high emotional demands of school leadership, and bring meaningful changes to their school.

Social justice leadership

Social justice leadership means that school leaders make prominent issues of social inclusion, justice, respect, care and equity. In the forefront of social justice leadership there is a concern about the impact of race, class, gender, disability and other historically marginalized conditions on schools and students’ learning.

Contrary to the dominant concerns about technical competences, bureaucracy, and efficiency for effective school leadership, social justice leadership enables questions to be asked about how social, political, and economic advantages and disadvantages are replicated in school organizational structures and cultures. It is those issues that have gradually constituted social justice and diversity concerns as “risky” business for school leaders favoring high scores in student outcomes as evidence of success. The purpose for school leaders, from this standpoint, is to achieve more equitable outcomes for all.

Principal Jonas

The case study examined in this paper describes the leadership practices of primary school principal, John Jonas, as he navigated the ambivalent emotions that emerged in his attempts to establish a social justice leadership at a multicultural school in Cyprus.

Principal Jonas was chosen as the focus of this case study because he became widely known for his passion for social justice and equity; this made him an excellent choice among the principals of the multicultural schools that were part of a larger research project. His struggles to navigate the emotional ambivalence of social justice leadership are used as a springboard to provide suggestions for leadership preparation programs.
Vision and practices of leadership for social justice

Principal Jonas described a number of practices he had implemented in his school to promote his social justice vision. His primary goal was to change existing school structures so that a guiding framework and practice of justice was enacted by school staff, students, and the community. Thus, he encouraged his staff to incorporate new ideas in the curriculum that met the specific needs of the particular school.

Another practice that Principal Jonas implemented was to organize systematically events so that all parents, and especially non-indigenous and minority students and their parents, could be active participants in school life and the community – such as, inviting professionals to give lectures and seminars, offering afternoon Greek lessons to non-indigenous parents and children, organizing school events in which students and parents from various countries could speak their language and present their culture to the community.

Principal Jonas's enactment of vision and practice for social justice leadership highlights a number of issues that leadership preparation programs must attend to. These issues refer to the importance of developing critical consciousness both as a personal goal and as a goal for all students so that they can live as critical citizens.

Ambivalent emotions of social justice leadership

Principal Jonas's emotions about social justice leadership were ambivalent, that is, there were both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. In a discussion about the emotional aspects of leadership, Principal Jonas made an important distinction between emotions related to leadership in general and emotions related to social justice leadership, in particular. As he explained, "Leadership is by definition an emotional process, but the commitment to promote values of social justice and equity is even more so."

Principal Jonas struggled particularly with the emotions of disappointment and frustration, as a result of his perceived sense of personal inadequacy and the resistance he faced to the social justice work he tried to do. However, he also had pleasant feelings to share from the relationships he developed with students and community members.

His descriptions about both the pleasant and unpleasant emotions of engaging in social justice leadership are valuable for leadership preparation programs, because they show the constant emotional intensity involved. Thus leadership students get a good picture of both the rewards and the challenges in enacting such a leadership approach.

Strategies of social justice leadership

For Principal Jonas, practicing social justice leadership was an emotionally demanding process that changed him over time. In relation to internal coping strategies, Principal Jonas admitted that his emotional responses were often "paralyzing" so he consciously tried to find some emotional balancing in his responses.

Furthermore, Principal Jonas's struggle to navigate his ambivalent emotions produced changes in his understanding and practice of social justice leadership. For example, he gradually came to the realization that social justice leadership was not an individual but a communal effort.

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Principal Jonas's case highlights that leadership preparation programs for social justice must teach prospective principals tools to cope with the personal and structural dimensions of social justice leadership.

**Implications for leadership preparation programs**

Preparation programs for school leaders often focus their attention primarily on the effectiveness and efficiency of schools. This narrow emphasis fails to prepare school leaders to engage in the difficult emotional work that requires a shift in values, attitudes, and practices and limits their ability to address fundamental social justice issues.

The difficulty of focusing on social justice issues becomes even more obvious in a time when governments and school systems want to focus primarily on the achievement of basic skills. Therefore, there seems to be a need to change teacher education programs as well as leadership programs to ensure that teachers and leaders are aligned to social justice issues and are able to accept the different perspective that this might bring. If leaders for social justice are to be successful, they need teachers with similar viewpoints.

In particular, for educational leadership preparation programs to promote and sustain a social justice orientation, future school leaders need to be provided with opportunities to engage in critical emotional reflexivity on their values and practices as well as their impact on the community. Future (or practicing) school leaders need to address the significance of critical emotional reflexivity as a tool of sustaining their emotional resistance against unjust policies and teaching practices.

Principal Jonas's case study suggests that school leaders can challenge and expand the possibilities of social justice leadership by investigating the role of emotions as impetus for social justice work at their school.

Leadership preparation programs often emphasize the effectiveness and efficiency dimensions of leadership, failing to connect those dimensions to social justice and its emotional demands. It seems clear, however, that the emotions of social justice leadership deserve more attention in leadership preparation programs.

**Comment**

This is a review of “The emotional aspects of leadership for social justice: Implications for leadership preparation programs” by Michalinos Zembylas. This article uses a case study to provide analysis of a principal’s emotional struggles to do social justice work. It enhances understanding of the emotional aspects of social justice leadership for the purpose of making recommendations for leadership preparation programs. The article is clear and concise, and employs an interesting and readable style. It is of value to both future and practicing school leaders.

**Reference**