A Global Perspective of Social Justice Leadership for School Principals

reviewed by [Jon Veenis](http://www.tcrecord.org/AuthorDisplay.asp?aid=26715)— April 06, 2018

**Title:** A Global Perspective of Social Justice Leadership for School Principals
**Author(s):** Pamela S. Angelle (Ed.)
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A *Global Perspective of Social Justice Leadership for School Principals*is the product of a collaborative research effort that builds upon the expertise of international scholars representing a diverse range of countries. It emanates from the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN), which was launched for the dual purpose of entrenching deeper cross-national research partnerships and exploring school leadership from a wide array of international perspectives. In summarized form, the book explores how contextual factors influence the conceptualization and enactment of social justice leadership in 11 different countries (i.e., with a primary focus on school principals and head teachers).

This volume is a thoughtfully arranged collection of papers that offers fresh insights into the various dimensions and subtleties of social justice leadership; some of these understandings are unique to their own respective contexts, while others transcend contextual borderlands. To that end, this book delivers on the implicit but too often unrealized promise of cross-national comparative research, revealing similarities, differences, nuanced perspectives, and new possibilities for the work of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who seek to learn from the experiences of others. The overarching design of the project is strengthened by the application of a common framework for exploring issues of social justice leadership; that is, each empirical study employs a common set of research questions, a shared conceptual model, and the same research methodology (i.e., a case study approach). While the project’s methodological uniformity fortified the overall clarity and coherence of the book in a holistic way, it did so without stifling the inherent distinctiveness of each individual chapter. To that end, what makes this volume unique is the diversity of theoretical perspectives, writing styles, analytical approaches, and professional experiences brought to the table by its various contributors.

The conceptual framework chosen by the ISLDN team is also an inherent strength of the book (see Chapter Three for a more detailed explanation). Following a three-tiered paradigmatic approach, which includes an examination of *micro-meso-macro* contextual influences, the framework functions on several different levels within the parameters of the team’s research efforts. First, it serves as an efficient and effective acclimatizer; that is, it expeditiously and purposefully immerses the itinerant traveler into a given milieu, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of how social justice is defined and comprehended in a given setting. Second, it helps to paint a more complete and precise depiction of context, engendering a three-dimensional view of social justice leadership (i.e., triangulated against the three layers of context mentioned above). Finally, the framework is broad enough to include an array of different types of empirical works across a range of settings while simultaneously creating necessary boundaries around such endeavors. Moreover, the team’s fidelity to the three-tiered conceptual framework not only contributed to the book’s overall cohesiveness, but also led to the unearthing of unforeseen revelations concerning social justice leadership (see, for example, Fuller, 2017). Indeed, one of the more intriguing elements of the book includes how each study applied the conceptual framework in slightly different ways; modifications that added depth and texture to their respective analyses.

The inclusion of a chapter dedicated to researcher positionality helps to clarify the contours of the team’s preexistent notions of social justice leadership. It also provides a concise overview of the critical areas where ISLDN researchers find common ground; a useful blueprint for understanding the intellectual foreground for the empirical work itself. As some researchers have pointed out, self-awareness is a critical component of thoughtful empiricism and, correspondingly, reflexivity helps to create the conditions that support rigorous and ethical empirical work (see, for example, Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As Finlay (2002) rightly points out in her pithy examination of the topic, qualitative research involves the co-construction of knowledge and therefore meta-awareness is a requisite tool of the researcher who aims to avoid the pitfalls of unexplored biases. To be certain, the disclosure of positionality strengthened rather than weakened the book’s overall credibility and trustworthiness.

STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION

The book is divided into three main sections. Part Two is where the majority of the primary research is explored; it includes the analysis of ten individual studies. The book’s forward, written by Michelle Morrison, presents a compelling case for the ISLDN project itself. It is followed by a preface that outlines the genesis and evolution of the group’s collective efforts to explore two main strands of leadership as well as the book’s guiding research questions. Part One includes (a) an examination of each team member’s positionality in relation to social justice leadership, (b) a comprehensive literature review on the topic, (c) the development of the team’s overarching conceptual framework, and (d) findings from preliminary research efforts. Part Three consists of two chapters; the first is an argument in favor of autoethnography (i.e., as a leadership development tool) and the second is a summary of the limitations and future needs connected to the work of the ISLDN team. The final comments are provided by Phillip A. Woods, who offers a deeply reflective and thought-provoking piece on the notion of freedom as it pertains to social justice leadership. One of the unequivocal strengths of this book resides in the heuristic logic of its chapter-by-chapter arrangement and the eloquence of its overarching structural organization.

EXEMPLARY CHAPTERS FROM PART TWO

Although each empirical study included in Part Two offers relevant and insightful research on the topic of social justice leadership, a selection of chapters stand out for a variety of reasons (e.g., the perspicacity and depth of analysis, methodological rigor, quality of writing, etc.). That being said, taking into account the multifaceted and often personal nature of social justice as a topic, it behooves the reader to explore the contents of the book in its entirety; that is, individual reviewers are likely to make their own unique connections with certain themes and experiences emerging from each individual chapter. The aforementioned caveats aside, the following is a brief discussion of selected chapters.

In Chapter Six, Beycioglu and Ogden offer a well-organized and exceptionally clear analysis of both the similarities and nuanced distinctions between two principals’ perspectives on social justice leadership. The authors’ succinct description of the macro contexts in which each principal operated, coupled with the persuasive simplicity of their analytical approach, helped to elucidate the interconnectedness between each principal’s conceptualization of social justice and the larger setting in which they sought to enact equitable leadership practices. Offering a thought-provoking and authentic counter narrative to neoliberal hegemony, King and Travers skillfully apply Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological framework in Chapter Eight as a means to empirically assess the leadership praxes of a male and a female principal operating in two very distinctive school contexts in Ireland. The authors posit an intriguing addition to the three levels of analysis proposed by the ISLDN group; that is, the possibility of an *exosystemic* level (i.e., contextual factors that exist outside of the school leader’s sphere of influence).

Educational policy takes center stage in Chapter Ten; Torrance and Forde’s piece is a well-constructed analysis of asymmetrical and inherently flawed relationships between educational policy and professional practice (i.e., using interviews with head teachers in Scotland as the basis of analysis). The authors’ clear espousal of their theoretical framework helps to crystallize understandings of how policy moves in rather disjointed ways through the different layers of the educational system, creating dissonance between policymakers and practitioners. They too theorize an interesting addendum to the triumvirate conceptual lens; the possibility of a *nano* level in which the school leader exercises deep levels of influence over the enactment of educational policy. Potter delivers an astute analysis of how a leader’s evolving identity as an agent of social justice is both a function of time and the relative fluidity of context. Although the unit of analysis relies exclusively on one teacher’s perspective, the abundance of interview data provides ample depth and breadth to support the author’s findings, exemplifying the richness, nuance, and focus that a single-case study can bring to qualitative empiricism.

In Chapter Thirteen, the focus turns to the role that self-reflection plays in helping school leaders make sense of social justice leadership and thereby grow as stewards (and lead protagonists) of the cause. The author’s clear writing style illuminates the interdependent and at times complex relationships between *sensemaking*, prior experience, and individual perspective. McNae also underscores the enormous personal costs that often accrue when school leaders commit themselves fully to serving egalitarian ideals; too often fighting the torrential headwinds of systemic inequities entrenched in a given context. In so doing, the author considers the sometimes overlooked quandary of social justice leadership; that is, the disproportionate work demands and inherent professional risks faced by school leaders who selflessly commit themselves to ameliorating social incongruities. Indeed, her point is more than just a valid one; moreover, it speaks to the multiplicity of injustices perpetuated by broader institutional and societal forces (see, for example, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Finally, Flood and Oldham offer a concise and well-researched review of prior cross-national comparative research on the topic of social justice leadership. They accomplish the aforementioned task while also implementing an innovative approach to the essential task of a systematic review: the infusion of an operative metaphor to help elucidate its key understandings. They succeed in delivering a synthesis that is at once instructive, useful, rigorous, linguistically eloquent, and quite engaging.

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY

One of the key areas of opportunity found in this volume is the dearth of raw data emanating from non-Western contexts; a void that is duly and openly acknowledged by the editor in her final reflections, which she calls a “glaring limitation” (p. 317). In the opening chapter, Slater also makes a relevant point about perspective: he posits that macro-level contexts defined by extreme conflict or dire circumstances (e.g., war, civil unrest, famine, etc.) might produce manifestly unique viewpoints on social justice (p. 18). Indeed, the very notion of social justice might be conceived and enacted quite differently in places where, for example, overt resistance is based on appreciably and diametrically incompatible beliefs about one issue or another (e.g., religion, form of government, civil freedoms, etc.). Certainly, one finds trace elements of these kinds of conflicts in the work produced by the ISLDN team. That being said, there are distinctions between *extreme* conflict and its milder or less visceral versions. Of course, doing research in the former context can also pose ethical dilemmas or even extreme hardships for the would-be researcher. Nevertheless, if it were feasible (and appropriate) to empirically examine a setting such as the one described above, the understandings gleaned from such work might prove to be invaluable.

Another area of opportunity uncovered in this book is the relative paucity of raw data used for exemplificative purposes in some of the empirical chapters, including several that received praise in the previous section. Striking a balance between the presentation of primary data and the explication of contextual factors is, without question, a difficult tightrope walk, especially when the conceptual framework demands a certain degree of comprehensiveness. The aforementioned challenge is made even more complex when the volume includes a fairly significant number of independent studies. Generally speaking, the contributors succeeded in performing this delicate balancing act. That being said, the treatment of the overarching conceptual framework consumes a good deal of the writing in the Part Two chapters, and what is a strength can also be seen as a limitation.

While the book’s focus on thematic and conceptual continuity may be attractive to researchers and academicians, it is not always clear, at least in an immediate sense, how leaders might make use of this kind of information within the parameters of their own unique school contexts. To that end, the recommendations for school leaders are not always abundantly evident or readily transferable. And, at the same time, the cautious application of empirical claims is also appropriate, especially when considering the contextual specificity of each individual study. Furthermore, the immediacy of the book’s relevance to practitioners may not be the key to unlocking its inherent value to them. Moreover, one’s ascension toward social justice leadership is in all likelihood a progressive, perpetual, and even methodical one. Correspondingly, individual revelations about social justice are more likely the product of each leader’s unique experiences, as well as his or her ongoing efforts to make sense of what social justice means from a leadership perspective (see, for example, Theoharis, 2007). Thus, a volume of this kind is probably best conceived by practitioners as a reference that one revisits on a continual basis (i.e., for the purpose of reexamining beliefs and reconsidering the possibilities for social justice leadership). As one’s experiences accumulate, context also continues to morph (or transform altogether). With that in mind, this book can make important contributions to a school leader’s ongoing personal journey toward more enlightened understandings about equity, equality, and justice in an evolving and, in some cases, equivocal context for education.

CONCLUSION

*A Global Perspective of Social Justice Leadership for School Principals* is a rigorously researched, thought-provoking, and richly nuanced volume on the topic of social justice leadership. Having completed this particular phase of their collective work, the ISLDN team has made significant methodological contributions to the empirical study of the construct. This book succeeds in delivering a level of consistency that is often difficult to achieve across a range of individual studies, especially when the research emerges from such a diverse array of contexts. In so doing, the various contributors to this project have also preserved the distinctiveness of their own research undertakings, while also capturing the intrinsic authenticity of the people and the contexts they have chosen to explore. This book comes highly recommended to anyone who is genuinely interested in gaining a deeper understanding of how social justice is conceptualized and enacted across a range of international school settings. As the team continues its important work, a broadening of international perspectives will help to enrich, expand upon, and perhaps challenge certain understandings about social justice leadership. Finally, as mentioned in the book’s penultimate chapter, the team’s efforts to operationalize social justice leadership in new and unexplored ways represents the logical next step forward (p. 312). If the ISLDN team can succeed in disentangling the conceptual and methodological complexities of the aforementioned empirical task (e.g., quantitatively testing the effects of social justice leadership), the findings from such work might encourage educators and policymakers to focus on the topic with a heightened sense of urgency and with greater intentionality.

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