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CONCLUDING COMMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

Coming to social justice, for me, is always a new process. You can never see social injustices in the same way because of changing circumstances, situations, events, people, or just the fact that you are looking at it from a different space or at a different time. Hence, critique and revision are next steps in how we teach, learn, and lead. Obviously, contexts matter, but what does that mean when placed next to the hegemonic formats and habits of doing educational leadership research? Do the constructs themselves: social justice, equity, and inclusion offer pathways forward for rethinking research and practice?

Keywords: Problematic; scepticism; theory-method interactions; context; social justice



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PREFACE

I am aligned with the text's author(s) that researchers and practitioners ought to maintain a certain level of scepticism with respect to the constructs of educational leadership, social justice, equity, and inclusion. What that means is that no single definition, conceptual framework, review of literature, research design and methods, set of empirical data, or, especially, no one set of findings should be viewed as a total picture, complete, and finished. Capper and Young (2014) refer to these realities in educational leadership for social justice as ironies and limitations. The constructs under discussion in this text have to be seen as *in process*. In other words, educational leadership, social justice, equity, and inclusion are all defined differently within different contexts locally, nationally, and internationally. Therefore, we ought not mis-take these theories, methods, and/or leadership practices by the words on the page as being objective, value free, neutral, or completely true. The state of the art of today's very timely concepts of social justice, equity, and inclusion are still as fragmented as ever. For this reason, I believe, the author has attempted in an unorthodox manner to re-center scepticism and problematization inside these normative ideas and hegemonic structures called educational leadership research.

Our task for this commentary, as we think alongside the author, is how we make sense of a review of the different concepts of social justice, equity, and inclusion as presented in the literature (Chapter One), a conceptual chapter on equity and inclusion in relationship to sustainable development goals (Chapter Two), a policy analysis and case study about Malta (Chapter Three), a participatory case study about indigenous research in Australia (Chapter Four). Both geographical settings, of course, are former British colonies and both remain members of the Commonwealth of nations. In other words, the two settings have a lot in common. In short, the chapters cover multiple theories, multiple conceptual frameworks, case study empirical methods, policies and laws, as well as school leadership practices.

I'll end this preface with the simple question; why me as the chosen author of this concluding chapter?

Coming to social justice, for me, is always a new process. You can never see social injustices in the same way because of changing circumstances, situations, events, people, or just the fact that you are looking at it from a different space or at a different time.

And, with each review or critique, the researcher's role is to engage the reader in that situation specifically, contextually. It makes theorizing, as processes, problematic, but in a good way, forcing readers to actually see what is happening and what is not

happening at the same time. If you as a researcher can expose something not obvious or not in the readers' consciousness, then that is the first step of the process. You want to spark a dialogue by exposing a truth that if not exposed will result in a continuation of social injustice situations.

But as a researcher, there is more to do: you have to actually demonstrate the effects of social justice, not just describe it theoretically or study it superficially.

MY READING OF THE TEXT

For me, the author came to these chapters, first as a researcher through the most recent literature on leadership for social justice, and then, as a former policymaker/administrator through her experiences in Malta. What she extracted from that literature, if I am interpreting the writing correctly, was the problematization of the constructs, social justice, equity, inclusion, as a continuous beginning again. Each study itself represents a new beginning in a specific context that results in finding partial truths which fit a theory or research design, method, all inside that one context.

Therefore, what's needed to understand the findings from different theoretical/empirical studies on educational leadership for social justice are: (1) the history of the antecedents leading up to the experiences of those injustices, (2) the different consequences which emerged, not from the descriptive words on a page, but rather from the specific actions/interventions taken, and lastly, (3) the actual experiences of the participants in the empirical study who can inform us, as researchers, whether that intervention made their lives better (or worse) than it had been previously.

And what's problematic – in a good educational way – are these processes of continuous learning from actions being taken and then the designing of next steps, hopefully in the direction of social justice, equity, and inclusion. To return to the text, the Malta and Australia case studies illustrate good tries along with new ideas for what should come next. All of these processes involve intersections across theories, conceptual frameworks, methods, and analyses. All of these processes are continuous and educational.

READING AS ENGAGEMENT

If you happen to be reading this concluding commentary before the other chapters in the text, in addition to you being a radical rule-breaker, then my advice in reading is to take a sceptical or problematic post-structural position

theoretically. That means reading the theoretical chapters not for definitions or definitive conclusions, but instead for deeper understandings of the scope of scholarly interests generated by the topics of social justice, equity, and inclusion. Take note of how many different researchers are going beyond one-dimensional approaches, going beyond single axis frameworks, and going beyond the physical doors of the school house. Then as you proceed onto the two case studies, read them as experiments, one with policy in mind, the other with indigenous methodologies, guided by participants, as illustrations of pathways towards undoing social injustices.

The ideas of social justice, equity, and inclusion and their worldwide correlates are meant to make what is happening around the world as well as within specific contexts accessible to readers. But it is still the responsibility of researchers to make the words on the page come alive – even in APA formatting. In so doing, margins on the page are filled with hastily, but thoughtfully, scribbled notes which are meant to trigger new ideas. Researchers and practitioners are on the same page in saying that they not only support improvement and change, but that both are necessary. Yet, as educators professionally, we cannot say that this is happening enough. And so again, scepticism and problematization remain the most appropriate mindset for today. Why? Old habits: our literatures are stuck in the theory-practice binary as well as the theory-method binary. New habits would promote theory and practice interacting continuously, and theories driving methods, while also methods driving theories.

CONCLUSION: MY CONTEXT, MY RULES

Let's leave Malta, Australia, and the OECD, for now, and fly with me across the Atlantic to the United States. If we land where I live today, in the state of Florida, then the laws are very clear: no diversity, no equity, and no inclusion (anti-DEI). The immediate question(s) for educational leaders in Florida is that by the time this text is published, its contents have already been banned; therefore, how can or why should educational leaders read it? The laws will not let us – meaning you being here with me in Florida – cannot engage in these so-called divisive concepts. Geographically, however, you are still on planet Earth; yet the laws, policies, regulations, and rules in Florida (and elsewhere) only allow you to engage in this text, but without breaking the law.

What would life be like living in a world without laws and policies (norms, habits, beliefs) supporting social justice, equity, and inclusion? This is the reality for millions of people around the world, and it has been for decades. As the shared values of democracy and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) wane

and populist nationalism rises, we are being forced into reconsidering educational leadership for social justice under a wide range of political, social, and economic circumstances all as barriers to these constructs.

There have always been differences in circumstances, resources, and opportunities based on where people are born and raised. As governments retreat from social justice interventions, we are left with a world where individuals can rely only on their own spheres of power as they try to climb economic and societal ladders on their own. This dystopian vision has a long pedigree of economic, philosophical, and social theories – none of which we are found in this text or, rarely debated in liberal academic journals: the moral and economic arguments of Adam Smith, the political arguments of Edmund Burke, the philosophical arguments of Frederick Hayek, the economic positions taken by Milton Friedman, the popular novels of Ayn Rand, and the journalistic commentaries of Thomas Sowell (2023). I leave you, dear readers, with my three questions:

- Can the term ‘social justice’ shed its socialist connotations of government interventions, and, instead, be re-interpreted developmentally as fulfilling human potential?
- Can the meaning of equity become a collective goal where the interdependence of all imperfect human beings requires us to see the need for ‘special’ assistance?
- Can the meaning of inclusion shed its limited association with people with disabilities, physically or mentally, and be reinterpreted as a sustainable goal for everyone, everywhere?

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