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Problematizing the Pursuit of Social Justice Education

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Leadership for social justice embraces diversity, promotes inclusivity, and transforms relationships between schools and communities (Riehl, 2000). Though calls for such leadership abound (Bates, 2006; Blackmore, 2002; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2006b), the intricacies and inconsistencies of this pursuit are less frequently subjected to case study analysis. Drawn from a multicase study of schools serving traditionally marginalized students (Scanlan, 2005), this article examines how leadership efforts toward social justice can paradoxically lead to truncated manifestations of this goal. The implications of the original study suggest that school leaders need to problematize – not essentialize – their pursuit of social justice.

Research Context and Methodology

The field of educational leadership is rife with exemplars of leadership oriented toward reducing barriers to such “traditionally marginalized” students. Much of this literature focuses on effectively serving students in poverty, students of color, and students who are English language learners (Johnson, 2002; Lopez, 2001; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Smith-Maddox & Wheelock, 1995; Thomas & Collier, 2001; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000) students with disabilities (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001; Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000; Frattura & Capper, (in press); Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Theoharis, 2004), and students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (Lamme & Lamme, 2002; Lugg, 2003; MacGillivray, 2000). However, many students, including those in poverty, of color, with disabilities, or from linguistic minority households, have been and continue to be underserved in schools (Berliner, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Losen & Welner, 2001; Orfield & Lee, 2005). With increasing accountability requirements to educate *all* students (e.g. Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002), educational leaders continue to turn to the values of social justice to pursue more equitable schooling (Blackmore, 2002; Brown, 2004; Hafner, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2006a; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Sapon-Shevin, 2003; Shields, 2004). This article builds on this body of literature on equity and social justice for traditionally marginalized students by exploring the complexities school leaders face in this pursuit.

Generally, private schools serve relatively few traditionally marginalized students (Broughman & Pugh, 2004) and are accordingly frequently overlooked in analyses of social justice education. Select Catholic elementary schools have been exceptions to this rule. The extant literature on Catholic elementary schools often focuses on urban contexts (O’Keefe, 2000; O’Keefe & Murphy, 2000), climate and academic programs in these schools (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Cibulka, O’Brien, & Zewe, 1982; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Convey, 1992; Greeley, 1982; Hoffer, Greeley, & Coleman, 1985; Jaynes, 2002; Sandor, 2001a, 2001b), or on specific student groupings, such as African Americans (McGreevy, 1996; Moore, 2003; York, 1996), Latinos (Carger, 1996; Stevens-Arroyo & Pantoja, 2003), or students with disabilities (Preimesberger, 2000; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002). To date, however, the literature has not comprehensively examined how school leaders impact the understandings of inclusivity that are at play in select Catholic school communities prima-

rily serving traditionally marginalized students.

This article draws on a multicase study that examined the conceptualization of inclusivity of traditionally marginalized students in select Catholic schools (Scanlan, 2005). Specifically, I report the efforts of one school, St. Gabriel, to create a school community oriented toward social justice. The research was conducted from a critical constructivist conceptual framework (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; LeCompte, 1995; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995), and employed a qualitative methodology (Carspecken, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). During the 2004 – 2005 school year, data were gathered through interviewing representatives of administration, faculty, staff, and school boards, as well as through site visits and archival research. Constant comparative methodology facilitated coding and analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glesne, 1999). (For an extensive description of the research design and methodology, see Scanlan, 2005).

Findings

The data illustrate that St. Gabriel’s success in pursuing social justice is remarkably mixed. St. Gabriel includes a significant population of traditionally marginalized students, like many public schools, especially in urban settings. On one hand, the school community demonstrates social justice commitments by reducing barriers of racism and serving students in poverty; on the other hand, the school fails to see the social injustices of their failure to adequately meet the needs of students who are English language learners or students with disabilities. The data suggest that despite clear ambitions to advance justice, leaders can become mired in contradictions.

School context. A community landmark operating since 1924, St. Gabriel School is neighborhood based and serves approximately 340 students in preschool through 8th grade. A large portion of the student body lives in poverty, with 92% of the students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. One in five students qualifies for a free breakfast and three of every four students receive free lunch. The school has access to a Title I resource teacher who works on the premises. Slightly more than one in ten of the students have identified special needs, predominantly high-incidence speech and language, emotional, and behavioral disorders. Nearly nine out of ten students in St. Gabriel identify as Latino. Many of their parents speak Spanish as a first language, and twelve percent of the students in the school were born outside of the United States, generally from Central and South American Countries, with the vast majority from Mexico. The demographics of the neighborhood and student body have shifted over the past decades: whereas twenty-five years ago over 90% of the students were White, today only 7% are.

Promoting social justice. St. Gabriel promotes social justice by explicitly pursuing an antiracist agenda and by serving families in poverty. The school mission, posted on plaques in rooms throughout the school and placed prominently in promotional brochures and the parent handbook, makes the commitment to antiracism clear: “St. Gabriel School participates in the educational mission of the church and our parish by providing a Christian anti-racist environment for learning and teaching truth.” Margaret, a school secretary and one of the only two Latina on staff, highlighted this: “The main focus is to have an antiracist environment... to teach kids about the different heritages and different nationalities, and that even though we may be different we are still all human and the same basic form.” One practical way that

the educators attempt to infuse the daily life of the school with a sense of this mission is through a daily ritual where students pledge to follow it.

St. Gabriel was the first Catholic elementary school in the diocese (the organizational structure akin to a public school district) to commit to anti-racism. This commitment began five years ago when Sr. Elaine had all faculty and staff participate in an intensive multi-day antiracism training. The training, which involved extensive examinations of personal, institutional, and societal racism along with manifestations of White privilege in personal and organizational settings, inspired the faculty to revise their school mission. Ongoing professional development, such as annual retreats and curricular reviews, has resulted in a school culture and lexicon infused with antiracism. Sr. Elaine (and later her assistant principal) now hold anti-racist leadership roles in the diocese and direct trainings in other schools. Sr. Elaine describes how colleagues came to refer to her “as kind of the anti-racism queen,” and that she was considered both a resource and a thorn in their side: “Sometimes they’ll call and say, what do you think we ought to do [about a specific issue they are facing regarding race and anti-racism]? ... But I think they also find me irritating on the topic because I don’t stop talking about it- even though it would be easier to.”

Teachers’ commitment to the anti-racist mission grew in an open and supportive professional community. In a comment reflective of many research participants, one teacher described Sr. Elaine as a leader “you can approach... about anything” and credits her for creating “a great sense of community and family” in the school. This feeling of support by the administration fostered in teachers the sense of ownership in implementing the antiracist mission. When asked what allowed the school to embrace a diverse student body, Sr. Elaine responded, “I feel we can [do this] because we have people who are willing to work with them.” Specific efforts to make the school community more culturally relevant and engaging to students and families were connected to the values of antiracism, including showing respect for the home language of students, using relevant teaching materials, and building relationships with students. For instance, one teacher noted, “Everyone [is] aware of how important it is to honor [students’] language and customs and cultures,” while another teacher explained, “[Students] have to have things that are interesting to them, and so I think that we have to broaden our teaching to them.” A third teacher reported the importance of relationships: “I can say that almost all the students feel that their teacher genuinely cares about them – and I think that that is obviously one of the first parts that helps create this community that we want inside the classroom.”

In addition, St. Gabriel demonstrates a commitment to creating a pluralistic community. Despite its private religious orientation, the school respectfully embraces religious and cultural diversity. For instance, the father of a family that is Muslim serves on the school board and helped the school adopt more equitable tuition policies to not discriminate against families of other (or no) faith traditions. The school community shows signs of infusing what it terms a “welcoming spirit” into the school through various events. For instance, they hold a festival each fall celebrating the community’s various cultures and ethnicities. Students gather to present poems, dances, and descriptions about their different heritages, and the entire student body then parades around the block waving flags and banners celebrating not only the United States and Mexico, but also Ireland, India, Brazil and Palestine. Each spring the older students perform

plays for the school focusing on themes of tolerance and justice. In addition to such events, a tenor of multicultural appreciation is evident in artifacts throughout the school, ranging from the student work teachers post to the art and displays they use to decorate the classrooms, hallways, and bulletin boards.

As well as forging an anti-racist, pluralistic environment, a central way St. Gabriel demonstrates social justice commitments is serving families of low socioeconomic status. Extensive development and fundraising efforts, mainly led by Sr. Elaine, allow the school to serve families who cannot afford to pay tuition. Unlike many Catholic elementary schools, St. Gabriel receives no subsidy from the parish with which it is affiliated. Instead, the principal works closely with both diocesan and community organizations to leverage consulting services, trainings, and other resources to help these efforts. St. Gabriel provides scholarships for tuition from a local nonprofit organization, has attracted the support of a major donor who has committed to the school \$100,000 per year for the past three years, and regularly recruits teachers from a volunteer teacher corps to save on personnel costs. These sources of financial support are critical to St. Gabriel because tuition is a major barrier for many families. Sr. Elaine is also savvy at identifying public sources of funds to help raise the capacity of the school to serve the diversity of students, including the Federal Breakfast and Lunch Program, Federal Title programs (1 – 5), and state education funds for textbooks and transportation costs.

Inhibiting social justice. Commitments to antiracism and to serving families in poverty provide a clear social justice orientation for St. Gabriel, and the school principal plays the central role in providing this orientation. Paradoxically, the school inhibits social justice across other dimensions of marginalization, particularly for students who are English language learners (ELL) or who have disabilities. Students who are ELL do not find in the school an articulated approach to bilingual education, and students with disabilities are segregated.

Despite the large number of students from homes where Spanish is the primary language spoken, teachers expressed limited knowledge regarding serving students who are ELL and ambiguity about the linguistic skills of students and their families. When asked how well he was able to include students who are ELL, one teacher was at loss for words: “This is difficult... I’m still working on that.” Few were able to articulate any sort of specific strategies to effectively engage English language learners or to describe any bilingual supports that helped them inside the classroom. Margaret, a secretary and one of the only Native Spanish speakers in the school, explained that the lack of a comprehensive approach to bilingual education was problematic: “We have bilingual teachers, just not a bilingual program. I would recommend investing money in that.” Though some important steps had been taken, such as translating materials into Spanish and having translators available at conferences, the default educational approach employed in St. Gabriel was English immersion.

Similarly, St. Gabriel lacks a cohesive strategy to build the capacity of teachers to include students posing learning challenges or with disabilities. Services for struggling students are delivered in pullout manner, either with the help of the assistant principal, a Title I teacher, or a part-time special educational assistant. Several teachers expressed frustration at the lack of communication in this regard. As one stated:

The [special educational assistant] has a lot of good ideas, but I never see her. It’s really inconsistent. She’ll catch me in the hall and be like, “Are you free today?” And it will be in the middle of 100 different things. We don’t even find out about who has received testing!”

A learning specialist from the central office who has consulted with St. Gabriel concurred: “There needs to be more intensive work done to develop teachers’ awareness of and toolbox for how to include students... [Teachers] want to do it, but they don’t know how.”

Rather than building the capacity of the teachers to meet the needs of all students within the school, St. Gabriel recently began contracting with an outside agency to provide assistance to struggling students off-site. Thirty students – nearly one in ten– now attend hour-long tutoring sessions during the school day at a local Catholic high school. Two or three times each week these students are bussed over to receive assistance, and they are charged \$3.00 each day for transportation. While this collaboration signals progress in St. Gabriel attempting to better meet the academic needs of all of its learners, this strategy in effect delimits the way inclusion is understood by the educators. Essentially the school is saying, “Our solution to helping students who are struggling is not only to move them out of the classroom but actually to bus them off–site to receive the assistance they need. And we’ll charge them for this transportation to boot.”

There was virtually no discussion of the lack of a comprehensive bilingual education approach or the limitations in service delivery to students with disabilities as a critical shortcoming for the school, especially by the school leaders. Ironically, the segregatory service delivery to students with disabilities was considered progress. Moreover, other Catholic schools in this diocese similar to St. Gabriel (i.e. in close proximity and serving predominantly traditionally marginalized students) chose more inclusive approaches to bilingual education and to service delivery to students with disabilities, illustrating that other options were available. Thus, the school intentionally promotes social justice across certain dimensions of marginalization while inadvertently inhibiting social justice across others.

Discussion

This study hints at some complexities and paradoxes school leaders face in their pursuit of social justice. St. Gabriel, through the leadership of Sr. Elaine, attempts to promote social justice by reducing barriers to traditionally marginalized students, particularly attending to the barriers of racism and poverty. Yet the same school leader has not initiated other ways to proactively serve the diversity of students in the community, such as developing a more comprehensive bilingual program or focusing on how to better include children with special educational needs. Thus, how inclusion is perceived can simultaneously bring certain dimensions of marginalization into focus while blurring others.

Moreover, the evidence suggests that leaders for social justice are susceptible to being co-opted by their own success. Sought out by some colleagues as a consultant to help reduce racial tensions, yet isolated from other Diocesan principals in these efforts, Sr. Elaine wore antiracism as something of a badge of honor. Antiracism became the requisite element to her social justice identity. This illustrates how depth can obscure breadth: a leader looking hard at one dimension of injustice may be blind to others.

The implication is not that we simply need better school leaders who are more comprehensive and holistic in how they approach social justice education. Schools are fortunate to hire principals with the dedication, skill, and vision of a Sr. Elaine. Rather, a key lesson is that school leaders, and school communities would be well-served by problematizing their pursuit of social justice. Effectively opposing oppression and transforming schools into institutions of liberation is a central objective in social justice leadership (Capper, 1993).

Problematizing this pursuit through various manners, including questioning the epistemological lenses through which one is approaching leadership (Capper, 1998; Scheurich, 1997), exploring the spiritual dimensions of leadership (Capper, Keyes, & Theoharis, 2000; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999; Oldenski & Carlson, 2002), and developing pluralistic notions of social justice (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002) can help school leaders avoid social justice practices that are stultified or contradictory. Such problematizing would reflect what Pounder, Reitzug, and Young (2002) describe as inquiry-based praxis: “Leading for social justice requires that one engage with and explore content, theory, and the problems of practice, and, in the process, reconstruct and expand the theory, knowledge, and perspectives that drive one’s practice” (p. 274).

The irony the case of St. Gabriel illustrates is that institutionalizing select social justice practices (i.e. through developing an anti-racist mission and developing policies and practices to serve students in poverty) without nurturing a culture that holistically targets social injustice can allow a school to ignore the continued dimensions of other forms of marginalization in its midst. The barriers students face due to limited English proficiency or disability are real and arguably worsening, yet the school remains focused to a fault in a narrow conceptualization of social justice. Moreover, this case illustrates that when school leaders essentialize social justice they miss critical opportunities. The antiracist mission of St. Gabriel would be better served if school leadership – Sr. Elaine and faculty alike – looked more critically at the way the school reduced the linguistic barriers to students. This could lead to recognizing the students’ home language of Spanish as an asset and building bilingual opportunities into the school curriculum. The case also illustrates that essentializing social justice leaves leaders vulnerable to contradictory and self-defeating practices. While welcoming students of low economic status by providing tuition scholarships, assistance, and free breakfast and lunch services, St. Gabriel, is telling students who are struggling academically that they do not belong, literally showing them to the door.

In conclusion, Rorrer’s (2002) point is well taken: “Social justice rhetoric and bandwagon appeal must be discarded and replaced with a commitment and long-term investment by educators, researchers, and policymakers in resolving issues of inequity” (p. 4). Such commitment and investment entails critical analysis of our current practices. The case of St. Gabriel shows that in their pursuit of social justice, school leaders can fixate on a truncated goal. By contrast, problematizing the pursuit of social justice education will help school communities more effectively achieve social justice goals. Espoused commitments to social justice can embolden a school community. Yet, social justice as an ultimate goal must not be essentialized.

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