

Multiple hues: New Zealand school leaders' perceptions of social justice

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Abstract

Social justice is a fluid and contested notion. In the absence of a nationally accepted definition of, and commitment to, social justice, New Zealand school leaders and their communities must interpret the nature and substance of this phenomenon. This article examines the perspectives of eight secondary principals who participated in the International School Leadership Development Network's (ISLDN) study on leadership for social justice. Whilst not explicitly theorized as such, participant perspectives of social justice reveal distributive, cultural and associational dimensions. These notions are grounded in, and shaped by, seminal experiences of social justice and injustice, both personal and vicarious. They reflect the amorphous and tentative nature of school leaders' social justice conceptions, and a clarion call for a wider professional conversation.

Keywords: *Social justice; equity; distributive justice; cultural justice; associational justice; school leadership; Aotearoa*

Introduction

Although there has been a long history of a commitment to social justice outcomes in New Zealand education, its manifestation has been far less constant. In 1939, Clarence Beeby, then assistant Director of Education under Education Minister Peter Fraser, outlined the Labour government's egalitarian vision for a New Zealand public education system in which,

The government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his [sic] level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers. So far is this from being a pious platitude that the full acceptance of the principle will involve the reorientation of the entire system. (Beeby, 1992, p. xvi)

While the opening sentence has been "quoted thousands of times to the point of satiety" (p. 123), Beeby doubted that few people read the policy statement in its entirety. It was, in essence, a critique of the principle of selection underpinning New Zealand's school system which he believed inflicted a "definite penalty ... on the children of the poor" (as cited in Alcorn, 1999, p. 100).

Beeby's observation that public opinion on education swings like a pendulum between "two competing concepts of fairness – fairness to the individual and fairness to the country as a whole" (1992, p. 284) is borne out by our subsequent educational history. Both the rhetoric and reality around leadership for social justice are contested spheres. There are those who argue that the school system serves to reproduce rather than "remedy the ills of a fundamentally unfair society" (Beeby, 1992, p. 303) while others believe that education challenges political, economic and social inequities. In the midst of neoliberal reforms initiated by the 1984 Labour government, the Royal Commission on Social Policy (1988) was tasked with "a nationwide inquiry designed to set social policy goals and recommend what needs to be done to make New Zealand a more fair and just society" (p. xvii). The terms of reference specified five foundations of a fair society:

- dignity and self-determination for individuals, families, and communities;
- maintenance of a standard of living sufficient to ensure that everybody can participate and have a sense of belonging;
- genuine opportunity for all people, of whatever age, race, gender, social and economic position or abilities to develop their own potential;
- a fair distribution of wealth and resources of the nation;
- acceptance of different peoples within the community and understanding and respect for cultural diversity. (Royal Commission on Social Policy, 1988, p. 10)

Historians are divided over the rationale underlying the establishment of the Commission; some seeing this as “an attempt by Prime Minister Lange to salvage some of Labour’s social democratic heritage and to ring-fence social policy from the more extreme elements within neo-liberalism who wanted to restructure the welfare state on US lines” (Barnes & Harris, 2011, p. 2), and others as “a cynical move to appease the anxieties of those who opposed the neo-liberal reforms being introduced with little public consultation and no apparent regard to the social consequences and impact on people’s lives” (Clark, 2006, p. 277).

However, with political motives and reception aside, this report (Royal Commission on Social Policy, 1998) was significant in that it recommended strong public social service provision and macroeconomic policy interventions designed to alleviate social injustice. Rather than endorse the “trickledown theory” that market driven efficiency would improve social wellbeing, the Commission concluded that economic and social policies should be “regarded as ‘inseparable’ and developed together in a coordinated way that took account of the mutual impacts of the economy and social wellbeing on each other” (Durie, 2002, p. 591). This Report also broached the politics of difference (Cheyne, O’Brien, & Belgrave, 2008; Durie, 2002; Kelsey, 1997; Wilson & Yeatman, 1995), providing a “vehicle for the often discordant voices of 1988: neo-liberals, social democrats, men, women, Māori, Pākehā and Pacific peoples, for example” (Barnes & Harris, 2011, p. 10).

More recently, the growing gap between rich and poor, and alarming child poverty rates (Boston & Chapple, 2014), have heightened the concern for social justice that has arguably been ever present in the minds of New Zealand educators and, in varying degrees, latent in the minds of governing National party politicians. Following his re-election in September 2014 for a third term as Prime Minister, John Key demanded of his officials fresh ideas on tackling child poverty, a political pronouncement seemingly at odds with his government’s failure to implement more than 23 of the 78 recommendations proposed by the Children’s Commissioner’s Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty (2012, 2013) and its reluctance to support the progression of the Education (Breakfast and Lunch Programmes in Schools) Amendment Bill to a second reading in parliament. Commonly referred to as the *Feed the kids* bill, this draft legislation advocated fully State funded breakfast and lunch programmes in those New Zealand schools serving the poorest communities.

The impropriety of the government’s actions on both these counts was highlighted one month later when the United Nations published *Children of the Recession* (UNICEF, 2014), a report card documenting the progress of children’s rights and wellbeing in wealthy developed world countries from 2008 to 2012. Concluding that children bear the brunt of economic downturn and suffer lifelong consequences including social alienation, diminished educational potential, under- and unemployment, and declining fertility, the report card found that appropriate policy responses are critical in alleviating the duration and depth of hardship: “Remarkably, amid this unprecedented social crisis, many countries have managed to limit – or even reduce – child poverty. It was by no means inevitable, then, that children would be the most enduring victims of the recession” (p. 2).

Thus, it is not surprising to read in this UNICEF report that, in New Zealand during this period, poverty and inequality rates stagnated. While the proportion of children in poverty fell marginally from 18.8% in 2008 to 18.4% in 2012, the percentage of young people (15-24 years) not in education, employment or training (NEET) rose from 12.9% in 2008 to 13.9% in 2013 (UNICEF, 2014, p.10). Upon the Report’s release, Social Development

Minister, Anne Tolley conceded that New Zealand had no target figure to reduce child poverty, arguing instead that recent budget initiatives aimed at reducing benefit dependency should improve the situation (Migone, 2014).

It is against this constraining socio-political backdrop that school leaders endeavour to mitigate the effects of poverty and other forms of injustice. In the absence of a national conversation and universally accepted definition of social justice, New Zealand school leaders must decipher for themselves what social justice means and what the pursuit of socially just outcomes entails. Hence, as part of an international study, this article gives voice to the lived experience of eight New Zealand secondary school principals and, in so doing, opens the conversation that is the topic of this special issue. We outline the various conceptions of social justice held by these participants and describe seminal personal experiences that have given rise to these. Noting clarity and confusion in the definitions expressed, we align participant perspectives with theoretical conceptions of distributive, cultural and associational justice (Gewirtz, 1998; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002). And we echo participant calls for deliberate attention to the importance of social justice in New Zealand education.

The research project

The participants in this article contributed a New Zealand perspective to a research collaboration conducted in over 20 countries across five continents by members of the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) social justice strand. Jointly sponsored by the British Educational Leadership and Management Society (BELMAS) in the United Kingdom, and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) in the United States, this social justice project poses four fundamental research questions:

1. How do social justice leaders make sense of 'social justice'?
2. What do social justice leaders do?
3. What factors help or hinder the work of social justice leaders?
4. How did social justice leaders learn to become social justice leaders?

As might be expected, researchers hold plural views as to what constitutes a social justice leader and who determines this. "That the same term is used by both the political right and political left to mean quite different things attests to the problematic nature of social justice" (Angelle, Morrison & Stevenson, 2015, pp. 98-99) and social justice leadership. Within this diversity, however, ISLDN network members share the view that social justice leaders relentlessly pursue greater equity in educational access, opportunity and outcome.

Acknowledging that leadership endeavours occur at multiple levels within schools and transcend positional roles, researchers nonetheless recognize that the school leader bears ultimate responsibility for mediating external policy directives and establishing internal school culture. Their explicit commitment to principles of social justice is crucial in cultivating an inclusive learning environment that openly confronts injustice and reconciles the conflicts arising from competing forms of, and claims to, social justice. Accordingly, the ISLDN project focuses on the views of school leaders who consider themselves social justice leaders.

In New Zealand, research invitations were distributed to school principals in the central North Island region. The immediate and overwhelming response to this invitation suggests that school leaders welcome the opportunity, and indeed clamour to engage in dialogue of this nature. Conscious that geographical and financial logistics often confine research interviews to participants closest to the researchers' settings, we deliberately sought the inclusion of new voices. The first phase of data collection (2013-2014) involved 15 semi-structured interviews using the ISLDN interview protocol and the construction of multiple case studies.

In establishing the context for this special issue, and using pseudonyms, this article focuses on the first of the four research questions through Andrew, Cliff, Geoff, Hemi, James, Nettie, Sarah, and Robert's eyes.

Conceiving of social justice: clarity and confusion

Given the absence of national policy statements, it is perhaps unsurprising that participant definitions of social justice are vague and somewhat tentative. A keenness to discuss social justice perspectives seemingly arises from lived experience and a daily concern for others, rather than sustained theoretical engagement with praxis.

James

For James, social justice is a somewhat nebulous term: "What does it mean? It would mean something to you [researcher 1], to me, to you [researcher 2]." Having accepted the research invitation, James had not consciously prepared for the interview:

I deliberately haven't done study on it, so you get the raw unedited version. But I do remember reading something that touched me. Someone wrote, "a way of distributing the good and the bad that happens in life somewhat equally" and I quite like that. [If asked for] my fall-back position, I think that's what it would be.

Geoff

Geoff similarly attributed a lack of prior reflection on the research questions to the busyness of the school day: "I must admit that I looked at them when they first came through and I haven't looked at them since." With the qualification that his responses would be "rough and raw and from the heart and from the head," Geoff articulated a view of social justice that encompassed both individual and collective dimensions.

We believe in holistic education and we encourage the individual to do well academically, in sport, culture, whatever else. We're forty-five per cent Māori and our last intake was just roughly fifty-fifty Māori, New Zealand European. And so it's actually catering for every individual, but at the same time when you talk social justice you've got to consider all the students in the school and sometimes you need to do something about an individual, which might not seem necessarily fair to that individual but you're taking into account what is best for the school community.

Importantly, when issues arise, parent involvement is immediately sought and Geoff believes that social justice requires the perspectives of "the individual student and their family or whanau. I believe that we are making a difference because we see it like that."

He takes issue with the Ministry of Education's Better Public Service Target (Prime Minister, 2012) that eighty-five per cent of students should attain NCEA level two by 2017.

Well, sorry... social justice, as far as I'm concerned, is that every student should be able to achieve... Every student in the school is a priority learner. But when you get down to the nitty-gritty, we've probably got somewhere between ten and fifteen per cent of our students who, for whatever reason ... arrive in our school well below the chronological age for reading, writing, mathematics, comprehension.

Geoff expresses concern for students who gravitate to the back of the class "just below the radar" and teachers who ignore them in the hope they will "go away and not be part of their statistics. But as I've said, that's unsatisfactory, it's not acceptable."

Andrew

Andrew similarly focused his reflection on “doing right things, especially for the people [you] have contact with in an organization like this, and that’s right across the board - parents, students, colleagues and so on.” He alluded to aspects of procedural justice in his dealings with people and the potential for unexamined structures and processes to silence and stultify the voices of the most vulnerable. In recent years, Andrew has become more “alert to the environment of meetings” and the potential for expediency to override more creative and just outcomes. He has become more sensitized to an inner voice that says, “Hey, this is not right” and to the positions of others.

If one of my kids were sitting across the table during this exchange, would I be comfortable with the way that things are being shaped? And I think over the years there’s probably not been a lot of social justice in schools... I think a lot of it is about being able to stop and listen and to get the viewpoints of participants properly. How do you get the student to be able to articulate how they are feeling in an environment which is quite often, we think is amiable and friendly, which to them is aargh, in their face. It’s hostile... I guess the benchmark would be how would I feel across the other side of the table, you know?

Sarah

Declaring that she is “not a religious person per se”, Sarah’s conception of social justice is nonetheless grounded in Christian ideals. She perceives that the school plays a crucial role in “constructing a young person’s understanding of their world” and is passionate about crafting “that sense of spirituality, for want of a better word, that sense of otherness, that sense of understanding that there is more to being a human being than just living, among [fellow students] in a completely secular setting.”

This demands an expansive educative mission that reaches beyond the confines of curriculum boundaries and economic imperatives:

We’re not just trying to educate [students] to be a better physicist or ... to teach them Latin; it’s to teach them how to be ... and how to be aware... So really what you’re talking about is something quite close to my heart although I would never use the phrase ‘social justice’.

Asked why not, Sarah expressed dislike of the term, perceiving it as a tautology:

I would never use the phrase social justice, I don’t like it. ... It’s about justice. ... All justice is social, it’s human, it’s spiritual, it’s all about recognising what people deserve.

Relating this to her single sex school context means “giving every student the chance to be the best [they] can be in the simplest of terms” but this is not a straightforward undertaking. “How we achieve that in a school setting is harder than it sounds, much harder than it sounds”

Hemi

For Hemi, social justice has only recently become part of his formal lexicon: “the term social justice has probably only come into my consciousness in the last two, maybe three years, I think. I’ve had thoughts about it but I didn’t have a terminology for it.” His notion of social justice is an emancipatory one:

It’s about ... us trying to find the solutions to get our young people to where they want to be, their dreams and aspirations, and for our community - that’s what it should be. It should be about freeing them; it should be unlocking the doors for them. So that was my sense of or my understanding of social justice ‘til I heard the term being used by somebody saying that really if we work to the higher moral ethic then this is about social justice for our young ones. When I heard that I thought, oh, okay. That really resonates with what my internal beliefs were.

Robert

Robert's notion of a socially just society focuses on the creation and preservation of collective wellbeing.

My vision for myself and the school and the world I want to be part of is that we all have a sense of social connection, that we won't be self-centred too much, that we all try and look after those who aren't as well-off as we might happen to be.... I think the last twenty, thirty years in New Zealand have been really unfortunate in terms of the spread, the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots - you know, The Spirit Level stuff. And we are paying a high price for inequality, I think, in terms of those who aren't very well-off seeing themselves in society and stunted aspirations compared to the New Zealand I grew up in.

Nettie and Cliff

In a similar vein, Nettie commented, "I've always wanted to be able to say that I live in a country where we look after our own." She suggested that "it doesn't matter what you call it. [Social justice] is about giving everyone a chance" and working towards "basic equity." Cliff elaborated on the notion of equity, suggesting that social justice is "really about ... social equity, financial equity, cultural equity" (Branson, Morrison & McNae, 2015).

It is evident that the school leaders interviewed recognize the complex and often conflictual nature of social justice. They alluded to due process and the right to be heard, to evening out economic, social and cultural disparities in ways that build community, and to releasing human potential. Equity is a recurring and seemingly compelling concept in participant definitions of social justice but what prompted this? In the following section, the New Zealand participants reflect on the origins of their conceptions of social justice, identifying seminal events that have directly and vicariously attuned them to just and unjust practices.

Experiencing social [in]justice**Hemi**

Hemi remembers his parents perceiving education as a pathway to success and holding strong ideals about what constitutes success: "When my parents looked at a school, they weren't just looking at whatever the academic record was for the school. They were asking what the values were in that school." He recalls two childhood experiences which instilled in him a sense of gratitude and a desire to pay it forward. The first occurred when his mother passed away and anonymous community donors took care of his and his five siblings' secondary school fees.

Of even greater importance was the generosity of a retired, relieving teacher who recognized Hemi's academic potential in the final term of his fourth form year and followed his scholastic progress. This was in stark contrast to another teacher who previously doubted his ability to succeed and advised his parents against paying examination fees. Fortunately, Hemi's parents had greater faith in their son's abilities and believed "one has always got to have hope." In the event, Hemi "scraped through" School Certificate English with 53%. At the beginning of his sixth form year, the relieving teacher visited Hemi at school.

He said ... "I looked at how your English was and I decided when I looked at the other subjects that actually you're not dumb." That's what he said to me. He said, "You just don't know how it works" because my maths and science were really good, and technical drawing ... He said he wanted to offer me some tutoring and he did it for free and so I'd go on a Wednesday afternoon. I'd go to his house and his lovely wife, this kuia, lovely Pākeha lady, would always make us a nice cup of tea or a Milo and we'd have a little cake and it was, like, beautiful china. You know, I don't see china like that! And we'd sit at the table and he'd work through the English.

After two terms, the tutoring arrangement ceased. Without disclosing the seriousness of his illness, Hemi's teacher was at pains to reassure his young student that he had done nothing untoward.

He just said, "Look, it's not me, he's just not too well and he can't do anything more." I thanked him because I was really pleased... They never asked for anything in return.

One month later, Hemi's English tutor passed away, however the help he received had a profound influence on him completing his secondary schooling and improving his life chances. Without this serendipitous intervention, Hemi suspects that his fate would have been similar to his peers.

When I did the tests at school, I ended up in what was the three gorilla class, sort of thing. The future first fifteen were in there and the future A basketball team. I didn't think about it at the time but, much later, upon reflection, there would have only been a couple of Pākeha boys in our class. The rest of us were all actually from the same families, we were all related to each other and we ... never thought anything of it. Of that class, I remember I was the last one. Halfway during sixth form none of them were around anymore - I was the last one there.

The tutoring support he received was instrumental in Hemi completing his seventh form year and embarking on a teaching career:

And so when I became a teacher those are the things that influenced my belief about what the school could and should be about.

Nettie

Nettie's father instilled firm beliefs in her about social justice: "My dad was strongly Labour so I guess I grew up with good ethics about how you live and what you do. My father saw no difference in anyone." She was affronted by two examples of overt racism, one from her University days and one more recent. Having grown up in the North Island, Nettie took social inclusion for granted. It was only upon attending university in the South Island that she realized "how differently people thought about people." Despite the fact that her fellow hostel students were all "Catholic girls", Nettie was dismayed by the prejudice exhibited by two varsity friends. She recalled one evening spent looking at photographs:

They had my sports photos and I realized that the two of them were sitting together looking at them and they were sort of quiet and I said, "What's the matter? And [name] looked up at me and she said, "Were they your friends?" And I said, "What are you talking about?" And she said, "Were they your friends?" And I looked at the photo and it was the netball team. It was the top netball team and the others were all Māori ... I'd never looked at it this way. And I suddenly realized that we all lived in the same country but they didn't have any Māori in their school in [place]. The only thing they knew was that Māoris went to work on the wharves at [work site], and on the oyster boats. Their parents - what they were told was that if you saw a Māori, you walked on the other side of the road. That was what they did.

In Nettie's view, the veneer of cultural inclusion remains thin and "when you scratch the surface, there's quite racist things happening." While oblivious to ethnic division at primary school, maturity brought greater realization of polarization within her home town and a degree of divergence between her parents.

Mum had a lot of Māori people that she was very friendly with but it wasn't, it wasn't sort of in her. Mum used to say to us, "Don't you ever come home with a Māori." ... Dad would have been shocked if he'd heard Mum saying it.

Reflecting on current educational provision within the town, she points to the migration of Pākeha students to the integrated special character school.

We've got the integrated school, which has virtually no Māori students, and the state schools are all fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty percent Māori.... It's a very sad indictment that it's been allowed to go like that but there's definitely a 'white flight' sort of attitude and I think that's very sad... I've never been aware of having one educational institution which has become so pale. But people don't talk about it and hurriedly get onto another topic when that [one] comes along.

Robert and Cliff

Robert and Cliff shared political views that spurred them into action during the 1970s. Coming from working class roots, Robert joined the Labour Party at university and, following the death in 1974 of Prime Minister Norman Kirk, his affiliation turned to activism. Robert recalls being shocked by the political sea-change that a change of government brought: “[Kirk] wasn't perfect by any means but his aspirations for New Zealand were quite different to what Muldoon was presenting.” Cliff's crusading against injustice focused on apartheid and the 1981 Springbok tour, conscription and the inequities exacerbated by Tomorrow's Schools educational reform legislation. He recalls the latter engendering a “huge debate over equity and equality” and shaping his understanding of social justice.

James

For James, relocation from a New Zealand to a northern Ireland school at the beginning of Year 8, “just in time for the eleven plus” examination that would determine his academic placement at secondary school, precipitated a culture shock that attuned him to diversity. Not only was he immersed in a political situation that “was starting to heat up,” but also differences in school curriculum saw him placed in the lower academic tier at the “the toughest boys' school in Belfast.”

I'd never heard of fractions and decimals and that was littered through my maths homework; I had no idea... [The secondary school] went from A1 to A3, B1 to B3, C1 to C4; and there was I in three C4. And so in about May of that year I was learning 'cat', 'sat', and 'mat.' I can still remember it. And I could spell 'cat,' 'sat' and 'mat,' that wasn't too much of a problem and I just thought to myself, well, I can stay here or I can do something about it.

Choosing the latter option, James approached the Dean, voiced his opinion that the work was too easy and was allowed to shift to a higher class. He recalls this exercise of agency as both uncharacteristic and catalytic:

I could have just kept quiet because I was a reasonably shy kid, still young, thirteen. I took the initiative to make a difference because, really, it couldn't get any worse... So, for me, as a human being, it gave me an exterior that was maybe a little stronger than my upbringing would have allowed. That has helped me but I still have, I guess, an empathy towards students who are in the lower aspect - whether it be academic, sport, whatever. I can empathize, because I was there.

As James sees it, “social justice is not about equality, it's about equity” and recognising what each individual needs. In addition to childhood experience, his thinking has been shaped by university study which exposes him to new ways of seeing: “My thinking and my reflection is limited to my sphere of understanding, so I love being challenged.”

Andrew

Early in Andrew's teaching career, an influential principal awakened his thinking around issues of social justice. The catalyst for this was the publication of the Johnson Report (Department of Education, 1977)

and 70 far-reaching recommendations regarding school climate, the expansion of school based guidance services, more liberal approaches to health and social education; moral, spiritual and values education; enhanced support for children with special needs; and “a lifespan perspective on exercise, recreation and outdoor pursuits” (Bowler, 2005, p. 9). The Report’s recommendations were condensed into nine priority clauses including four specifically reflecting the nature of social justice:

- i. The provision of an appropriate climate in all schools for healthy growth and maximum development;
- ii. The vigorous promotion of health and social education including education in human development, morals and values; ...
- vi. The real involvement of parents (and where appropriate, students) in the formulation and implementation of health and social education programmes;
- vii. The extension and upgrading of medical services to the children in our schools and to the community through our schools. (Department of Education, 1977, p. 97).

Andrew recalls his previous principal being a strong advocate of the Johnson Report at a time when teaching was “pretty hard-nosed sort of stuff.” Known for his non-hierarchical, power diffusing “carpet, coffee and conversations,” Andrew’s principal was:

Willing to listen to the student voice a lot earlier than most... He was somebody who was willing to think that the student has got something important to say. And he was somebody who was willing to turn around and say that the students come to us with a lot of background at home, and social situations that we need to be aware of in our interactions with them.

For Andrew, these views of social justice were “quite new, absolutely new” but “his talks just resonated” and Andrew admired his principal’s resolve in the face of heated opposition from “some very lively characters who were coming out of old mind sets.” Regardless of the stances colleagues took on various issues, Andrew remembers there being widespread respect for the principal’s moral integrity:

We had all interesting descriptions of [name]. We thought he was a bit of a loose cannon but we actually admired his values and he didn’t stray from that. I thought he gave me a very important introduction to dealing with people... hopefully, I’ve stuck by that.

Participant conceptualizations of social justice appear to be largely atheoretical in origin and grounded in happenstance. In Hemi’s case, for example, the agency of his English tutor ameliorated the ravages of a monocultural curriculum that sorts students on the basis of race, Nettie’s varsity friends disrupted her notion of cultural inclusion, political events provoked Robert and Cliff’s activism, immigration brought cultural and academic dislocation for James, and Andrew’s principal sensitized him to issues that he had no prior experience of. That no-one mentioned the influence of formal teacher education or leadership preparation programmes suggests that either these did not feature issues of social justice, or that exposure was minimal or insufficiently memorable in impact.

Absent conversation

In grappling with what it means to lead in socially just ways towards socially just ends, a number of participants lamented the absence of conversation, both at a professional and national level. The scale and speed of responses accepting the research invitation suggests a strong desire to engage in dialogue around social justice and a quest for greater clarity and commitment to this ideal. In many ways, this runs counter to the prevailing socio-political climate in which individualism often supersedes collectivism, competition prevents collaboration, and privatization threatens the fabric of public education (Ball & Youdell, 2007).

Robert observed that, with the exception of kindred colleagues involved in Te Kotahitanga (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Bishop, Berryman, & Tiakiwai, 2003), there was a distinct lack of professional learning opportunities and issues of social justice rarely featured in the principals' meetings he attended.

Hemi

While Hemi holds fast to the experiences that have “cultivated [his] internal beliefs and thinking about what school could be for tomorrow,” he acknowledges that these ideals remain somewhat utopian:

I don't think it's because people put [social justice] on the backburner, I think it's just that sometimes it's not even conscious enough. And I always thought that if somebody became a teacher, that's what they were on about. To my surprise, that's not the case.

Sarah

Sarah believes that making sense of social justice on a national level is essential to “crafting a grown-up sense of what New Zealand is all about.” Perceiving the nation to be “only at the adolescent stage,” Sarah is convinced that educators have a “responsibility to help New Zealand grow up.” This requires a refusal to be “driven by the government's blind acceptance of its own perspectives” and a commitment to reflection and critique. She detects considerable complacency in the current climate and prejudices which are economically driven.

I don't think we're a reflective country in terms of government. You know, we prate on about the fact that we were one of the first people in the world to give women the vote. Well, that's part of social justice but there's no point just saying that as though it makes us better when we're not continuing to do that. It's all about resting on our laurels rather than being reflective, I think.... We need to understand more fully what we need to do for the dispossessed rather than just accepting the social welfare state of the 1940s and 50s.

Making connections: theorising experience

These participant reflections suggest that social justice is an amorphous and elusive concept and this is echoed in the ISLDN case studies internationally and in the literature. For example, Gewirtz's (1998) analysis of late 20th century education policy creation and enactment led her to conclude that “there is very little explicit discussion of what social justice means or ought to mean” (p. 469).

In subsequent work, Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) argue that social justice is a multi-faceted concept. It can be “viewed as simultaneously concerning the distribution of material goods and resources on the one hand and the valorization of a range of social collectivities and cultural identities on the other” (p. 499). Drawing on the work of Fraser (1997) and Young (1990), Gewirtz and Cribb propose three forms of social justice - distributive, cultural and associational - and frame definitions of these in terms of the absence of injustice.

Distributive justice focuses primarily on the distribution of “fundamental rights and duties and ... [the] advantages from social co-operation” (Rawls, 1971, p. 7). While this includes Bourdieu's (1986) notions of social and cultural capital, distributive justice is essentially associated with the proper allocation of economic goods and material resources and requires that these resources be allocated in ways that minimize labour exploitation, economic marginalization and material deprivation. Cultural justice focuses on the valuing and recognition of different cultural groups. It requires the absence of cultural domination through hegemonic practices including curriculum and other forms of subjugation that render people invisible or expose them to routine disparagement. This implies cultural autonomy, recognition and respect, and a commitment to challenging the injustices that arise from individualized and institutionalized racism. Finally, associational justice focuses on the less tangible resource of power, and the extent to which different individuals and groups

have a voice in determining societal norms and processes, including the shaping of policy in institutional contexts. It requires the absence of patterns of association that preclude individuals and groups from full participation in the decisions that affect them.

Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) then raise the issue of responsibility, posing the question of whether “some real or hypothetical central agent (such as the state)” should arbitrate social justice claims or whether this responsibility should be shared by a “plurality of agents ... including all individuals who are in a position to make a relevant difference” (p. 501). They find in favour of the latter, concluding that:

One of the implications of accepting that social justice has cultural and associational facets as well as a redistributive one is that responsibility for social justice is diffused. The promotion of social justice can no longer be viewed as the state's responsibility alone. If we accept, for example, that social justice demands the recognition of diverse identities and modes of association that include rather than marginalize, then we are all responsible for the promotion of social justice. For in our everyday lives we must struggle to ensure that our personal relations with others are informed by principles of social justice and that the institutions in which we operate take social justice concerns seriously. (p. 504)

Conclusion

This brief account of some aspects of the New Zealand participants' perspectives on school leadership for social justice bears out the theorising of Gewirtz and Cribb (2002). The rich and diverse school teacher reflections provide insights into the three forms of social justice and, together, highlight the importance of individual action. These participants certainly did not shirk this responsibility nor did they rely upon the state or the system to rectify the problem. Whilst the actions they took in leading for social justice are the topic of another paper, the espoused theories of action that precede these bear testimony to Sarah's contention that New Zealand hasn't yet “evolved what we really understand by [the] term.”

Her views are borne out by other New Zealand researchers. Clark (2006), for example, contends that although the concept of social justice is “central to theorising about education and schooling,” general agreement over the worthiness of pursuing social justice is “matched by a corresponding contestation about what the expression ‘social justice’ actually means in relation to the formulation of policy and how it is to be included in practice” (p. 272). He concludes that conceptual clarity and “a very clear understanding of what social justice, as an end, commits us to” (p. 272) is essential if we are to build a more equitable society. To this end, this special issue, and the international research project that provided its genesis, makes an invaluable contribution.

However, unlike some policy dictates, this ISLDN research does not profess an empirical mandate upon which prescriptive definitions might rest, nor has it been our intention to proffer a single, all-encompassing definition of social justice. By disseminating participant views to a wider audience, we invite readers to reflect on the extent to which these mirror their own perspectives and those in the literature. We encourage dialogue about what social justice means and why, about the extent to which colleagues and community might share social justice ideals, and about the implications for practice. If, as Sarah suggests, schools should be agents of change rather than mere microcosms of society, school leaders must play a vital role in conscientising students, staff and community to issues of social justice. It is therefore fitting that she should offer the final provocation:

We can't just reflect society, we have to move it. It's our job to change it... The role of a principal and the role of a school is to develop people who reflect and think about what they actually mean when they say these things.

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