Leading for social justice in Ghanaian secondary schools

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Abstract
This article describes a study undertaken to examine what social justice leadership looks like and accomplishes when practiced by three women heads of school in the West African county of Ghana. Definitions of social justice and social justice leadership abound and range from the all-encompassing to the tightly constrained (Berman, 2011; Cribb & Gerwirtz, 2003; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; North, 2008; Theoharis, 2007, 2009). However, this study seeks to examine the leadership responses of self-identifying or peer-identified school leaders for social justice to the unique challenges of a national school system in a developing country. The study assumes that personal definitions of social justice leadership, shaped by the cultural understandings of the study participants interacting with their life and professional experiences, will influence the approach of school leaders to providing for their students. The differences and similarities in their understanding of social justice, and the leadership practices they employ, will reflect the complexity of the interactions amongst national and school contexts, individual leadership identity, and the socially constructed understandings and practices that emerge to solve specific social justice issues in each unique school environment (Bogotch, 2002).

Keywords: *Social justice; Ghana; female school leaders; principals; women's educational leadership*

Theory, practice, and the definition of social justice through action

This study is rooted in the recognition that social justice definitions are bounded by cultural understandings and leadership practices, which are motivated by a desire for social justice, will be responsive to national and local educational environments. The discourse about the definition of social justice is "increasingly concerned with articulating the connections between…theoretical understandings of leadership for social justice and the everyday practices of school leaders" (Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p.126). Given that current definitions of social justice are based on "ideologies of human rights, equality and democracy as believed by most English-speaking Western societies" (Fua, 2007, p. 673), these may not reflect the very different value systems of other cultures or the complexity of indicators of prosperity and privilege worldwide.

The dearth of international studies on the intersection of social justice and international educational leadership prompted Skrla, McKenzie and Scheurich (2007) to note that, "Much remains unknown…about how leadership for social justice might operate in other international settings that have histories and culture vastly different from these" (p. 786). This lack of an internationally applicable or acceptable definition of social justice has led to growing support for the concept that social justice leadership is best defined through actions (Bogotch, 2002; Campbell, Gold & Lunt, 2003). Lyman, Strachan and Lazaridou (2012) in their analysis of the personal narratives of 23 female educational leaders from 23 different countries noted, "Clearly expressed in all of the narratives was that life experiences created an awakening to gender and other social justice issues. Commitment to social justice leadership begins when the meanings of social injustice arise from lived experience" (p.1).

Our study of three women leading Ghanaian secondary schools is situated in a larger project – the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) sponsored by the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) in the USA and the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS). The project aims to deepen the understanding of how principals lead

their schools in ways that reduce inequalities. It does not adopt any specific framework in relation to 'social justice' or seek to narrowly define who is, or is not, a social justice leader. Instead, the project is defined by a commitment to "listen to the principals." Two overarching questions guide the BELMAS/UCEA project: *What is "social justice leadership" and what does it look like when we see it?* [and] *How can an international and comparative methodology enhance our understanding of what social justice leadership means in different national contexts?* Within the parameters of these questions, a set of four research questions frame data collection: 1. How did social justice leaders *learn* to become social justice leaders? 2. How do social justice leaders make sense of social justice? 3. What do social justice leaders *do*? 4. What factors *help and hinder* the work of social justice leaders? This study of three Ghanaian female school leaders adopts the aims and framework of the ISLDN project to explore how these women, who are leading public secondary schools in Ghana, learn, make sense of, and do social justice leadership and what factors help and hinder them in their endeavors.

Methodology

The ISLDN project advocates a qualitative research design, seeking to develop a number of case studies of social justice leadership drawn from a range of educational contexts. These contexts are anticipated to reflect both similarities and differences *between* countries and also similarities and differences *within* countries. All cases are developed using the same methodology: a standard semi-structured one-two hour interview schedule designed to elicit the factors that influence school principals seeking to achieve the social justice outcomes they envisage for their students.

Participants

The parameters determined for the selection of participants for the ISLDN project are that participants should self-identify as social justice leaders (i.e. participants will have a strong educational philosophy committed to reducing inequalities). Inequalities are intentionally broadly defined – they may reflect differences based on class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ability, and may include inequalities in different forms of capital. Participating principals can have a reputation generally for social justice leadership, or they may have focused their efforts on a single, specific issue (ISLDN, 2012).

For this study, principals who met the ISLDN project criteria were selected from a group of women interviewed initially for a wider study of Ghanaian women principals (see Wilson-Tagoe, 2013). In these initial interviews, the women indicated a commitment to social justice, a commitment endorsed in informal discussions with their peers and others in the Ghanaian education system that recognized these women as leading for social justice. From this group, the researchers further purposefully selected three principals leading secondary (high schools) in differing geographical and socio-economic environments. Given that the national educational context was identical for each of the principals – they, their schools, teachers, and students operated under the same national policies and practices as defined by the Ghanaian Ministry of Education – the researchers believed that the factors most likely to impact each principal's practice of social justice leadership would be located at the school and personal level. By choosing principals from schools in different locations, serving different student populations as defined by socio-economic status and achievement in national examinations, the researchers hoped to learn how principals defined and addressed inequalities in both their school communities and in the treatment of their communities in the larger context of the Ghanaian education system.

To this end, three principals were approached to participate in the study. The first led a long established, highly rated girls' boarding school serving high-ability students mostly from families with high socio-economic status. The second led an inner city school in the capital, Accra, with students of mixed ability, mostly of lower to middle socio-economic status. The third led a school on the outskirts of the

capital city traditionally serving lower socio-economic students of mixed ability from the immediate area but experiencing changes in the school community as the catchment area of the school became absorbed into suburban Accra. One or both of the researchers visited each participant at her school. This provided an opportunity to see the school context, students, and classrooms. Interviews took approximately one hour, typically in the principal's office, following the semi-structured interview schedule developed from the ISLDN project, and were recorded with the permission of the principal.

While the decision to focus the study on three women heads was deliberate, both to use and extend the existing study of female heads of school in Ghana, it was not the intention of the researchers to approach the study with a gendered perspective. The researchers take the stance that women may or may not lead for social justice in the same way as men. While the purpose of this study was to explore and compare how three Ghanaian women lead for social justice, and how context and background affects this leadership, the hope was that the data gathered could well be used in future studies for a comparison of male and female social justice leadership both within Ghana and across other countries within the ISLDN project.

Researcher identity

Both researchers are female. One is a Ghanaian with a career in education as a teacher, teacher trainer, and academic currently living and working in Ghana. The second researcher, currently an academic at a U.S. university, has previously worked as teacher and administrator in public and private schools in Africa, with a research background in qualitative studies of gender issues in educational leadership worldwide. Together, the researchers believed they could provide both an insider/outsider perspective on the research and empathies with the problems facing school leaders in the challenging educational environment of West Africa.

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed and the recordings listened to in conjunction with reading the transcripts to verify their accuracy and to ensure that the non-Ghanaian researcher understood culturally-specific references and the Ghanaian English usage of the participants. The data from each interview was then reorganized using the four overarching questions – how do social justice leaders make sense of social justice (what do they want the outcomes of their actions to be; what is their vision?), what do they do (to realize this vision/outcomes in the schools they lead?), how do they learn to become social justice leaders and what, in the national and school contexts, helps or hinders them in their work? Both researchers collaborated in this process. A model of the factors at the country, school, and personal level that interacted to produce the desired outcomes of the social justice leadership for each principal was then constructed and compared. The reorganized interview material and the summary model were returned to the principals for verification of accuracy of the researchers' interpretations.

The Ghanaian educational context

Compulsory education in Ghana consists of six years of primary school and three years of junior high school (JHS). At the end of JHS, 150,000 students compete for admission to 450 senior high schools (SHS). There are over 9,000 JHSs in the country but only approximately 450 SHSs with about half the capacity of the JHSs. There is considerable variation in school quality at both levels of schooling, although the public SHSs are considered of higher quality than the equivalent privately operated SHSs. Each school is operated by a school management committee that includes the principal and representatives from the local community stakeholders (Government of Ghana, Ministry of Education, 2009).

Application to a SHS is centralized through a computerized school selection and placement system (CSSPS) introduced in 2005. The system allocates JHS students to SHS based on students' ranking of their

preferred programme choices and their performance on a standardized examination. Programme choices are often the result of discussions between students and their parents, teachers, and friends. Students submit a ranked list of choices, stating a secondary school and a programme track in that school for each choice. Students take the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), which is a nationally administered examination. Those who qualify for admission to SHS are admitted to a school. On average, less than half of all candidates receive a sufficient grade in the BECE to qualify for admission to SHS. Qualified students are assigned in merit order to the first available school on their list, and schools admit students up to their capacity. Students who do not gain admission to any of their schools of choice are administratively assigned to an under-subscribed school with available spaces. Efforts are made to place these students in their preferred district or region wherever possible, but there is limited regard for students' initially ranked choices. As such, there are high stakes involved in the application decision (Bosu, Dare, Dachi, & Fertig, 2011).

This school choice ideally provides an opportunity for educational mobility: a high-achieving student who begins his/her education at a low-performing school (for reasons of poverty, for example) can choose to complete that education at a higher-performing school with the benefit of access to greater resources. Merit-based systems such as this epitomize this prospect because a student's chances of gaining admission to a more selective school depend on academic performance and not purely on luck or family background.

The Ministry of Education appoints school principals for government secondary schools. Principals are not required to complete a professional standardized preparatory programme, but are to have served as a post-graduate teacher for 15 years, deputy director for two years, and an assistant headmaster/mistress for three years (GESC, 2009). While there is growing recognition that school heads are key to improving educational outcomes for students, there has been little progress to date in providing them with an understanding of approaches and tools that would assist them, including sensitivity to social justice issues that may exist in the schools they lead (Amakyi & Ampah-Mensah 2013).

The cases

Case 1

Madam T is the female headmistress of an inner-city coeducational day secondary school in Accra, the capital of Ghana. An initial interview with the headmistress conducted as part of the larger study of female head teachers indicated her strong commitment to school improvement, a commitment verified by colleagues in the educational service and by the academic outcomes of students in the school. When Madam T first joined the school three years prior to the date of interview only 49% of students performed well enough on the national examinations to go forward for tertiary education. In her first year at the school, 78% of students passed the examinations, and 86% the following year.

School characteristics and context

At the time of the interview, there were 1,600 students in this school, with 72 teachers and another 20 non-teaching staff. Madam T characterized the students as coming from varied backgrounds and with a wide range of academic ability. Many travel one to two hours on local buses, which can cause tardiness. Other parents seek to board their children locally so that they can attend the school. The headmistress noted that many families have problems finding the modest school fees; this has until recently been a school serving a low income population, but the improving school examination results have led to a number of better-resourced families joining the school.

The school is located in a central area of Accra, surrounded by government offices. It was founded in the 1960s and is in an area of changing land use, where property is increasing in value. The classrooms

are of basic construction and have limited resources – desks, chairs, and a blackboard being the primary furnishings. The classrooms surround an open area that contains space for car parking and for students to gather during recess. There are no sports facilities and the government has recently taken some land, originally part of the school site, for other purposes. In exchange, the school negotiated the provision of a new block of classrooms, under construction at the time of the interview. Before the arrival of Madam T as head of school, teacher absences from the classroom had been frequent.

Personal motivation to enact social justice leadership (how does she make sense of social justice; what outcomes does she hope for?)

The headmistress, an experienced school leader, interprets social justice leadership as a commitment to ensuring that all students complete their secondary education and pass the leaving examinations with scores high enough to allow them to access tertiary education. She believes this is possible despite the many factors in the home circumstances and previous educational experiences of students that work against this. The headmistress explained both her passion for education and her faith in education's ability to change the lives of her students. She stated, and repeated several times, that providing children with an education was to liberate them:

> I always say that education is a liberating factor. If you are liberated, why not, you fit anywhere at all…Education should liberate people...It gives you some freedom whereby you can operate anywhere at all. If not for education, none of us will be in Accra, we will be back in our villages you understand…It levels out society. Because you are able to understand…you'll read and interpret government policies, you'll begin to carry out things that you think are necessary for you. You don't just jump into things because someone says it must be done.

How did Madam T "learn" social justice leadership?

The headmistress described her own passion for education and interest in teaching as rooted in her own elementary school experiences. "I saw a few teachers who were up to the task and I said to myself, 'Why not? – I should be able to be one of such people.' And so now that I'm here, I also want to inspire my students…." She explains her belief that she must be a role model to everyone in the school derives from her memories of a middle school head teacher who collected magazines for her and other female students that showed young women with PhD's working in fields requiring higher education, at a time when few women aspired to this. She remembers how inspirational this person had been for her.

As she worked her way up through the levels of the educational system, she taught herself effective leadership techniques from observing those she worked under. "I started collecting pieces of things secretly in my head against the future and that has helped me a lot." She noted that several of the female school heads for whom she worked would attend meetings but always come back to school to work on several issues before finally leaving for the day – a "first in, last out" approach that showed commitment to the school and modeled the work ethic Madam T has, in turn, modeled for her teachers, staff, and students.

The headmistress acknowledges her deep religious faith as motivating her to social justice leadership. She uses religious illustrations to demonstrate to her students the need for focus in their studies and the need to think about long-term objectives rather than short-term gratification that would side-track them from achieving academic success: "If you are able to follow Christ and you say no to these earthly things as of now, why not, you'll go places."

How she leads for social justice

In addition to modeling commitment and a strong work ethic, Madam T also believes she has a responsibility to be an advocate for those students experiencing problems – particularly around school fees – that could

prevent them moving forward. She enlists and guides the school council to find resources for these students: "[W]hen some of [the students] are doing very well and then we have looked at their background and feel that the background is so very poor, we try to seek out assistance." This has involved cultivating foreign donors: a U.S. church group, and a Jamaican/Canadian philanthropist, as well as local groups, which provide money to help deserving students with school-related fees.

Madam T believes it is important to raise the expectations of the students at the school. For example, while acknowledging that most girls reaching secondary education do well, she continues to encourage them to think broadly about their futures: "I tell them, girl, you need to be educated to a point that you can stand on your own even if you are married so then you can help that nation grow and the family you will be raising." Her advocacy has extended to improving school facilities. When the government decided to appropriate the land that had traditionally been assigned to the school, she encouraged the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to challenge the government in the courts. The matter was eventually settled with the government agreeing to build a new building on the existing school site in exchange for the land.

Madame T's leadership is focused on making the education process effective by ensuring that everyone in the school community has it as their central concern. She claims her success in raising student outcomes on the national examinations was due to this: "I was onto everybody, students, teachers, and even parents. I would go round the classes; I would ensure that every teacher was in the class." She notes that one of the challenges she sees at the current school is that many of the children come from backgrounds where there is no understanding of the power of education or role models of those who have used it.

> *They don't have role models in their homes so that they are able to say I want to be like my brother or my sister ... and they don't know the essence of education in this school of mine because of their background.*

Helps and hindrances

Madam T chose not to see particular factors as helping or hindering her, but rather that she shaped her leadership to accommodate the realities of the situation she confronted and to change those realities to bring about the desired outcomes for her students.

Summary

This participant considered that the national system of education was as equitable as it could be given the resources it had at its disposal and was working to provide equal access to schooling to all children through the current merit system (those children who did well on examinations gained access to the next level of education). She considered it was the responsibility of the schools, working with parents and the community, to tackle issues of the inability of some students to take advantage of, or use, the education provided because of home environment or previous poor educational experience. Within the school, the headmistress saw it as her own responsibility to provide leadership to address inequality by ensuring human and financial resources were used efficiently, by advocating for the school and for students in need to provide additional resources, and by raising expectations in the entire school community. She attributed her motivation to do this to her deep religious beliefs about how people should behave and treat one another, her strong belief in the liberating potential of education, and to the examples of role models during her own schooling and professional career in education.

Case 2

Madam M is the headmistress of a high school comprising 2,100 students with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls situated in a community that, at the time of the study, was changing demographically. Madam M joined the school as an assistant head in 1997 and took over the administration in 2007. She

was chosen as a participant for this study because of the changes she had brought to the school. These are reflected in the physical school environment, which she has transformed with the addition of a security wall, new classroom block, separate washroom facilities for teachers, and an administration block. The school culture has also changed, with less absenteeism for both teachers and students and gains in student pass rates on national examinations.

School characteristics and context

While highly rated schools in Ghana typically draw the best students from all over the country, less desirable schools are more likely to have a high percentage of students from the immediate neighbourhood and from families without the means to provide transport to distant schools or bear the costs associated with boarding students at the more sought-after institutions. Madam M's school originally enrolled most of its students from low socio-income families in the local area. Parents were primarily farmers or masons with little education, and the majority of students walked or took local transportation to the school campus. The expansion of the Accra urban area in recent years has brought change to the local community of the school with an influx of new residents – parents who are working in offices or self-employed in small businesses and are in the lower-middle income group. This group, perhaps because they have some education themselves, are more responsive to their responsibilities regarding their children's education.

Personal motivation to enact social justice leadership

Madam M's philosophy of education and her religious beliefs intermingle to provide the motivation to strive to improve the school by her leadership. She explains:

> *I think that when you are coming into this world you are coming to get educated. It's to do with my religious inclination. So you come into this world to have education, be it formal or informal, whatever, you try to improve upon yourself; otherwise, what's the difference between us and the caveman, so to speak. So education is important so that your whole life, your whole being, can be changed for the better. You become a better person if you are open-minded. You can't do that without...the education aspect. ...Education can genuinely help make a difference even for your own mind set and your peace and your development – economically, socially – it's vital.*

Madam M describes herself as passionate about teaching and leading schools and uses this passion to improve schools for the benefit of the students. She has climbed the ranks of educational positions, from teacher to assistant head of school with teaching responsibilities, to a head of school who still chooses to teach. She uses teaching as a way of staying in touch with students and teachers so they know she understands the problems they face:

> *I still go to the classroom and I do the English literature and I do the English language [classes] because it's a motivating factor for the teachers, and it gives the students the chance to know you more...They [teachers and students] realize you are also a teacher and just leading the pack. So it sort of makes students understand you better; they get to know you more, you get to know the students, you see their problems, and therefore if a student comes to you, you already know what he/she is here for.*

How she leads for social justice

Her choice of leadership style, and the importance she places on making her teachers feel valued, is also a reflection of her understanding of the need to build a strong sense of community and understanding in order to improve the quality and outcomes of the education the school is able to offer. Madam M explains:

I try to listen to everybody, and then I try to put things right without necessarily offending too much. I like the hands on. You know, you lead by example. You try to have a listening ear, but you need to be firm, and finally you put your foot down so that you can have your way. But you know, you do not keep pressurizing people and making people feel uncomfortable. The work doesn't go on. So you know, firm but fair. A lot of listening and negotiating and then appreciating what they do, sharing their pain with them. So over here, when it's somebody's birthday...when somebody is bereaved, we help; and if you see that your colleague's face looks drawn, you must be able to say "Ei, dear, what's happening?" – so that they feel this belongingness. It helps the work to move on better. I mean I couldn't have done all these changes without my teachers' support, massive support.

Madam M articulates the view of the educational system as being merit based and open to everyone and has no real sense of discrimination or under-representation existing in it. She states, "So far as I am concerned…education is equal and free in Ghana, and it is for you to see it and then grab it." She believes, "Your effort will put you where you should go...You need to work hard…I think you go to where you fit in. The opportunities are there for all of us. I believe so." She describes her own determination to go to a high achieving girls' school: "I was itching to go there" two years before she was old enough to apply.

However, the headmistress acknowledges that families' understanding of the importance of education, and the location in which they live, may mean that some children have a less clear vision of the opportunities offered by education: "Maybe you are living far away somewhere so you might not be able to see things that people living in Accra are seeing." So she sees her social justice responsibilities as ensuring that all students have a clear vision of why they must take full advantage of their schooling, to recognize their own potential, and to employ it to build a better society. She says of her students, "At a point in time they get to know why they should learn. Because they have to get out of the life cycle of poverty and want." She explains that she tries to help students see opportunities – so that when they

see it they push up – like being in a whirlpool – you will drown so you find a way of getting out of it...Otherwise, you're going to be in the same cycle – living in a compound house sharing the toilets and bathrooms together.

She notes, "You see, they go through a lot of abuse and it's harming, but if they try hard, they get out of that situation and, if they become better, society progresses."

Madam M motivates, inspires and instills her vision of the importance of education for every child through conversation and counseling. "Many of them are motivated because you talk to them a lot; then they wake up [to the possibilities open to them]…The therapy is good for them, a lot of counseling and hard words sometimes." But she also appreciates that some students need practical help, and in these cases she assumes the role of advocate. Some of the students may be orphaned or cannot pay the school fees for other reasons connected to family poverty. In these cases, she encourages her friends to help out a student, or pressures the PTA to raise the necessary money, or contacts an outside agency, such as a national government organization to provide support.

Helps and hindrances

The headmistress credits her "vision" of what she wanted the school to become to her visits to a private international school in Accra, and her ability to bring about improvements to the fact that the teachers and parents had trust in her and supported her "absolutely." Madam M notes with pride a change in the teachers: "When it comes to their teaching and wanting to improve them, I think there has been a change because some of them are pursuing courses and they do what you ask them to do because they buy into that." She is

also proud of the improvement in her students' scores on the exit examinations from secondary education, particularly as many enter with low scores on the primary education exit examinations. She credits this to the improvement in teaching and teachers' self-esteem previously noted: "I think it's because of teachers working well."

Summary

This participant felt that the national system of education provided equal opportunities for all children, and the responsibility of the school leader is to provide the best educational opportunities within the school for all children, to compensate for home environment or previous poor educational experience. She believed the best approach to doing this was through building relationships with and between teachers, promoting a caring community that listened and responded, and articulating a clear vision of the power of education to transform lives. Within the school, the headmistress saw it as her responsibility to provide leadership to find and use resources to improve the physical learning environment for teachers and students and for students in need. She attributed her motivation to do this to her deep religious beliefs about the responsibility of individuals to develop their full potential for their own and society's benefit, her faith in the ability of education to open minds to this potential and opportunities to use it, and to the examples of good educational practice she had seen in the "western-style" educational environment in an international school in Accra.

Case 3

Madam G is the headmistress of a highly ranked girls' high school founded in the colonial era by a religious sect that still has input into the selection of the administrator and general running of the school. She comes from a family of teachers and worked her way through the ranks of teacher to head of school before being appointed to her current position, which she has held for ten years.

School characteristics and context

The school serves 1,500 high ability students, with many boarding at the school, and many of whom come from affluent families (Madam G notes that on visiting days "the cars that are parked here would make you think it's a ministerial meeting"). The school also has students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may come as day students from the local area or attend the school on a scholarship. The school is on a spacious campus with excellent facilities in comparison with most Ghanaian secondary schools, but it is situated in what is now a deprived community. This causes security concerns for Madam G, with intruders from the community entering the school and dormitories to steal.

How did she learn social justice?

Madam G defines her understanding of social justice in terms of fairness, and attributes her belief in this to her strong Christian faith and upbringing: "I am somebody who believes in fairness…This world is for all of us, and we must share all the things that God has put at our disposal and make it comfortable for everybody… So you need to respect people's backgrounds." Given the affluent nature of both the school environment and the majority of the students, she sees her responsibilities as ensuring that the educational experience provided by the school is accessible to all the students and that the more affluent are not privileged at the expense of the less affluent. "School is a leveler. Everybody knows that's my mindset."

She provides several examples of how this can happen and the measures she has taken to combat differential treatment based on socio-economic status, despite the fact that this makes her unpopular with both parents and teachers. One example is the provision of private lessons or coaching by teachers. Madam G has banned this practice in her school.

> *We cannot allow private tuition where teachers will gather [to teach] a few in their homes, collect extra huge sums from parents. So that poor man's child, what happens to her? Of course,*

> *the teachers are not happy [with me] because they are comparing with what happens on other campuses.*

The headmistress also conducts conversations with teachers about their grading of student work and withstanding parent pressure to influence this. She encourages teachers to have transparent marking schemes, telling them, "If you are not careful, you are disadvantaging somebody and this is injustice, yes. Either you do it expressly or by your laziness," and warns them they will be in serious trouble with her if she finds them manipulating a student's grades to give that student an advantage of some kind.

Another practice that the headmistress has banned is that of students bringing their own food to the communal dining hall to avoid the situation where

> *the poor man's child who cannot take corned beef and sausages is sitting there and feeling very bad and thinking that she is an orphan already. But if we are all eating the same food, she can eat her food in peace and not be looking at what somebody is enjoying which she cannot have.*

Yet another problem is that of parents who, because they are rich or politically connected, believe they do not have to follow school rules and procedures connected with visiting hours and pocket money for their children. Madam G noted,

> *I can tell you that in the school, I really find it difficult tolerating people who think that because they are so rich I must overlook the rules and give them some preferential treatment. You won't get it from me and, therefore, I get a bad name.*

Madam G also notes two other cases where she has felt the need to speak out about situations she feels are unfair. The first was the appointment of members of educational committees to represent the region at the national level, where she sees candidates being put forward and voted in who are political choices, despite well qualified alternatives who have served their time in the ranks. She explained,

> *They all knew that it shouldn't be done. But who was to bell the cat…In such a case you can trust Madam G to bell the cat. Not because I want to spite anybody, but I don't feel comfortable when there is injustice.*

The second case was that of scholarships available for needy students. Madam G said,

> *I am wondering why rich people like the parents I have here should have so many people on scholarship. They are too many for the calibre of parents I have here. They can pay three times what is needed, but they are on scholarships meant for the farmers.*

Madam G linked these instances to a national culture of putting oneself and one's family before everything else.

Leading for social justice awareness

Given the affluence of many of her students, Madam G sees an important aspect of her social justice leadership as making these students aware of the needs of others and urging and supporting them to take an active role in meeting these needs. She noted the wide range of social service activities in which the students become engaged, including with the community bordering the schools.

> *It's very interesting how they are passionate about their responsibility towards the community. And I am happy they are catching the spirit that education is not an end in itself; you have to be useful to yourself and to other people and the community you live in.*

Summing up, Madam G stressed her belief in the importance of role modeling for the students: "I believe in my impact on the girls and how I can shape them for a good future."

Leading for social justice also involves mentoring and being an advocate for the teachers, to raise their skills and commitment to the benefit of the students. Madam G explained,

You try to let people see the importance of the work you are doing and how crucial it is for national development, although teachers in our part of the world are not really appreciated the way we think they should be. You try and let them see how noble the profession is and how far-reaching this impact is…Self-esteem or self-worth is everything. Once you develop self-worth in your teachers, they want to also continue to lead people to achieve that.

In addition to setting high standards for her teachers, and monitoring the fairness of their treatment of their students and their teaching performance, she seeks funds from her Parent Teacher Association to conduct a four-day retreat for her faculty and an orientation week to help teachers prepare, both practically and mentally, for the coming school year. She frequently rotates the leadership of school committees to allow all teachers to experience leadership roles.

Helps and hindrances

Madam G saw no basic inequality in the educational system itself, instead locating the cause of unfairness in individuals. When asked what hindered her work as a social justice leader, she replied, "It is people's lack of integrity. That's all. Anybody who sets out to want to do the right thing for justice sake will be opposed, so it depends on who you are dealing with – it's attitudinal." She noted that when people simply do not care about social justice, you become isolated when you practice social justice leadership, "but my position is that we are mentoring children for Ghana and the future. If we teach them…that you can cheat, then we are in trouble as a nation…We have to be fair, and justice must prevail."

Summary

This participant also believed in the fundamental fairness of the Ghanaian education system, located her own understanding of social justice in her belief in, and practice of, Christian values, and saw social injustice residing in the way those with money and influence used the educational system to their advantage. Working with two groups of students, both academically able but differing in their access to money and resources in a well-endowed school environment surrounded by a deprived local community, she felt an important aspect of her leadership must be to encourage reflection by both students and teachers about their responsibilities to the larger Ghanaian community and sensitivity to the needs of others. Madam G believed social justice leadership incorporated a need to take an active stance against injustice in the larger school community, even when this made her unpopular, and by so doing role-modeled the values she preached.

Discussion

The three case studies illustrate basic similarities in the approach of three female school principals to leading for social justice, despite differences in their school environments and communities. At a personal level, all three women located their active involvement and commitment to the education of all students in their Christian upbringing and the examples set by teachers and leaders in the schools in which they had studied and worked. Their educational philosophies all spoke to an understanding that education was a leveler – allowing those that had it to access opportunities regardless of their social background.

All of the participants were accepting of the equality of opportunity offered by the Ghanaian educational system itself – given the economic resources of the country. They accepted the merit system that allocated the limited secondary school places on the basis of performance in the primary school leaving examinations as the fairest way of distributing educational resources. In this respect, the three women saw their role as bounded by their schools and school community and as bringing what Oxenham (2005)

describes as "reasonableness and impartiality in providing the opportunity to learn" (p. 70) and managing and supporting the teaching and learning programme for the benefit of all. A common concern was ensuring the quality of their students' education experience and the need to instill a desire for high achievement and a strong work ethic to take students beyond high school.

An additional common theme emerging from the three case studies was that of the school leader as "change agent." All three women had a vision of themselves as having a degree of agency with regard to the energies they expended developing their schools, a belief that they could affect the quality of their students' education through their actions, a trait also noted by Bosu et al. (2011) in their study of primary schools in Tanzania and Ghana. The participants would also appear to support Kraft's (2007) assertion that "fundamentally, teaching for social justice encourages students to embrace a sense of hope and belief that they can change their own lives and the world" (p. 85).

What did not emerge from the analysis of the cases was any need to recognize or honour cultural identities related to sexuality, ethnicity, or religious belief - the sensitivity to individual diversity so much a part of social justice schooling in "western" education systems. This absence of recognition existed despite the fact that the assigning of students to schools far from their homes or home region resulted in many different Ghanaian ethnic cultures being represented within each school. Neither was there an awareness of, or active push to accommodate, differences in student learning or of differentiating teaching for different learning styles to help all students derive the maximum benefit from their school experience. This lack of awareness existed despite recent moves by the Ministry of Education to assign a percentage of students from the locality of the school to the school, regardless of the level of achievement on the primary school examinations, which would inevitably disturb the homogeneity of academic ability currently found in the higher-ranking secondary schools.

Concluding comments

There is a growing interest in many developing countries for the provision of formal training for school leaders that extends past management skills to the ability to inspire teachers and students alike to create a vision of success and effectively support teaching that improves student outcomes. As such, the need to find and examine school leaders who have done this without the benefit of specific training grows (Chen, 2009; Fua, 2007). School leaders with a clear vision and understanding of developing students to contribute to creating a just and caring society in their national context can provide the models for incorporation into formal leadership training as it becomes established. In turn, the three cases examined in this study suggest that having a strong belief in the power of education to improve lives, a sense of personal responsibility for ensuring that the resources available for providing education are evenly and effectively distributed to all students, and an understanding of the need to be a change agent to make improvements at the school level, are necessary characteristics of school leaders.

This study also suggests that even when such leadership characteristics exist, there may be a need for further sensitizing to the ways in which diversity, be it of gender, ethnicity, or social status, may affect student outcomes. As formal leadership programmes develop in Ghana and countries with similar systems for appointing school leaders from the ranks of teachers, these programmes must incorporate an examination of social justice and diversity and how they should be addressed at the school and classroom level. The perceptions of existing school leaders who have chosen to take a social justice approach provide valuable insights into those aspects of the education system and society at large that hinder or help those intent on making a difference to the lives of the students, teachers, and parents who make up their school communities.

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