

Leadership for Social Justice: Achieving Excellence and Equity

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ABSTRACT

We must achieve equal educational results for all children. Failure to do so will hamper specific groups from attaining the fundamental, primary goods and services distributed by society—rights, liberties, self-respect, power, opportunities, income, and wealth. Education is a social institution, controlling access to important opportunities and resources. Educational leaders are obligated to examine the circumstances in which children of color and poverty are educated. In this article, I examine inequities in schooling and the vision of a system of high-achieving and equitable schools that ensures every child the right to learn.

A concern for social justice is at the core of democracy. The United States prides itself on being a fair and just democracy, a nation in which every citizen is to be treated equally in social, economic, political, and educational arenas (Corning, 2012). According to its Constitution, the United States seeks to establish “liberty and justice for all.” In spite of these goals, U.S. society is composed of many inequities: rich and poor, educated and illiterate, powerful and powerless (Schutz, 2012). Now in the second decade of the twenty-first century, educational leaders must continue to question whether they have an obligation to create a nation whose words are supported by the experiences of its citizens.

The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution addressed the question of equal opportunity, declaring that “no state shall deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” The mandate that people receive equal protection extends to equal educational opportunity. While this fundamental affirmation of equal opportunity has been part of American discourse since the inception of this nation and is found in the Declaration of Independence and other documents, inequities in the major social, economic, political, and educational institutions continue to exist in American society.

Inequities in Schooling

Inequities in schooling are among the social injustices with which educational leaders need to be most concerned. Although it has been a stated goal in the United States that all youngsters, regardless of family background, should benefit from their education, many students do not. Most schools do not teach all students at the same academic level. The U.S. educational system to this day is beset with inequities that exacerbate racial and class-based challenges. Differential levels of success in school distributed along race and social-class lines continue to be the most pernicious and prevailing dilemma of schooling. Furthermore, there is considerable empirical evidence that children of color experience negative and inequitable treatment in typical public schools (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2010).

Many children of color find themselves marginalized in toxic schools that offer inferior education. These schools affect the opportunities and experiences of students of color in several immediate ways: They tend to have limited resources; textbooks and curricula are outdated; and computers are few and obsolete. Many of the teachers do not have credentials in the subjects they teach. Tracking systems block minority students' access to the more rigorous and challenging classes, which retain these students in non-college-bound destinations. These schools generally offer few (if any) Advanced Placement courses, which are critical for entry into many of the more competitive colleges.

Furthermore, African American students are overrepresented in special education programs, compared with the overall student population. More than a third of African American students (as compared with fewer than a fifth of white students) in special education are labeled with the more stigmatizing labels of "mentally retarded" and "emotionally disturbed." Conversely, four-fifths of the white students (as compared with two-thirds of the African American students) in special education are much more likely to be labeled "learning disabled" or "speech impaired." African American males are more than twice as likely as white males to be suspended or expelled from school or to receive corporal punishment (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2010). Jonathan Kozol (1992), in *Savage Inequalities*, described the inferior education received by minority students (particularly African Americans and Hispanic Americans)—fewer resources, inequities in funding, inadequate facilities, tracking systems, low expectations, segregated schools, and hostile learning environments.

These related inequities, the persistent and disproportionate academic underachievement of children of color and their injurious treatment in our schools, are compelling evidence that the United States public education system remains systemically racist (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2010). This is not to suggest that racism is consciously intended or even recognized by educators; it is institutional racism that is systemically embedded in assumptions, policies, and procedures, practices, and structures of schooling. Nevertheless, every day more than 17 million African American, Hispanic American, Native American, and Asian American children experience the effect of systemic racism in U.S. public schools (Skrla & Scheurich, 2004).

Social justice in schooling, then, would mean equal treatment, access, and outcomes for children from oppressed groups. It would mean closing the achievement

gap between children from low-income communities and communities of color and their mainstream peers so they are successful in school (Howard, 2011; Paige, 2011; Teach for America, 2011); and consequently, school success would be equitable across such differences as race and socioeconomic status (Darling-Hammond, 2010). It would mean working toward such a vision of social justice in school by engaging the powerful force of accountability policy, that is, excellence and equity for all children.

Excellence and Equity

Educational leadership for social justice is founded on the belief that schooling must be democratic, and an understanding that schooling is not democratic “unless its practices are excellent and equitable.” Educational equity is a precondition for excellence. Gordon (1999) linked social justice to excellence and equity by arguing:

The failure to achieve universally effective education in our society is known to be a correlate of our failure to achieve social justice. By almost any measure, there continue to be serious differences between the level and quality of educational achievement for children coming from rich or from poor families, and from ethnic-majority or from some ethnic-minority group families. Low status ethnic-minority groups continue to be overrepresented in the low achievement groups in our schools and are correspondingly underrepresented in high academic achievement groups. (p. xii)

We must achieve equal educational results for all children. Failure to do so will hamper specific groups from attaining the fundamental, primary goods and services distributed by society—rights, liberties, self-respect, power, opportunities, income, and wealth. Education is a social institution, controlling access to important opportunities and resources.

In her book, *The Flat World: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) offers an eye-opening wake-up call concerning America’s future and vividly illustrates what the United States needs to do to build a system of high-achieving and equitable schools that ensures every child the right to learn. She concurs with Kozol and Gordon that “we take students who have less to begin with and give them less in school too.” Darling-Hammond argues further that being poor, being of color, being an inner-city resident do not cause differences in educational achievement. Rather the lack of resources put into the education of some students and the inequitable treatment of children of color and low-income children are the major causes of difference and social injustice. She makes explicit reference to teachers as an important resource. Darling-Hammond maintains that teachers are the most important resource available to students.

Conclusion

In its simplest form, social justice is linked to redressing institutionalized inequality and systemic racism. Harvard philosopher, John Rawls (2010), argues that social justice is defined by four principles. The first is based on equality of treatment of all members of society (equal rights and liberties). The second is based on all people being regarded as individuals. The third involves giving everyone a fair chance (equal opportunity). The fourth involves giving the greatest social and economic benefits to those least advantaged. The application of these four principles of social justice to education would mean that more resources should be allocated to improve circumstances of those historically least served by the system rather than treating all individuals equally. The notion of social justice suggests that treating all people equally may be inherently unequal. Rawls argues that all education stakeholders are obligated not only to safeguard individual's rights, but also to actively redress inequality of opportunity in education. This notion posits that educational leaders are obligated to examine the circumstances in which children of color and poverty are educated.

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