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Connecting Policy and Practice

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BELMAS CONFERENCE 2014 ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

‘What Place Values in Professional Standards?: Connecting Policy and Practice’

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to set an agenda for research and informed practice. It provides the opportunity to explore the space between espoused values and leadership practice, the points of translation and mistranslation. The focus for discussion is threefold. First, it seeks to explore what place (if any) social justice values play, as articulated in leadership standards, in setting expectations for and legitimising the actions of school leaders. Second, it provides the opportunity to discuss how we might investigate this and how we might engage the profession in this endeavour. Third, it provides the space to explore how we could develop the interface between a Scottish Network and an international research project. This study is aligned to the conference theme, ‘educational policy and practice: can leaders shape the landscape?’ in its focus on exploring with school leaders how they strive to embed social justice values in school practices.

Keywords: leadership, values, social justice, professional standards

1. Introduction

At a global level, increasing emphasis has been placed on both leadership and social justice within educational theory, policy and practice. However, conflicting priorities and accountabilities can make it difficult for school leaders to provide and to be seen to provide effective leadership, whilst adhering to a personal and professional commitment to social justice. Often school leaders experience tensions as they seek to meet both increasing academic expectations and commitments to social justice.

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2. What place (if any) do social justice values play, as articulated in the Scottish leadership standards, in setting expectations for and legitimising the actions of school leaders?

Scotland could be perceived as being at a more advanced stage of development than some other countries, in terms of setting expectations for and legitimising the actions of school leaders, through social justice values articulated in leadership standards. Like many other countries, Scotland has developed a set of 'national values' as promoted in Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Gillies, 2006: 32). This has been part of a historic development since the mid nineteenth century where through successive periods, there have been waves of immigration with different ethnic and faith groups settling in Scotland, particularly in urban centers. As such, Scotland has a longer history of diversity and plurality in society than other nations and has had longer to grapple with complex sets of challenges and opportunities. It has a clear legislative framework, notably the recent Equality Act 2010, as well as both a public/civic discourse and educational discourse around values. A number of recent Scottish developments have built on this foundation. A national strategy has been devised to enhance provision for educational leadership development. A commitment at policy and practice levels has been made to progress social justice leadership. Over many years the school inspectorate quality assurance documents and national curriculum guidelines have made specific reference to issues of equality and inclusion. More recently, a set of core values has been articulated, placed at the heart of the revised Professional Standards for all registered teachers. A commitment to social justice has been acknowledged within the newly revised professional standards for school leaders.

Juxtaposed to this, it could be argued that Scotland is at a less advanced stage of development than some other countries. Despite the rhetoric and espousal, not much research has been conducted around this area. Arguably there is not much practice of social justice leadership. Indeed, we do not yet know what social justice leadership looks like in practice. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the barriers and challenges facing leaders committed to locating social justice leadership values in school practices, such as the competing performativity agenda. This perhaps reflects a great deal being lost in translation within Scotland's particular three-layered public education policy development process (Forde, 2014). Moreover, despite the policy rhetoric, the *Christie Commission* (2011), in connecting equity, power, rights and social justice, identified that public services had much to do to ensure better outcomes and make the principles of human rights a reality for many people living in Scotland (Davis *et al.*, 2014: 5). Davis *et al.* (2014: 2) surface a number of inequalities still affecting Scotland's children, arguing:

the recent Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 promotes an aspirational notion of wellbeing at the expense of broader and more politically hard edged concepts such as rights and social justice. The Act does not address the wider political context of wellbeing such as children's status in society, adult arbitrary use of power, unequal distribution of resources and fair access to legal representation.

3. How should we investigate this and how should we engage the profession in an investigation?

The international literature highlights the range of views on and issues surrounding social justice. Barnett and Stevenson (forthcoming: 11) recognise that the concept in itself is '*inherently problematic*' with the term often being used imprecisely, reflecting a '*broad range of philosophical and political traditions*'. Similarly, Davis *et al.* (2014: 7) acknowledge that whilst a substantial body of work exists in this area, '*social justice has diverse, complex and dynamic meanings*'. This perhaps reflects Bogotch's (2008) view that social justice is complex in nature and that little understanding exists of how it might be realized in society, and Gewirtz' (1998) view that social justice has been undertheorised in education. Mullen

(2008: 275) sees social justice as an educational intervention connecting theory to practice and to the moral use of power, whilst Marshall and Anderson (2009: 9) acknowledge the challenge for staff in confronting established school practices. Davis *et al.* (2014: 9) promote staff placing rights, recognition and respect at the centre of their efforts, as well as developing collaborative relationships that take proper account of children and young peoples' views, in order to address issues of social justice. Mullen (2008: 275) perceives democracy and accountability, power and authority, and equity and opportunity as critical issues of social justice central to educational leadership.

There has been work on conceptualising issues of social justice leadership although this is still at the early stages of conceptualisation. Equally, empirical studies into social justice leadership tend to be small-scale and relate to pressing context specific issues of inequality and exclusion. Theoharris (2010) found that headteachers focused more on challenging practices, changing structures, developing school cultures and empowering staff to promote social justice, rather than on a narrow attainment focus. Similarly, Ryan (2010) explored the skills of American principals in advocating for social justice. Notman (2014: 186) found, through two Australasian studies, that school leaders across various roles in school hierarchies were caught between the micro level of the student and the macro level beyond the school, with headteachers often required to make judgement calls '*centred on competing human needs that had them asking themselves: Who benefits? Who loses the most? What is the worst-case scenario that the school can withstand if this particular decision is taken?*'. However, Social justice leadership has, as yet, been little studied.

Given the early stages of exploration into social justice leadership, there is a continued need to explore this area both conceptually and empirically. In many ways, there is a need to return to a foundational question of what place (if any) social justice values play, as articulated in leadership standards, in setting expectations for and legitimising the actions of school leaders. From this foundational issue, a number of questions could form the basis of further research:

- What is understood as social justice in different systems?
- Is there any public articulation of social justice in other systems?
- Is there a definitive construction of social justice or should we be looking at social justice within the Scottish context?
- What is absolutely intrinsic and what is culturally specific and geographically located?
- What scope, space, opportunities and requirements do school leaders have in constructing and taking forward a social justice agenda in their schools?

4. How should we develop the interface between the Scottish Network and the international research project?

Our interest is linked conceptually and methodologically to the BELMAS-UCEA International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN). In particular our interest is linked to the 'Social Justice Leadership' strand. We seek to develop, with encouragement from Prof. Howard Stevenson of Nottingham University (who has the lead role for the social justice leadership strand of the BELMAS-UCEA ISLDN), a Scottish Social Justice Educational Leadership Network to work in parallel with the international network. One intention is to secure a balance between academics and school leaders in the Network's activities.

The Scottish based network intends to draw extensively on the framework and research questions that have already been developed by ISLDN but with a focus on school leaders and academics co-constructing understandings of social justice leadership. In this emergent project, school leaders across Scotland are being asked to contribute to a research based

approach to building understandings of the place of social justice generally, and more specifically to the values embedded within the revised professional standards for school leaders, through critical reflection on experience and practice. The study sets out to explore the relationship between school leadership and a commitment to social justice. It seeks to understand how school leaders advocate for social justice in their practice and any role that the professional standards have within that relationship.

5. Conclusion

The Scottish Social Justice Educational Leadership Network intends to engage school leaders across Scotland to develop a research based approach to building understandings of the place of social justice. The study sets out to explore the relationship between school leadership and a commitment to social justice, recognising potential tensions, challenges and barriers to the enactment of values in practice. It seeks to understand how school leaders advocate for social justice in their practice and any role that the professional standards have within that relationship. Uniquely, from conception, The Scottish Network has sought to bring together colleagues from BELMAS, SELMAS, GTCS, Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow to develop a joint enquiry, connecting perspectives from theory, policy and practice.

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