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The Importance of Context in Social Justice Leadership: Implications for Policy and Practice

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Abstract: This article contributes to the evidence base on the significance of context in enacting social justice leadership. It draws on data from the International School Leadership Development Network of 20+ countries who adopted a common qualitative approach involving interviews with principals identified as being social justice leaders. The article focuses on four case studies of Irish principals in varying primary elementary school contexts. Findings reveal local contextual features significantly impacted principals' perceptions, actions, and self-efficacy as social justice leaders. While the actions and motivation of the principals is similar, two of the principals, working in school contexts where the values and norms are not consonant with broader society, appear to lack confidence in their practice of social justice leadership. This article extends the existing evidence base by arguing for enhanced critical consciousness of all stakeholders related to the personal, institutional and community contexts in schools. It recommends a more flexible and iterative process of policy development to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and ideological struggles in schools. Finally, it calls for governments and policy makers to take responsibility for and support disadvantaged communities as education alone cannot solve the issue of inequity.

Keywords: *Context, equity, leadership, social justice, social justice leadership.*

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Introduction

Social justice issues in education and particularly the role of school leaders to counter inequitable practices and policies is increasingly receiving attention from educational researchers (Berkovich, 2014; Bogotch, 2013; Brown, 2006; Poekert et al., 2020; Shields, 2010; Torrance et al., 2021). Concurrently, awareness has grown of how global education reform policies aligned with neoliberal economic agendas have negatively affected educational equity (Berkovich, 2014; Connell, 2013; Stronach, 2010) and educators' agency (Ball, 2016; Lynch et al., 2012; Sachs, 2016; Smyth & Wrigley, 2013). With due regard to the influence of globalisation, it is also the case that national governments have considerable power to develop policies to reflect their educational priorities for individuals and the state. For this reason, it is necessary to understand how different national socio-cultural and political traditions contribute to or reinforce educational inequity (King et al., 2019) to understand the challenges that social justice leaders face within a given country. Lessons may be learned from one country to influence policy and practices in other countries.

Within a state, social justice issues need to be considered through the interactions of multiple levels and systems of interaction to gain a socio-ecological perspective on how school contexts are culturally and socially positioned (Berkovich, 2014; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Hallinger, 2018; King & Travers, 2017; Miller, 2021). It is within this socio-ecological complex terrain that the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences of the principal have evolved and subsequently shape their leadership work (Hallinger, 2018; Miller, 2021). The 'institutional context' includes the education system in which a school operates and refers to its structures, rules, and goals. The 'community context' on the other hand refers to features such as the socio-economic status of parents, parent, and community involvement in the school, both of which shape the practice of principals. The broader prevailing national political and economic policies influence both school and community contexts but taking account of these policies is not sufficient to explain how social injustices are framed contextually. Instead, to understand the lens through which social justice issues are perceived and categorised, one must turn to the deep structure of historical, cultural, political, ideological and value

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issues (Freire, 1992). Grace (1995) insists educational leadership can only be understood in the complexity of those relations. He argues for social historical research to illuminate the cultural and ideological struggles in which schooling is located (Grace, 1995), as school leadership is a cultural, sociological, and historical subject for study rather than a technical one. Hallinger (2018) refers to the ways a school's historical context contributes to its current efficacy which in turn defines a principal's initial leadership challenge. At a practical level the principal needs to understand the school's context and culture encompassing student engagement and learning, the ways in which staff think, act and respond, set within a particular community which has either been enabled or constrained over time by the broader contexts referenced.

This article aims to exemplify the importance of context by addressing national issues in the Republic of Ireland to develop an understanding of the political, economic, and religious traditions that have a decisive impact on individual schools (Angelle et al., 2016). It critically examines historical political decisions that prefigure current social values in Ireland and explicates how these decisions contribute to the framing of social justice issues in specific school contexts. Moreover, it considers how the broader national context enables some principals to actualise social justice in their school communities while constraining others from doing likewise. Potential findings from this research may help inform a deeper understanding of context in the role of social justice leadership beyond the Republic of Ireland and into other national and international contexts.

The first section of the article theoretically examines how social justice issues are inextricably linked to the purpose of education. It then reviews the historical policies that structured the current context in Irish education, with particular emphasis on consensualism in the absence of criticality within educational discourse. This is followed by an exploration of the influence of different school contexts on social justice practices which leads on to the methodology employed to gather and analyse the empirical data. The findings are presented under key themes which emerged from the data and then discussed considering the literature before signposting the overall conclusions and recommendations.

Literature Review

Social Justice and the Purpose of Education

A social justice leader is someone for whom the relentless pursuit of greater equity in educational access, opportunity and outcome is a defining principle of their work (Angelle et al., 2016). The term 'equity' embodies a state in which dimensions of privilege and oppression – for example race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and disability - do not determine educational outcomes (broadly defined) in any significant way, and where all learners are able to participate fully in quality learning experiences (Poekert et al., 2020). Captured within this idea of equity are two fundamental educational questions; which learning outcomes are prioritised and how the quality of learning experiences is evaluated? Both questions are closely related to the perceived purpose assigned to education at national level (Biesta, 2015) and to principals' judgement of the needs of learners in their school (Shields, 2013).

The national vision for Irish education summarises its purpose in four themes; to break down barriers for groups at risk of exclusion, to deliver a learning experience to the highest international standards, to equip learners of all ages to participate and succeed in a changing world and enable Ireland to lead across a broad range of scientific, enterprise, public service and cultural fields (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016). This ambitious and competitive vision builds on previous strategies that focussed on raising literacy and numeracy standards deemed essential for the growth of the indigenous knowledge economy to attract high-value jobs through inward investment (DES, 2011). The state clearly perceives education to position Ireland competitively through the qualification of learners. But according to Biesta (2015) qualification is only one of three domains of learning. The other two domains; subjectification and socialisation, need to be addressed when the purpose of education is in question. Subjectification refers to how education impacts positively or negatively on the learner as a person. It concerns how young people come to exist as subjects of initiative and responsibility, rather than as objects of the actions of others. Closely connected to subjectification is the concept of socialisation: how, through education we also represent and initiate learners in traditions and ways of being and doing, such as cultural, professional, political, religious traditions (Biesta, 2015). Socialisation is partly an explicit aim of education but, as research in the sociology of education has shown, it also works covertly, for example in how education reproduces existing social structures, divisions and inequalities (Connell, 2013; Mills & Gale, 2007).

While a balance of the three domains supports good multidimensional education for everyone, they are also necessary in what Berkovich identifies as the three operational social justice challenges facing schools. First, in the qualification domain, the challenge is to promote the academic and socio-emotional growth of all students. Second, the subjectification domain should aim at promoting inclusive schooling for marginalized population groups, with the intention of empowering disadvantaged individuals and groups to increase their ability to participate as equals in society. The third central challenge schools face is the development of an environment that accepts and respects differences to disrupt reproduction of existing social structures (Berkovich, 2014). These challenges relate also to affluent schools where the sense of entitlement that power and privilege can engender may inhibit realising the broader purpose of education (Huchting & Bickett, 2021; Shields, 2013). Bogotch (2013) summarises that the purpose

is not that students do better at school, but that they do better in life or phrased differently “preparing people to live well in a world worth living in” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 27). In other words, good education and education for social justice should be synonymous.

It follows that education leaders need to consider the balance of domains in which students need to develop qualities that contribute to a worthwhile life. In contexts where the national policies frequently suggest that social injustices can be solved only by individual academic mobilization within schools (DES, 2011) moral judgement is required to prioritise the specific needs of learners in particular schools (Berkovich, 2014). Such judgements are related to the Greek distinction between the dispositions of *techne* and *praxis* (Biesta, 2013; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Gleeson, 2009). *Techne* is concerned with the quality of the product and is external to the producer. Educational policy with an emphasis on performance-based metrics attracts a *techne* approach. In contrast, judgement based on *praxis* has the moral purpose of bringing about the self-development of each individual learner for personal and the collective common good (Gleeson, 2009). *Praxis* is informed action based on continuous reflection that guides judgement: it “means moving back and forth in a critical way between reflecting and acting on the world” (Brown, 2006, p. 96). This reflective component is not only externally focused but requires the leader to critically examine and deconstruct the taken-for-granted acceptance of their own views (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Social justice education is aligned with a *praxis* conceptualisation. The next section examines the historical evolution of Irish education policy, which as Grace (1995) argued, is vital for understanding current educational challenges. One will note the conspicuous absence of developments conducive to a *praxis* mindset in the following analytical account, which may also be informative for those in other contexts.

Cultural History of Irish Educational Policy Development

The historical context of Irish education can be categorised into three eras (Coolahan et al., 2017) namely, post-independence (1920s), economic modernisation (1960s) and alignment with neoliberalism (1990s). The policies enacted in each period reflected the zeitgeist of their time. It is not the purpose of this article to provide a detailed account of the social historical structure that prefigured the current context. However, the instances of policy development should exemplify and convey the relevance of historical context to the framing of social justice issues today.

The first salient fact in the post-independence educational analysis is that even prior to independence, the British government had ceded increasing power and control to the Catholic Church, in key areas such as education, health and welfare (Fleming & Harford, 2014). The church’s control, through the provision of key services, intensified in the new independent state, its morals and beliefs firmly placed at the centre of the emerging political system (O’Sullivan, 2005). Management of education was left entirely to the churches, with the state assuming a subsidiary role (Coolahan et al., 2012; Hyland, 1996; Walsh, 2011) which has contributed to the current unique context in Ireland where 96% of schools are denominationally managed (Coolahan et al., 2012; Irwin, 2015). Others argue the impact extended beyond the school system to incubate a cultural understanding the Irish people had of themselves as moral subjects which permeated family life, work, leisure and education (Inglis, 1998), as the paternalistic nature of Catholicism that prevailed contributed to an ethos of obedience rather than criticality (Norman, 2003), and an attitude of consensualism (Drudy, 1991).

Post-independence the State viewed the education system as a conduit to foster a sense of pride in Irish nationalism through the revitalisation of the Irish language and awareness of Irish history (Walsh, 2011). Schools, teacher education colleges and universities became important sites for the preservation and revival of Irish as the main vernacular language (Harford, 2009). This policy priority placed pressure on teachers who spoke English (the vast majority) to acquire competency in the Irish language (Coolahan, 1981). It became and remains a prerequisite for entrants to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for primary level teaching to have achieved higher standard Irish in their Leaving Certificate (final state exam of High School), which currently favours those attending middle-class secondary schools (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). Irish as an entry requirement for ITE, rather than a skill acquired during ITE, inhibits diversity in the teaching profession in Ireland (Gilligan, 2007). This is relevant to social justice leadership as teachers in Ireland come from less diverse backgrounds than in other European countries (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Drudy & Lynch, 1993) and rarely from low socio-economic groups (Coolahan, 2003; Darmody & Smyth, 2016) which is not reflective of society generally. While this post-independence era is retrospectively viewed as a period of inertia and insularity in Irish education (Fleming & Harford, 2014) tangible effects exist a century later despite two major eras of change that followed in the 1960s and 1990’s.

A change of direction in the 1960s commenced with Ireland joining the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD’s evaluation of the education system fed into the publication of *Investment in Education* in 1965, which detailed the shortcomings of a system stagnated by the “entrenched conservatism of political and educational elites for the previous generation” (Walsh, 2014, p. 121). The report recommended increased investment in education to remediate the shortcomings while emphasising the correlation between higher levels of educational attainment and economic growth (Loxley et al., 2014). The subsequent introduction of free second level education in 1967 was partly motivated by this deeper economic motivation, and it did open opportunities previously

unavailable to a large cohort of the population to secure access to a favoured niche in the class system (Breen et al., 1990). The nature and purpose of education initiated by *Investment in Education* has been described as “troubling” (Walsh, 2011). It is argued that increased access to education within a human capital framework embedded a meritocratic ideology in Irish society (Drudy, 2009; Kennedy & Power, 2010; Lynch et al., 2012). It is argued these influences are evident in educational thinking today as “Ireland does not have another language of education other than that of human capital” (Loxley et al., 2014, 177), arguably reflective of many other countries internationally. The approach to education that *Investment in Education* initiated was one based on a theory of meritocracy and consensualism (Drudy, 1991). Many suggest these traits reflected academic and educational discourse generally (Breen, 2010; Drudy, 2009; Drudy & Lynch, 1993; Loxley et al., 2014; O’Higgins-Norman, 2011; O’Sullivan, 2005; Tovey & Share, 2003; Walsh, 2011). In other words, the set of policy prescriptions that originated in Catholic social teaching were renewed within a consensualist attitude that permeated the rise of competitive individualist emphases (O’Sullivan, 2005).

The 1990s witnessed the most significant review of education in Ireland since independence (Walsh, 2011) and culminated with the publication of the Education Act (1998). The Education Act formed the legislative framework for an agenda of change in Irish education (Coolahan, 2003) to position education more firmly within the control of the state. The Act defined the key roles and duties of the personnel and institutions involved in education. It aimed to provide education for every person in the state, underpinned by principles of inclusive recognition of the diverse needs, beliefs, and traditions of all in society. It aimed to ensure the education system’s accountability to students, their parents, and the state, conducted in a spirit of partnership by those who serve, oversee, and engage in the system (Employment equality act, 1998). Of particular importance to this article is that this legislation outlined specific measures and requirements that would be put in place to achieve these aims. The act initiated further statutory acts which governed specific aspects of education relating to teaching standards, special education needs (SEN) and welfare issues. It triggered the establishment of statutory bodies, under the aegis of the DES to oversee implementation of regulations. This is the crucial juncture at which neoliberal managerial structures and technologies slipped into the management and control of education in Ireland, without the critical awareness of education practitioners and representatives (Lynch et al., 2012).

While the rhetoric of the Education Act (1998) acknowledged diversity, it did not alter the ownership and management of schools by denominational bodies. The tenacious staying-power of previous eras was underscored in the Employment Equality Act (Employment equality act, 1998) published that same year. Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act legislated that patron of all denominational schools be allowed to “take action...to prevent an employee... from undermining the religious ethos of the school” (Employment equality act, 1998). It was also deemed acceptable if criteria for employment favoured applicants of that religious orientation over those of other orientations. These left teachers working in denominational schools in an awkward, contradictory space between the two authorities of church and state, particularly when state priorities and Church teachings did not align. It also impacted graduates of ITE as “non-theist student teachers may have to engage in dissimulation practices if they are to ensure a teaching appointment” (Coolahan et al., 2012, p. 99). It has been suggested this potentially prolongs the ‘culture of silence’ already established among teachers in certain denominational schools (Irwin, 2015; Norman, 2003).

This historical review of Irish education policy demonstrates how previous policies may be superseded but not expunged, creating a cultural milieu unique to Ireland (Ball, 2003; Irwin, 2015). The difficulty with the cultural milieu is that it does not appear unique - it is the mundane part of everybody’s life which easily escapes attention and identification (Jenks, 2005; O’Sullivan, 2005). Yet it is the filter through which we evaluate what is normal and acceptable within a society and what is not (Jenks, 2005). For the purpose of this article, it is important to understand this history and the following differences that ensued as it helps to understand the key role context plays in the social justice leadership practices of the four principals in this study.

Influence of Different School Contexts on Social Justice Practices

Despite the context described above it is important to note that the status quo was contested by some. In the 1970s a movement started to access a state provided education free from denominational control. The return of emigrants to Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s acted as a catalyst for this change, as exposure to liberal regimes elsewhere made them question the status quo in Ireland (Hyland, 1996). An activist in the campaign, Hyland recalls 1975 as the year when a group of parents who wanted their children educated in a multi-denominational environment formed an organisation and campaigned to establish *one* school, rather than challenge the system at national level. They encountered formidable opposition from the combined forces of the joint orthodoxy of the Church, the DES, and the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), the sole union for primary teachers. Those involved in the campaign saw the issue in the broader European and international context and thought there was nothing revolutionary about setting up one multi-denominational school. However, it became apparent that most of the population perceived them as “dangerous radical subversives about to undermine the structure of society” (O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 200). Despite the obstacles and with some political support they succeeded in opening the Dalkey School Project in 1978 to ninety pupils in temporary premises. The campaign for a school building involved huge fund-raising as traditionally the churches

provided the sites and some of the capital costs for school buildings. In 1983 their school building was opened. In that same year a coordinating committee, Educate Together was set up to coordinate the efforts of the various groups which were attempting to set up multi-denominational schools in other parts of Ireland. One of the schools in this study was an Educate Together School.

The clear social justice element in provision of Educate Together schools is that they do not impose a religious ethos on students (and indirectly on parents) who do not share that faith. Parental will, political skill and fundraising ability has enabled the establishment of multi-denominational schools against significant state opposition (Irwin, 2015). This group had disrupted the cultural norm of denominational schooling and had established a subculture status by emphasising their interest in providing an alternative to state denominational provision. They defined and articulated their values and displayed agency in acting on those values through praxis-informed judgement.

Educate Together schools are different, but they have agency in defining how they are different: the label has not been imposed on them. This is of significance in understanding the social justice leadership praxis of one of the principals in this article. In contrast, other schools considered different from the norm do not get to define their status. The categorisation of schools as 'disadvantaged' began in 1984. Additional supports were provided for these schools through various intervention initiatives, but no concomitant evaluation process was included until after the publication of the Education Act. It defined educational disadvantage as follows: "The impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (Employment equality act, 1998).

This definition separates the concept of 'disadvantage' from the political and social interests embedded in society. The implicit ideology underlying the purpose of education – for example, to provide a highly-skilled workforce – is obscured. So too is what O'Sullivan (2005) called the hegemonic perspective, that the education system itself is neutral and those who use it best will derive commensurate benefit.

Following the Education Act, the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) initiative was launched in 2005. Disadvantaged schools were categorized by the Social Inclusion Section of the DES using the DEIS Banding categorization; Band 1 (greatest level of disadvantage) and Band 2 disadvantaged). The DEIS initiative involved a two-pronged approach: more professional and financial support for disadvantaged schools but with monitoring to ensure these supports were used effectively. Results of standardised tests in literacy and numeracy were the chosen metric of effectiveness. DEIS children's attainment was compared with the national norm (Weir et al., 2011). It has been noted that DEIS ignored the socio-political aspects of inequality (Kitching, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2005). Responsibility for closing the attainment gap was devolved to DEIS schools, favouring techne-based judgement (DES, 2011)

The crucial point is that there are different ways in which school contexts diverge from the socially constructed norm. Those who choose to diverge have greater flexibility in how they run their schools compared to those who are expected to raise standards to meet the norm, reflecting the situation for two of the principals in this research. This creates a fundamental and perhaps intractable problem for social justice leaders in urban DEIS schools.

Methodology

This article draws on empirical data gathered as part of a wider project related to the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN), which began in 2010. The work relates to the 'Social Justice Leadership' strand of the network set up by the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS) and the University Council for Education Administration (UCEA) in the USA (Angelle et al., 2016). The focus within the ISLDN network is to explore how school leaders 'make sense of' and then 'do' social justice. Two of the authors joined this network in 2014 and followed the agreed methodology of producing individual cases of school leadership within the Republic of Ireland. A common interview protocol for semi-structured interviews devised by the ISLDN network was used. This paper draws on the data gathered from four different principals to explore the following research questions:

- How do the principals frame issues of social justice?
- How does the school context influence their practice of social justice leadership?

Interview questions centred around four main areas:

- How do you as a social justice leader make sense of social justice?
- What do social justice leaders do?
- What factors help and hinder the work of social justice leaders?
- How did social justice leaders learn to become social justice leaders?

Sampling was purposive in that each principal either self-identified as a social justice leader or was identified through a reputational approach in line with the ISLDN sampling procedure. Details of each of the four principals and descriptions of their different school contexts are synthesised in Table 1. Along with school demographics, the table indicates the initial leadership focus of these principals when they began their role. Their focuses ranged from creating a culture in a newly formed school, to continuing the established culture, to trying to change the culture.

Table 1: Participants and school contexts

	Current Context of school	Patronage	Enrolment	Appointment of Principal	Initial Focus following appointment
School A Mary	Middle-class co-ed school with growing enrolment in the greater Dublin area	Educate Together	90% Irish 10% international 90% middle-class Almost 500 pupils	Mary was appointed as first principal with the establishment of the school	Creative opportunity to establish a school culture
School B Anita	Rural DEIS Band 2 co-ed school with stable enrolment located in rural village	Catholic	100% Irish Mixed SES 30% SEN 71 pupils	Promoted from position of Deputy Principal within school	Continue well established practices and culture of the school
School C Matthew	DEIS Band 1 school with falling enrolment in the inner-city area of significant socio-economic disadvantage	Catholic	100% low SES 69 pupils	Matthew was appointed from outside the school to the position of principal	Change culture of despair to one of hope and respect
School D Cora	DEIS Band 1 co-ed school with falling enrolment in provincial urban area of significant socio-economic disadvantage	Catholic	60% Irish 40% multicultural 80% low SES 186 pupils	Promoted from within staff	Change culture of blame and deficit to one of respect and recognition

SEN (Special Educational Needs); SES (Socio Economic Status)

Ethical approval was granted by Dublin City University and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point and that their data would be anonymised. Each set of interview data was imported into Nvivo 11 and went through iterative rounds of data analysis and coding to answer the research questions above. This paper reports on two major themes which emanated from the data.

Findings

Each of the four principals framed their issues of social justice by highlighting specific contextual features that influenced their practice of social justice leadership. While each school context is nested within the broader state context, the local contextual features appear to have a significant impact on principals' perceptions, actions, and sense of self-efficacy in their role as social justice leaders. The data shows on the one hand how two of the principals felt competent in their social justice leadership where they were able to create and continue existing school cultures. On the other hand, the data revealed challenges for the other two principals who were faced with changing school culture. These two themes will now be explored.

Creating and Continuing School Cultures

Mary was the first principal of a newly established Educate Together (ET) school, a multi-denominational school, different from the norm in the Irish context, and established against state opposition (Irwin, 2015). Mary describes her school as "predominantly middle class", with less than 10% coming from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds. Most pupils are ethnically Irish. She describes the pupils as "well motivated, with excellent behaviour". Their standardised tests scores are very good, "as you'd expect in an area like this". She welcomed the active involvement of the parents which evolved from classroom set up to supporting learning in the school in reading, I.T. and Gaelige (Irish language). Parents contribute to curriculum development and act or lead on multiple organising committees. The initial challenge was to have the school accepted within the wider community. It was "seen as very left-wing, kind of mad, you know, the lunatic left, sort of thing" arguably reflecting O'Sullivan's (2005, p. 200) reference to "dangerous radical subversives". Mary dispelled this perception by inviting community senior citizens to the school to be entertained with musical performances by the pupils. This evolved into an annual event and stimulated other community connections, demonstrating her political skills to influence others in achieving specific aims (Forde, 2013). It also evidences Mary's understanding of the importance of the socioecological perspective on how school contexts are culturally and socially

positioned (Berkovich, 2014; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; King & Stevenson, 2017) and how this has shaped her leadership work within the community context (Hallinger, 2018; Miller, 2021).

Mary reflects that she had the opportunity and agency to create a school culture of equality and justice, supported by the human rights philosophy underpinning the Educate Together ethos. Educate Together philosophy allows freedom to include in the curriculum “whatever issue you see as a burning issue in your society”, which affirms her praxis-informed judgements (Biesta, 2013; Brown, 2006). She believes that schools should reflect the context and society they are in. Her broad social justice perspectives are reflected in varied issues addressed in the school, ranging from awareness of positive mental health, racism, gender issues including LGBTQI equality and international injustices prominent in media and public discourse. She has also ensured that a small number of places are allocated for disadvantaged children living in a transient housing project located in the area. Mary acknowledges that principalship of a start-up school was challenging but afforded her the opportunity to lead without the “constraints of all the baggage and everything” she experienced in previous school contexts, once again highlighting the importance of agency to adopt praxis-informed judgements.

When Anita was appointed principal of the rural school in which she had been deputy principal, her initial aim was to “keep things as smooth as possible” and “continue as we were... because everyone was happy”. This aim motivated her to apply for the principalship; she would not have applied for principalship in any other school, arguably reflecting Anita’s understanding of the importance of the school’s historical context and culture in her role as a social justice leader (Hallinger, 2018). The school is categorised as a DEIS band 2 rural school, but Anita notes they have a mixed enrolment from “polar extremes” with some parents “arriving in jeeps and BMWs”. A high percentage of the pupils are diagnosed with SEN. Her view of equity means that different support is available for the specific needs and strengths of all children, which her school can provide. She feels she has the freedom and agency to contextualise DES initiatives to suit her school’s circumstances and community context (Hallinger, 2018; Miller, 2021). Anita perceives the lack of affordable internet in rural Ireland as an injustice. She uses her moral judgment to prioritise the specific needs of her learners (Berkovich, 2014) and ensures all children have access through the school broadband facility to compensate for this, and also that children have the opportunity to learn to play the violin as part of their equitable school experience, rather than relying on their family’s ability to pay for extra-curricular activities. This also highlights Anita’s understanding of the broader purpose of education, including subjectification and socialisation (Biesta, 2015), as she empowers disadvantaged individuals to increase their ability to participate as equals in society (Berkovich, 2014). The additional financial resources provided through DEIS adequately supports these endeavours, indicating how the school in this community context has been enabled by the broader institutional context (Hallinger, 2018). She acknowledges staff engagement and cooperation with the selected school initiatives she leads that continue the well-established culture of the school, once again evidencing the principal’s understanding of the role of school context and culture in supporting her to make praxis-informed judgements.

Both principals feel they have competently led their schools in ways that are consonant with the prevailing values and norms in their different socio-cultural or community contexts (Hallinger, 2018). They consider they have agency and a degree of flexibility in the decisions they make to meet their learners’ needs.

Challenges of Changing School Culture

In contrast, Matthew, and Cora work in DEIS band 1 urban schools (greatest level of disadvantage in the community) located in different marginalised areas. Both school contexts diverge from the socially constructed norms, but not by choice. Despite their geographic differences, their initial and continuing challenges demonstrate similar themes.

Matthew was the fifth principal appointed in ten years to his school. When he accepted the position, he was aware of the historical context and the extreme challenges the school faced. He acknowledges that he was angered at how this community had been neglected compared with other communities that had benefited from investment: “the economic agenda has taken priority over the social agenda”. This reflects his awareness and understanding of the negative impact of the wider institutional context and national context on the school in the community context (Hallinger, 2018). Regardless, his belief that all children have moral, legal and constitutional rights to education motivated him to lead the school despite these challenges. Matthew initially insisted on professional standards of punctuality and attendance from staff members who had become demoralised. He provided teachers with better materials to improve their practice and succeeded in having a new, well-resourced school building constructed, reflecting his understanding of the purpose of education including socialisation (Biesta, 2015) where he aimed to create an environment that accepts and respects differences (Berkovich, 2014) to disrupt reproduction of existing social structures, divisions and inequalities (Connell, 2013; Mills & Gale, 2007).

Reflecting on his fifteen years as principal, Matthew acknowledges that his leadership actions have affected the school community context positively. He has established a positive structure in which pupils are accepted, loved, and expected to respect themselves and others in the school community, reflecting the importance of subjectification and socialisation as central tenets of education (Biesta, 2015). Parents are welcomed to the school and feel comfortable sharing their issues with Matthew. While initially the school building was regularly vandalised, this is no longer the

case. He credits this change to the reciprocal respectful relationships he established between the community and school highlighting the importance of the community context of the school and Mathew's focus on subjectification as a purpose of education whereby young people come to exist as subjects of initiative and responsibility (Biesta, 2015). He has demonstrated political skill (Forde, 2013) in acquiring above-quota staffing for his school to meet the varied complex needs of the pupils.

Even though Matthew's actions have improved pupil attendance and attainment in his school he feels conflicted about the purpose of education for his pupils as he questions the focus on qualification (Biesta, 2015). He perceives the state's desire to improve Ireland's ranking on PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) as based on an economic policy to attract multinational companies to Ireland. Few if any of his past pupils have had or will have the opportunity to avail of these employment opportunities. The emphasis on raising literacy and numeracy standards leaves him and other DEIS principals he speaks with feeling "a bit inadequate". On the other hand, he finds the educational system does not allow for flexibility of provision to meet the needs of his community, which in this case would require the purpose of education to reflect a focus on subjectification and socialisation (Berkovich, 2014; Biesta, 2015). He cites as an example the fact that many of his pupils do not make a successful transition to second level education, which initiates further marginalisation from society. He tried to propose extending their enrolment in his school as a solution but could not get anyone in the DES to explore the proposal with him. He is frustrated with recent initiatives in education that lack the flexibility to meet the needs of his school community context but require his compliance with accompanying monitoring systems at institutional level: "policy will be made at the national level, and policy will have very little to do with what is in the best interests of these children, or my mental health". Arguably Matthew feels the constraints imposed at institutional level constrain him in adopting praxis-informed judgements to meet the needs of his pupils in the school community context.

Many of the initial challenges he encountered at the beginning of his principalship remain. Most of the families continue to experience myriad social problems which reduce their capacity to support their children or themselves reflecting the impact of the school's historical context and how it is constraining its current efficacy which in turn presents challenges for Matthew (Hallinger, 2018). He advocates on their behalf with the various services. He still encounters challenges when some teachers "look down" on pupils. He regularly works with new teachers to raise their critical consciousness about the effects of generational marginalisation on a community, evincing his understanding of the influential role of staff in the school context and culture (Hallinger, 2018) and the importance of critically examining and deconstructing taken-for-granted views (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Staff turnover is high, and he recognises the emotional costs of teaching in the school. He felt maintaining the structures in the school requires his presence, limiting his opportunities to attend and engage in professional learning. Despite the continuous demands of the principalship, he is determined to stay in his role out of a sense of public service and arguably a view of education for the common good (Gleeson, 2009). Yet he does acknowledge the possible futility of this effort, quoting Bernstein that "education cannot compensate for society" when resources are not distributed justly by state agencies because of a lack of societal respect for the most marginalised. This clearly shows his understanding of the cultural and ideological struggles in which school is located (Grace, 1995) and the impact this has on leadership for social justice which requires a praxis focus instead of a technical one (Biesta, 2013; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Gleeson, 2009).

Unlike Matthew, Cora's social justice perspective was not influenced by awareness of deeper economic and social structures. "I looked at education as a way to avail of the opportunities in life, you know to get a job that you liked", reflecting meritocratic and human capital cultural influences (Drudy, 2009; Loxley et al., 2014). She believed good education held similar possibilities for everyone.

Initially she encountered some staff expressing deficit views of pupils. She arranged professional development for all staff where they were facilitated to adopt a more positive approach, to model desired behaviour, to articulate specific expectations and notice children's engagement and effort. The focus on teaching and learning improved; pupil engagement improved and was acknowledged. She also engaged parents in school activities and social events, and this led to her deeper understanding of their challenges raising their children in a community bereft of supports. For some parents, school itself was one such challenge. But these conversations also revealed to her the parents' strengths and their interest in supporting their children's education, despite their low sense of efficacy to achieve this. This reflects a shift in Cora's understanding of social justice leadership in the school context from one which initially only focused on the pupils and staff to one which involved the community context and its historical and cultural influences (Hallinger, 2018).

In the first six years before the DEIS initiative was implemented, she worked with staff members to set up additional after school clubs to enhance children's artistic, musical, I.T. and sporting experiences, highlighting Cora's understanding of the broader purpose of education, to include subjectification and socialisation (Biesta, 2015), where she aimed to empower disadvantaged individuals to increase their ability to participate as equals in society (Berkovich, 2014). She fundraised to improve school resources such as the establishment of a school library and the installation of interactive whiteboards. Parents became more involved as they perceived the school's responsiveness to their children's needs. Cora used her political skill (Forde, 2013) and accessed support from local businesses and organisations to enhance the extra-curricular experiences available to the school community. School vandalism ceased;

like Matthew, Cora attributed this to the respectful relationships that had been established. This too potentially evinces a broader aim of education where young people's responsibility and potential sense of pride in their school as part of their community context (Biesta, 2015).

Subsequently influenced by the teaching of Paulo Freire, Cora focussed on adapting the curriculum and displayed a praxis approach in how she made school experiences relevant to the community, "If you go back to Paulo Freire, he says that you learn to read the word as you learn to read the world. He says that teachers have to have the courage to not know what somebody else's knowledge is, but find out, be willing to find out". She encouraged teachers to engage in activities that harnessed the knowledge, culture and hobbies of the diverse groups within the school, to encourage parental contributions and locate learning in the children's prior knowledge and experience. It could be said that is within these systems of interaction (Berkovich, 2014; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; King & Stevenson, 2017) that Cora's knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences have evolved and subsequently shaped her social justice leadership work (Hallinger, 2018; Miller, 2021). She did however experience resistance from some staff members to changes in practice. Some were uncomfortable with the increased involvement of parents. She was aware of this tension but believed and expressed that respect for parental concerns did not detract from support for staff. It appears that not all staff developed the same understanding for the need for these systems of interaction and adopting a socio-ecological stance for social justice issues (Berkovich, 2014; King & Stevenson, 2017).

On reflection Cora recalls that she naively welcomed the DEIS initiative from the DES, with a belief that additional resources and professional development would enhance their already improved learning attitudes and outcomes. The school set the required improvement targets in literacy, numeracy, attendance, parental involvement and links with the wider community, all areas they had been prioritising. Teachers engaged in the additional professional development provided by the DES in literacy and numeracy. A cascade approach was used in which one teacher attended the professional development and was then expected to lead the implementation of a particular programme in the school. Teachers focussed on implementing the recommended programmes and on showing an improvement in the literacy and numeracy data. Cora reflects that while aspects of the programmes were valuable, they were not recontextualised to suit the school environment. It appears that the values and aims at institutional level were not consonant with those at the school community context level with an overemphasis on the purpose of education as qualification (Biesta, 2015) and a lack of understanding of the importance of community context (Hallinger, 2018). Cora stated there was no longer time to discuss local issues and opportunities in which to base learning activities as the requirements of DEIS took precedence. While she agreed that improvements in literacy and numeracy were to be welcomed, she felt conflicted at the way practice became programmatic and data-driven rather than responsive to the learning needs and strengths in the school, "if our test scores are not on a curve that somewhat resembles the national norm, you know some teachers feel they are not succeeding in their job. I feel that standardised testing is having a huge effect, it's nearly narrowing the curriculum to a certain extent". It might be said that there was a lack of understanding at institutional level of the importance of the school community context and the flexibility and agency needed by leaders for social justice in these communities.

Cora pointed out that the focus on literacy and numeracy intensified following publication of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011), while staffing levels were reduced during the economic recession around the same time. The economic cutbacks also affected many of the families as unemployment rose, accompanied by an increase in antisocial behaviour in the community which impacted the pupils. It is generally thought that global education reform policies such as the National Literacy and Numeracy strategy (DES, 2011) are aligned with neoliberal economic agendas and negatively impact educational equity (Berkovich, 2014; Connell, 2013; Stronach, 2010) and educators' agency (Ball, 2016; Lynch et al., 2012; Sachs, 2016; Smyth & Wrigley, 2013).

Cora found some staff became less tolerant of increasing pupil behavioural issues as they focussed on standards, and tensions were palpable as she mediated for pupils while trying to support staff. While an increased emphasis on standards reflected the educational priorities for enhancing the knowledge economy (DES, 2011) there appeared to be a lack of understanding at multiple levels for how this contributed to or further reinforced educational inequity (King et al., 2019). Cora acknowledges this stage of principalship was almost overwhelming, but she did have support of some other staff members. She took an opportunity (not provided by the DES) to engage in professional development which broadened her opportunities to reflect on her educational values which arguably would support future praxis-informed judgements (Brown, 2006). At the time of data collection, she had engaged with staff on action research in the school to identify a way forward, arguably reflecting her understanding of the importance of enhancing staff knowledge, skills, and attitudes to promote social justice.

While both Matthew and Cora show commitment to improving the learning outcomes and wellbeing of their pupils, they do not convey the same sense of accomplishment as the other principals. Both appear to have had their agency curtailed by techne based initiatives that focussed on the qualification domain. Both expressed doubts about the direction of current policy for their pupils; both actively supported parents in their school community; both still struggled with staff members who showed a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of the pupils. The initial challenges they identified at the start of their principalship proved obstinate.

Discussion

The contrast between the descriptions of the two principals in DEIS Band 1 schools and other schools is stark. Yet the actions and motivation of all four - to provide a broad and balanced education for their pupils - are strikingly similar. What differs is the position of their school context in relation to the cultural milieu and status quo in Ireland (Ball, 2003; Irwin, 2015).

In Mary and Anita's schools, the community is consonant with the prevailing values and norms in broader society (Hallinger, 2018), and thus can provide support to the school, either in practical or appreciative terms. The community enables the school as it has the social and political capital to have its own broad needs addressed. The school in turn can support the community on specific local social justice issues, for instance to compensate for sparse broadband provision, or provide school places for a minority of marginalised children.

The renewed state focus on literacy and numeracy did not present an issue for either of them. Literacy and numeracy standards were not an issue in Mary's school, because as Mary pointed out, good standards are the expectation in an area like that. The implicit assumption is that parents can take some of the burden off teachers for any students that do happen to initially struggle. The sense of connectedness between school and the community appears to suggest that there are enough supports in the system in these particular contexts. In Anita's school, where everyone was happy with the school, a high percentage of pupils were identified with Special Educational Needs in literacy, which Anita viewed as a normal demographic occurrence. Her school had adequate resources and skills to meet these learners' needs in an inclusive way supported by the DEIS initiative. Neither Mary nor Anita indicated that the DES required them to adapt their practices in any way to achieve specific results.

Matthew and Cora had both shown agency based on their judgement to affect changes in their schools, but DEIS procedures appeared to hinder their praxis, indicating that institutional contexts can constrain practices on community contexts where there are insufficient supports within the community context (Hallinger, 2018). In Cora's case the delivery of professional development to individual teachers reduced learning to a technical procedure. Teachers received a message that the school would be evaluated on the performance of children on standardised tests. Teachers focussed on 'what to do' to get the required results. That method of professional development initially bypassed the principal and therefore the opportunity to develop whole staff critical reflection of the specific contextual needs of the diversity of learners in the school was missed. It may also reflect the historical context whereby the nature of Catholicism that prevailed contributed to an ethos of obedience rather than criticality (Norman, 2003), and an attitude of consensualism (Drudy, 1991).

Matthew was frustrated with systematic inflexibility to consider proposals for altered provision in his school, especially juxtaposed with the requirements to comply with monitoring systems. The improvements they had made were not visible on the indicators of improvement prioritised by the system. So, while Matthew did adopt a critical stance (Norman, 2003) he was constrained by the policies and values at institutional and state levels which prioritised the purpose of education as qualification, having little regard for the purposes of subjectification and socialisation (Biesta, 2015) which Berkovich (2014) argues are central for social justice. Meanwhile much of Matthew's energy went to supporting the parents in the school community, who were marginalised by the social structures of the state, something which was not understood at institutional and state levels. The ET2020 final report on schools highlighted "that is it important that policies support equity and inclusion but also allow flexibility to meet the diverse needs of learners in schools (European Commission, 2018, p.3). This flexibility was missing and is an area that warrants focus in taking local contexts into account. It requires policy makers taking a bottom up as well as a top-down approach and consulting with school leaders about how best to support schools.

While all four principals acknowledge the collaboration of the school staff in the provision of broad learning experiences for the learners and support for leadership initiatives, that acknowledgment is qualified in both urban DEIS schools. Both principals alluded to low expectations or cultural misunderstandings of children by teachers. Part of their leadership role involved enabling teachers to understand life in marginalised communities, reflecting their understanding of the importance of the cultural and ideological struggles in which schooling is located (Grace, 1995). That this task was necessary plausibly reflects the lack of diversity among Irish primary teachers, but also that ITE does not expose student teachers to the diversity of educational contexts they may experience. It also shows how teachers are not immune to the norms and values prevalent in society at large (Devine, 2005), which raises the issue of society. The contrasting views about society are reflected in two observations made by the principals. Mary believes that schools should reflect the society they are part of. Matthew observes that schools cannot compensate for society. Both observations taken together indicate that principals frame social justice issues through the lens of how their school is positioned in relation to the broader context of society, which has implications for the wider international context also.

Conclusion

This article explored leadership for social justice as practised in four primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The specific research questions this article set out to answer were (i) how do principals frame social justice issues and (ii) how does the school context influence principals' practice of social justice leadership. What has become clear is that these questions are interrelated: the school context influences how social justice issues are framed, and this in turn impacts on practice. The literature on the historical context explicated the confluence of factors that led to those within the Irish education system not being encouraged to be critical of their own practice or of wider structures.

Social justice leadership, as described in the literature, has different goals and priorities, emphasises different practices, and measures its success differently from what is commonly referred to as successful leadership. But in practical terms, within the Irish education system and beyond, such diversity of goals and practices can be constrained by a top-down managerial ethic that has a narrow focus on measurable goals. This occurs when the school context is not consonant with the cultural norm of meritocratic achievement. This techne-approach limits the ability of leaders in DEIS schools to use their best judgement - informed by specific details on the school and community context - to help the children receive a good, balanced education. Crucially, this techne-approach does not constrain schools whose cultures are aligned with the dominant social values.

Matthew said that schools alone cannot compensate for society. That schools alone cannot solve the problems of society is well understood by researchers (Lynch, 2019; Mac Ruairc et al., 2013). However, there is a risk that this lesson is forgotten in the paradigm shift to social justice leadership. In other words, proponents of social justice leadership may place too great a burden on the shoulders of school leaders, who are already struggling to create a semblance of equity for their pupils, without due regard for the responsibilities of wider society.

Recommendations

Further research is required to explore cultural influences with school leaders and teachers on their understanding of the purpose of education, conceptions of quality learning experiences and desired learning outcomes. This article argues that this criticality must be cognisant of the context and culture of the school. Leaders are encouraged to critically explore their own understanding and perspectives on justice. A related point is that to encourage criticality today without understanding why and how such criticality was actively discouraged in the past is to gloss over deeper cultural structures that will continue to exert influence if they are not acknowledged.

A second recommendation for research and practice is for social justice leadership to be explored through a socio-ecological framework to gain understanding of the interrelationships between individuals and their environmental systems and how this shapes their beliefs and practices at the school level. This paper suggests this is crucial in marginalised schools where misunderstanding of practices between teachers and pupils can inhibit educational relationships.

Finally, further research is required to investigate how central institutional policies that favour the qualification domain of education have differential effects on principals' work across school contexts. The findings in this paper suggest such policies inhibit multidimensional education and leaders' praxis in marginalised schools. Initiatives that offer a semblance of proactive policy and practice to support the marginalised while the cause of their marginalisation remains unchallenged should be criticised, as they enable perpetuation of the deeper structural inequalities they ostensibly address.

Limitations

This research is limited to four qualitative interviews in the Republic of Ireland. A larger sample size would add further credibility to the findings, particularly related to social justice leadership in school contexts where the values and norms are not consonant with broader society.

Authorship Contribution Statement

King: Conceptualization, design, data acquisition, data analysis/ interpretation, drafting of manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, supervision and final approval. Travers: Conceptualization, design, data acquisition, data analysis/ interpretation, critical revision of manuscript. McGowan: Data analysis/ interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript.

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