SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
THEORY

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**Introduction**

Social justice leadership has gained currency both in the literature and policy texts across the world in a bid to reduce inequalities in education systems. Noteworthy is a variety of perspectives of social justice, arguably influenced by each individual country's socio political and economic contexts, thus rendering any orthodoxy of social justice leadership challenging. This chapter focuses on how social justice is conceptualised within the Irish primary education context and what role leadership has to play in social justice praxis. The adoption of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological theory allows for an exploration of social justice leadership at the micro, meso, exo, and macro levels thus providing a multiple lens view of leadership, which may be helpful for others working in this field.

Examples of the way social justice leaders understand the inter-relationships between individuals and their environmental systems and how this shapes their beliefs and practices at school level will be explored. The interdependence and interconnectedness of the various system levels interact and help explain the views and actions of school leaders. Following a conceptualisation of social justice we examine social justice in the Irish context and social justice leadership. The benefits of socio- ecological theory in the analysis of leadership beliefs and practices is outlined. We then draw on two case studies from the Irish primary school context as supporting evidence for this approach. Through application of the theory in two very different contexts we strive to show how school leaders' understanding of social justice at multiple levels enables them to use their activism to leverage change at an

intra-institutional level. Social justice praxis requires understanding of practices at multiple levels and how these levels interact and impact with each other.

**Conceptualising Social Justice in Education**

Social justice in education is a complex concept that arguably looks different in a variety of contexts due to varying political, social, cultural and economic structures (Berkovich, 2013; Leo and Barton, 2006). What might be considered (un)just in one context may arguably be the norm in another depending on who is constructing social justice and from whose perspective. Nevertheless, social justice is generally accepted as a set of moral values or beliefs centred around justice, respect, equity and equal opportunities for all regardless of race, ethnicity, creed, (dis)ability, gender, class, economic status and other marginalizing circumstances (Berkovich, 2013; Brown, 2006; Miller and Martin, 2015; Shields, 2010). It involves actions around treating all with fairness, dignity, respect and opportunities (Connor, 2014; Woods, 2005).

This is reflected in the wider education system where Brown (2006) argues that the duty of public education is to eliminate oppression of marginalised students and to strive for democratic equality (Skrtic, 2012), equity and excellence for all (Brown, 2006; Chapman et al. 2012). It is however important to recognise that students "enter schools in unequal situations and that schools need to compensate for this" (MacArthur, 2009 cited in European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE), 2013, p. 15).This is also reflected in the 1990 Education for All (EfA) movement in which 155 countries and 150 organizations agreed to provide EfA by 2000 (Ponte and Smit, 2013). EfA was seen as a social justice practice (Wilkinson, Bristol & Ponte, 2013) which needed to focus on both 'having' (allocated resources, material things…) and 'doing' ("moral significance of education for all pupils") (Ponte and Smit, 2013, p. 458). The latter includes "rights,

opportunities, and self-respect" which is "relationships based on processes mediated by social institutions" (Skrtic, 2012, p. 132). This implicates schools "in the construction, oppression, and domination of difference" (Skrtic, 2012, 132). Students are entitled not only to access but also to "academic, social and civic outcomes" to enable them to "take their place as contributing members of society" (Shields, 2010, p. 572).

This is arguably challenging while the central precepts underlying education are aligned with new managerialism, where market accountability seems to reign over democratic responsibility (Lynch, 2015) resulting in a tension between democracy and capitalism (Skrtic, 2012). Social justice in education "cannot be separated from the broader neo-liberal social-economic context framing national and international policies today" (Berkovich, 2013, p. 286). The dominance of neoliberalism perpetuates the dominance of elite groups (Berkovich, 2013; Skrtic, 2012) and "hegemonic and dominating behaviours, cultures, and structures" (Shields, 2010, p. 567). The focus on markets and "technocratic efficiency and bureaucratic administration" along with performance bonuses and penalties and an emphasis on test scores has resulted in a "closed system" where parents and the wider community are ignored (Skrtic, 2012, p. 144).

Proponents of neo-liberal capitalism posit that individual academic mobilization within schools is the answer to social injustice (Berkovich, 2013, p. 286). However, focusing solely on the academic achievements for marginalised students is arguably "conforming to the existing power structure and perpetuating it" (Berkovich, 2013, p. 288). Focusing on the academic results of individual students rather than a focus on the social and educational outcomes for all students and the wider society as a whole arguably perpetuates the problem of social injustice (Skrtic, 2012). Instead injustices need to be conceptualised as socio-ecological issues (Berkovich, 2013) where schools are developed as learning

organizations with a key focus on deliberative discourse where the voices of those experiencing injustices are heard and involved in co-planning of solutions to realise the "preferred future for students and communities...and democratic ideals in schools, communities and the nation" (Skrtic, 2012, p. 145).

**Social Justice in the Irish Context**

Up to the late 1990s the Irish educational context was remarkable for the lack of legislation governing policy and practice in schools. Since the Education Act of 1998, there has been a steady flow of legislative initiatives covering many social justice issues, particularly in the area of equality and anti-discrimination. In parallel with this there have been numerous policy initiatives aimed at raising achievement levels and completion rates in areas of socio-economic disadvantage which is arguably indicative of perpetuating the problem of social injustice with its focus on management of individual results (Skrtic, 2012). Instead this should be considered as only one approach of many to address social injustice in our communities (Berkovich, 2013).

However, from an ecological systems view, efforts at social reform and addressing disadvantage have been severely hampered by issues in the wider educational sector. The Republic of Ireland has just over 4,000 schools serving a population of 4.76 million in 2016. Irish primary schools are essentially privately owned but totally publically funded. A patronage model exists which allows religious denominations or limited companies to start a school and receive State funding for the enterprise. Over 90% of Irish primary schools are managed by the Catholic church with the remaining 10% managed by organisations, such as the non-denominational Educate Together, the interdenominational Education and Training Board (State patronage) or to an Irish language medium (Gaelscoil) model. There has been

criticism of this division and the degree of denominational dominance. In terms of school enrolment policies, there have been criticisms of criteria such as, first come first served, used by Educate Together schools, as discriminating against children new to an area; the priority given to baptised Catholics in Catholic schools with no other school option in an area; and to children of past students as perpetuating advantage in certain areas, used by some schools. Likewise soft barriers to the enrolment of children with special educational needs have been criticised (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), for example, schools articulating that they don't have the resources or skills to meet their child's unique needs or that other neighbouring schools would be better placed to meet their needs.

A Forum on Patronage and Pluralism suggested a change where parents in a locality would vote for a preference of patronage models and that the schools in the area would then reconfigure to reflect this (Coolahan et al., 2012). Essentially this would entail Catholic schools passing over patronage to other organisations, such as the non-denominational Educate Together, the interdenominational Education and Training Board (State patronage) or to an Irish language medium (Gaelscoil) model. This plan ran into difficulties at local level with many non- practising Catholic parents unwilling to give up Catholic schools, resulting in some cases in a shortage of places for children of parents looking for a non-denominational school (Mac Donald, 2014). In areas which can only support one school (usually Catholic) this has led to tensions for school leaders in seeking to meet the needs of parents who request that their children be exempted from religious education. Additional barriers have included legal complications, interventions from local politicians and criticism of the policy that it will lead to ethnic segregation (Humphreys, 2014, 2015; Mac Donald, 2015).

**Social Justice Leadership**

Schools are often perceived to be "microcosms of a macro-society... reflecting and shaping cultural values and norms" (Connor, 2014, p. 121) and political and economic conditions (Berkovich, 2013). A widely accepted view is that social justice practices in schools is dependent on the capacity of school leadership (Brown, 2006) whose effects some argue account for about 3-5 % of the difference in student achievement within and across schools (Bush, 2008). Within school-related factors that affect student learning, leadership is next to teacher quality (Leithwood et al. 2006). Indeed, it is posited that when the total effects of leadership on student learning are elucidated the effects amount to about a quarter of the total school effects (Brown, 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005), thus rendering it necessary to "make the 'black box' of school leadership more transparent" (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004, p. 134) for realising social justice practices.

School leaders aim to meet the needs of all students but are nonetheless often meeting the needs of those students whose identities often reflect the values the school system provides (Marshall and Oliva, 2010). By unpacking what constitutes social justice leadership, others may better understand how to compensate for the fact that many students do not already have access to the same values and environment that the school system advocates (Bourdieu, 1977; Miller and Martin, 2015). Social justice leadership focuses on "addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). In reality they challenge any issue of race, (dis)ability, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and any other marginalizing condition (Shields, 2010). This therefore aligns leadership with change, influence, values and vision (Bush, 2008) all reflecting Shields' (2010, p. 568) concept of transformative leadership which "recognizes the inequities and struggles experienced in the wider society affect one's ability both to perform and to succeed within an organizational context." Transformative leadership calls on leaders to challenge inequalities and to be

activists for change in their wider communities (Brown, 2006, Shields, 2010, 2014). It calls for leaders "to increase their awareness of sociopolitical and sociocultural" issues (Brown, 2006, p. 712). Transformative leadership focuses on sociological and cultural aspects of schools and the wider society in which they are situated (Shields, 2010).

In a bid to further explicate the concept of social justice leadership, this chapter acknowledges the importance of transformative leadership, which also reflects the arguments of others who state that any conceptualisation must consider the contextual factors and meanings within which leadership operates (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004; Leo and Barton, 2006). It therefore adopts Berkovich's (2013) view that social justice in education is arguably not confined to academic achievement, inclusion and an environment that respects diversity and differences. Rather it conceptualises social justice within a socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which aims to understand social justice leadership within the wider society which influences its meaning and practice (Shields, 2010, 2014) as no individual can be responsible for addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools (Kugelmass, 2001). Indeed leaders ought to develop interactions with families and the wider community to support pupils' learning and well-being (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). What is required is a multiple lens view of leadership that allows for looking at leadership within this wider context.

**A Multiple Lens View of Leadership (Bronfenbrenner)**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework allows for a socio-ecological perspective to social justice in education where the inter-relationships between individuals and their environmental systems and the relationships between the environmental systems are explored (Berkovich, 2013; Leman, Bremner, Parke, & Gauvain, 2012; Skrtic, 2012). This is

essential given that social justice issues can arguably be resolved with a focus on the interdependence of all involved based on collaborative problem solving among teachers, leaders, parents and other community stakeholders and when appropriate, students (Boscardin, 2011; Skrtic, 2012). Furthermore given that nothing happens at ground level (schools) that isn't influenced by policies and practices at a higher level (Bottery, 2006) it is necessary to look at the parts and how they are related to the whole (Berkovich, 2013).

Arguably such a theoretical framework is suitable for further understanding the complex issues surrounding social justice leadership in education as social justice leaders act 'in' and 'on' their world and are influenced by it (Lalor and Share, 2013). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory focuses on human development and therefore allows for exploring both the intra-institutional and extra-institutional activism of social justice leaders (Berkovich, 2013). This facilitates the pivotal focus on institutionalization processes within schools and how they respond to their wider social environments (Skrtic, 2012). Furthermore it allows for exploring how leadership involves "negotiating interactions among people, policies, and practices in a variety of contexts" (Crockett, 2011, p. 352).

In the context of this chapter Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework will be employed as it "involves the scientific study" (p. 21) of the complex and dynamic factors that affect both the school leader and his/her environment and which stem from their mutual interaction while aiming to eliminate social injustices. It therefore provides us with a lens to understand the topic in hand in a systematic and structured way. As this framework is being applied after the research and involves backward mapping (Elmore, 1979-1980; Shields, 2010) (see section "Case Studies" for more details) then only four of the five levels of Bronfenbrenner's framework can be explored:

- **Macrosystem**: general policies, laws and ideologies of cultural and social structures, such as economic conditions and cultural values e.g. democracy, patronage.

- **Exosystem**: one or more settings that do not include the leader or students as active participants, but influence them. This would include contextual factors e.g. local neighbourhood, government agencies funding services such as speech and language services, breakfast clubs…

- **Mesosystem:** "the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person [school leader / students] actively participates" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25) (e.g. the relations among home and school, school to Health Services.)

- **Microsystem:** immediate relationships in school setting, day-to-day interactions e.g. leader-child, leader-staff, leader-parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lalor and Share, 2013).

The fifth level, which was later added by Bronfenbrenner (1979), is the chronosystem and incorporates aspects of the other four levels changing over time. This aspect was not explicitly explored with the participants involved and therefore is not used in this analysis.

**Case studies**

Methodologically this chapter adopts Elmore's strategy (1979-1980) of backward mapping, used by many others including Shields (2010), to explore how principals identified as social justice leaders conceptualised and realised social justice in their contexts. These two leaders in the Irish context were either identified through a reputational approach or were self-professed as social justice leaders in line with the ISLDN sampling procedure. Details of each case study context are outlined below.

Case study 1 : The interviewee (Michelle) is a female principal of a primary school in the greater Dublin area run under the patronage of Educate Together; an independent non-government organisation. These schools are multi-denominational, co-educational, child centred, and democratically run schools which "guarantee equality of access and esteem to children irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background" (Educate Together, 2005). The interviewee was the first principal of this school opening with 30 pupils in 2002 and growing rapidly to an enrolment of 496 pupils in 2014. 90% of pupils are ethnically Irish and 10% international which largely reflects the demographics of the local community "...*which is one of the things that I* [Michelle] *feel strongly about*"

Case study 2 Context: The interviewee (Tom) is a male principal of a Catholic senior boys primary school (2<sup>nd</sup> class to 6<sup>th</sup> class aged 7 to 13) serving an inner city docklands community in Dublin. There are 69 students in the school. The catchment area is one of significant socio-economic disadvantage with high unemployment (75% of the parents of children in the school are officially unemployed), high numbers of single parent households (80%) and 100% local authority housing and it has a problem with drugs.

"*Everybody is working, just nobody's employed…you take the drug trade out of this place it will collapse into massive poverty, it is so endemic and so embedded.*"

The school was founded in 1870 by the Christian Brothers and in 1970 had 480 students but by 1980 there were 110 and 52 in 2000. The present principal took over in 2000 having been a primary teacher for the previous 12 years. He became the sixth principal since 1990 in the school. A very high percentage of the children have special educational needs and "*this school had the highest level of EBD* [Emotional and a Behavioural Disorders] *of any national school in the country.*"

**How social justice is conceptualised by principals within the Irish context**

Michelle described her view of social justice as "*very simple… leaving this world as having had a bad influence or having had a good influence*". This reflects a macro-perspective of social justice (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) considering change in society as a whole (Skrtic, 2012). This is also echoed in her belief that a school should reflect the society in which it is located. She believes that teachers all over the country are always trying to make "*the world a better place...and want their children to make the world a better place*" further reflecting Shields'(2010, p. 572) idea of enabling students to "take their place as contributing members of society". Ultimately she wants the children to "*have that sense of how important it is that we're creating a world that's just and equal and that diversity is something to be celebrated*" reflecting Berkovich's (2013) view that social justice is conceptualised within a socio-ecological framework and not simply at the intra-institutional level.

Tom's view of social justice in education is also very much nested in the Bronfenbrenner (1979) framework. Echoing Brown (2006) and Shields (2014) he has a deep awareness of the socio-political and sociocultural issues which influence both the community and school context in which social justice leadership is interpreted and practised. He sees the tensions between the economic aims of education in the Irish context dating from the 1950s to the broader view encapsulating social and personal aims, which is reflected in the curriculum in Irish primary schools.  At a societal level "*justice basically is about how you share the wealth, the privilege, the opportunity that's what social justice is about.*" Arguably a sole focus on academic outcomes which privileges some (Berkovich, 2013; Skrtic, 2012) lies in contradistinction to Tom's view of social justice which looks to provide equality of

opportunity to all instead of perpetuating the existing power structures. At the exo-system level the school is situated in a community context of severe socio- economic disadvantage and Tom questions how much can be achieved by education on its own:

> *Now you have a community okay that has had the shit kicked out of it for 30 or 40 years, it's the bottom line, that's actually why I'm still here so that's the social justice because it's unwinnable.... So that is the dynamic of it and I'm very sceptical about what can be done within education.*"

He quotes Bernstein's (1971) view on education not compensating for society but his scepticism is around not connecting education with the wider inequalities that children present with before they reach the school gate.

Nevertheless both principals did describe the various social injustices in their own school setting. Michelle, for example, discussed inequality in terms of impoverished children, in her context, mainly those who have lost their council house for anti-social reasons e.g. drink and drug related issues. Other inequalities included racism and homophobia. A point reiterated a number of times by Michelle was the importance of school enrolments reflecting the communities in which the children live. She criticised the 'double sieve' practice in schools which involves 'first come first served' for enrolments along with being aligned to the patronage or ethos of the school meaning that "*newcomers to the area are disadvantaged and then if you're non-Catholic and a newcomer you're in the last school*". This reflects the criticism of the policy of passing over patronage to other organisations, such as the non-denominational Educate Together which was feared might lead to ethnic segregation (Humphreys, 2014, 2015; Mac Donald, 2015).

However Michelle acknowledged attempts by the then Minister for Education to correct this issue so as to avoid "*ghettoising kids*" where some Educate Together Schools are known as "*the black school*" and another "*the Eastern European School and then the Catholic schools are getting the Irish [kids]*". A key tenet underlying Michelle's philosophy of social justice is that "*all*" children leave the school having achieved their potential academically, that they value learning and "*can be themselves*" reflecting Shields' (2010) point that students are not only entitled to access but also "academic, social and civic outcomes" (p. 572).

This is a point echoed by Tom  who interprets the curriculum as "*fantastic aspirational pieces of work in relation to either social justice or education*" but "*where the rubber meets the road is this, it's churn them out, have them ready for industry, have them ready for business and I'm not saying that's all a bad thing, it's the balance in this*" again reflecting Berkovich's (2013) point about focusing solely on individual academic achievements within schools should only be one of many approaches to address social injustice in our communities.  This also reiterates the necessity for social justice to be conceptualised at all levels of the ecological systems as wider social forces influence social injustice (Slee, 2010), forces which are all interdependent of each other with one not working well on its own. The challenge therefore is to see what social justice leaders can do to reduce and remove inequalities in the system.

**What social justice leaders do**

What social justice leaders did in these Irish case studies reflects a macro-perspective of social justice leadership in education, where leaders adopted a socio-ecological perspective by linking leadership efforts with the concepts of activism and social change (Berkovich, 2013). In both case studies, it is evident that both leaders are cognisant of what is happening at the exo and macro levels and this drives their activism and social change at the micro and meso levels in

relation to the following areas: quality teaching and learning and working with parents and the wider community.

*Teaching and learning*

At the micro level (school) Michelle values continuing professional development (CPD) and provides the structures and resources to support quality teaching and learning (Crockett, 2011; King, 2011; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Teachers know that CPD is valued as they are afforded the time and money to engage with it (King, 2011; Stevenson, 2008). Having taught in the US for two years where "*everything was for the test*" she stated it made her "*really appreciate our love of learning*" and she "*would be always trying to resist us going in that direction...It wasn't education.*" Instead she values the underlying philosophy of Educate Together which doesn't have a set curriculum with dogma attached. It has the Learn Together programme with human rights as its central tenet. Michelle values this highly as the children "*have that sense of how important it is that we're creating a world that is just and equal and that diversity is something to be celebrated.*" Instead it allows for curriculum inquiry based on "complicated discussions" (Lopez, 2014, p. 468) around issues from wider society, which in the school is also the norm, for example, the issue of homelessness in Ireland and the Syrian camps. "*Whatever is topical at the time, I will engage them with.*" Further evidence of this is the school's collaboration with a school in Cambodia. Four teachers from the school travelled to Cambodia at their own expense and time. They volunteered for the summer and one teacher remained on for the year. The teachers and students now Skype back and forth and run a blog, thus reflecting Lopez's (2014) idea of the curriculum as being operationalized within socio, political and cultural contexts and that schools reflect these socio, political and cultural contexts.

Alongside this was the increasing emphasis on performativity and accountability in the Irish context which involved reporting of standardised test results to the Department of Education and Skills along with Whole School Evaluation reports being published on the Department of Education and Skills' website. Another top-down mandate from the macro level is that of school self-evaluation which requires schools to focus on improving literacy or numeracy through the creation and implementation of a School Improvement Plan. This came at a time of acute austerity in the Republic of Ireland where teachers' pay was significantly cut, along with resources to schools. This was also accompanied by the introduction of an extra 30 hours non-contact time for teachers as part of the 'Croke Park Agreement' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2010), which is the name given to public sector negotiations that highlight increased performance, productivity and management. Nevertheless Michelle was acutely aware of the need to not focus solely on the academic achievements as it will arguably perpetuate the problem of social injustice (Berkovich, 2013; Leo and Barton, 2006; Skrtic, 2012). Noteworthy was Michelle's agency (Sachs, 2003) and activism (Berkovich, 2013) to turn a top-down mandate of school self-evaluation into an opportunity for collaborative practice focused on their issues in their context.

Equally the focus on the macro level context did not preclude Tom focusing on raising academic standards and on the teaching and learning environment. He railed against low academic standards and didn't accept labels as excuses for low attainment levels: "*I was getting kids in here who couldn't, who didn't know 26 letters of the alphabet, I don't give a shit how dyslexic you are or whatever else they haven't been taught.*" He believed the children were entitled to the best quality education available in the most conducive environment. His approach in the Irish context would be unorthodox: "*I came in here with a mouth and an earring and an attitude.*" It could be argued that such an approach was required

to turn around a school that had lost its way, and following a line of short term principals, a radical change was required.

Acknowledging that teaching and learning is a relational and emotional process there was a strong emphasis on a structure based around love and respect: *"We've got certain structures, you're talking about living the love and allowing it...and it's nice to be nice."* There is a sense of love and respect with service. He also emphasises the sense of long term commitment to the children:

> *So you are offered a deal and I won't give up on you, okay, but part of that is endurance as well...so there's consistency, you keep going after it okay, but also there's like the kids they're loved. The kids are loved.*

He aims to create an environment of total belief in the children and staff. It also requires an emotional intelligence and willingness to be flexible and *"like any good willow tree, you must bend in the breeze."* This can entail individualising responses with particular children in terms of discipline and understanding that they *"have got to be able to see that pin prick of light at the end of the tunnel."* In one example of discipline with empathy, the principal had to negotiate with a teacher who wanted to prevent a pupil from attending a boxing event due to poor behaviour. The principal argued that it was disproportionate and that all this pupil lived for was boxing and that in denying him this, the school would effectively lose his engagement for the rest of the year and that he would never forgive her. The focus on teaching and learning at academic, social and affective levels was endemic in Tom's social justice praxis.

This sense of commitment was also reflected in Michelle's leadership where she used her influence in staff recruitment. Michelle states *"it's the most important job that I do in the*

*year*" ...because "*it's about a culture...a commitment to ethos*". She recruits those interested in social justice issues to the point "*that you can see that this is what makes them tick*".  She stated "*what gets me out of bed in the morning is the ethos of the school….I love the equality and justice part of it*". This alignment of the principal's and teachers' values of social justice creates a climate and culture for change (King, 2011). Michelle clearly sees herself as a teacher and hopes that her staff see her as a teacher first and foremost. They all discuss issues of social justice and work together to solve problems (Boscardin, 2011; Crockett, 2011). While both leaders focus on what they can do at the intra-institutional level they also actively engage with working with parents and the wider community in the belief that extra-institutional factors are hugely important in attempting to address social injustices (Berkovich, 2013; Brown, 2006; Shields, 2010).

### *Working with parents and the wider community*

Michelle recognizes the importance of collaboration with the wider community (Boscardin, 2011; Crockett, 2011) and has an open door policy where parents and the wider community are encouraged to be part of the school. Parents are involved in many activities with the children in school and they have a parent room where they run things for themselves e.g. a craft morning. Another example of parental involvement being valued is where following a positive reaction by parents to a 'Mental Health' fortnight, with a number of parents saying that they suffered from depression, January was dedicated to Mental Health awareness each year.  The impact of this can arguably be felt at the micro, meso and exo levels of the system and is reflective of Leithwood & Riehl's (2005) point about nurturing the interaction of families with schools to support pupils' learning and well-being.

Michelle reported that the school was seen as "*very left-wing, kind of mad...the lunatic left*" in the beginning. To counteract this the school invited grandparents and local senior citizens in one day each year for a social event. This event "*put us on the map in terms of being accepted in the area and suddenly we were seen as an ordinary school.*" Collaborating with parents and the wider community is "*hugely important.*" Inviting local senior citizens and grandparents in, having a "*very, very, very active parent body in the school,*" collaborative problem-solving with parents and other schools in the area and other Educate Together schools is now the norm.  In this way injustices are conceptualised as socio-ecological issues where the school has developed as a learning organization in a bid to co-plan solutions (Boscardin, 2011; Skrtic, 2012).

Tom's actions as a social justice leader are also hugely influenced by socio-ecological issues. Despite being skeptical about what education could achieve, in reality his understanding of the wider context has allowed him to tailor social justice responses at the micro level which make sense in terms of where the school is at. A key aspect to this approach has been to seek to understand the social, economic and historical context of the community in which the school is situated. He explains the particular social and economic ups and downs of this inner city docklands community and how it contrasts with the fortunes of more recent residents in the area. He feels this understanding is vital as it shapes the identities of the families attending the school. These insights allowed him to empathise with parents and guardians while challenging them to join in an educational journey with their children to get the most benefit from education, once again echoing Leithwood & Riehl's (2005) call for leadership to develop interactions with families to support pupils' learning and

well-being. With relatively small numbers in the school he was in a position to personalise responses for both children and their families based on their differing contexts.

Furthermore, in addition to developing his own understanding of where the community is at and where it has come from, he feels a responsibility to support others in doing likewise. In particular, he believes the teachers need to understand the community they serve and that they should not engage in pity or "*looking down their noses,*" reflecting Bourdieu's (1977 and Miller and Martin's, (2015) point about children who don't have access to similar values that the school system promotes. He highlights the importance of respect from the staff and inducing respect in the community for themselves and taking action to improve things, thus reflecting the concept of social activism to address social injustice (Berkovich, 2013; Brown, 2006).

The principal believes that the community in which the school resides has been shamefully treated and that the school had lost its way in terms of structure, expectations, vision, attitudes, practices and the learning environment. In what might be termed transformative leadership (Brown, 2006; Shields, 2010), while recognising the inequities, he set about changing what could be changed in the school context, again echoing social activism within school (Berkovich, 2013). He had the task of turning around a school that was in a very poor position and losing pupils. In terms of the learning environment he initiated a major building project to effectively create a new school building. He started from a perspective of anger "*which I haven't lost*" and insisted on high expectations and professional standards of service from teachers. The constraints of the situation were never used as an excuse for low standards of professionalism and expectations. At the same time he had an acute understanding of the need for responses in the community that addressed the

economic, social, health and environmental barriers to social justice in a coordinated fashion and used his influence to advocate for these with political, union and business groups.

Similarly Michelle used her own agency at the meso level to address the issue of enrolment. In a bid to eliminate the '*double' sieve*' and '*ghettoising kids*" Michelle secured agreement from the Board of Management of the school for a "*small amount of discretionary places to make sure that we're looking out for everybody in our community.*" At the meso level Michelle has also voiced her opinion on this many times when meeting with other leaders at Educate Together meetings. This display of activism is indicative of transformative leadership which requires leaders to challenge inequalities and to be activists for change in the wider community (Brown, 2006; Shields, 2010, 2014). It also echoes Crockett's (2011) idea of leadership involving "negotiating interactions among people, policies, and practices in a variety of contexts" (p. 352).

Reflecting on the wider system and being aware of the sociopolitical and sociocultural issues (Brown, 2006; Ryan 2010; Skrtic, 2012) shows these social justice leaders' understanding of the wider society influences on social justice practice and meaning in schools (Shields, 2010, 2014). This understanding has enabled them to become activists for social justice at micro and meso levels.

**Conclusion**

This chapter focused on how social justice is conceptualised within the Republic of Ireland primary education context and what role leadership had to play in social justice praxis. Reflecting on the evidence from these two case studies this chapter argues for

employing a socio-ecological stance to social justice both within countries and across countries in a bid to move towards an orthodoxy of social justice leadership.

Regardless of context, taking a socio-ecological perspective of social justice can arguably support social justice leaders in their understanding and practice. Understanding the individual context of a school at the micro and meso levels along with understanding the wider education picture at the exo and macro levels can enable social justice leaders to utilise their agency for positive change. This was evident in both case studies where the leaders arguably reflected Shields' (2010, 2014) and Brown's (2006) concept of transformative leadership which encompasses activism and social change at both intra-institutional levels and extra-institutional levels.

Noteworthy is the contrasting contexts of the two schools and yet both social justice leaders acknowledged the importance of a focus on teaching and learning at academic, social and affective levels. This lies in contradistinction to current policy within the Republic of Ireland and to neo-liberal capitalism which advocates a focus on individual academic achievement as a means of reducing inequalities. Instead it supports Berkovich's (2013) and Skrtic's (2012) argument that a sole focus on individual academic mobilization just perpetuates the existing power structures within schools and society. Neither leader was hugely influenced by the educational climate at the macro level that privileges academic achievement with both having high expectations for their pupils along with a strong focus on social outcomes. They seemed to use their own agency to mediate these structures and focus on what matters most in their own context, the micro and meso levels (Sachs, 2003).

Teacher understanding of issues at the meso, exo and macro levels such as social injustices in the wider community and world was important for both leaders. While the

curriculum in Tom's context was seen as having social justice values it was considered aspirational due to a feeling of it being under resourced. Nevertheless expectations for the pupils was always high. The availability of resources to support a curriculum of social justice was also cited as a barrier to social justice by Michelle. Nonetheless some parents and organizations such as Amnesty International have been supportive in this regard, once again showing the importance of the wider community in a move towards social justice leadership.

Interestingly in the Educate Together school the underlying philosophy of human rights facilitated many discussions of social (in)justice at the exo and macro levels. Arguably similar discussions could be facilitated in Tom's context echoing what Lopez (2014) talks about in terms of seeing the curriculum as an engine for change. While adhering to curriculum objectives a teacher is able to use text more reflective of the class context and cohort so that students can see themselves in the curriculum (Lopez, 2014) while achieving the same aims and objectives. This requires an understanding and commitment on the behalf of teachers, a point highlighted by Tom.

Both leaders highlight the importance of teachers being committed to social justice and understanding social justice at the intra- institutional and extra-institutional levels which involves all levels of the socio-ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). They also recognised that this commitment to social justice required support from them in terms of valuing continuing professional development for teachers along with staff recruitment based on a commitment to the social justice ethos.

Working at the meso levels both leaders articulated how they advocated for changes at the exo and macro levels, for example at Educate Together group meetings, political, union and business group meetings. Arguably this is reflective of transformative leadership

(Shields, 2010, 2014) where they adopted socio-political strategies to address intra-institutional barriers (Berkovich, 2013).

These cases are promulgated as being instructive as distinct from exemplars of practice as the leaders came from very different contexts and school types and yet they both conceptualise social justice from a socio-ecological perspective which in turn facilitates them in their social justice praxis. This chapter argues for an adoption of a socio-ecological systems view of social justice in a bid to reduce inequalities in education systems and in wider society as arguably our education systems reflect society and yet education alone cannot address social injustices.

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