

## **Foreword:** *The place of professional growth and professional learning in leading socially just schools*

In my last editorial in *Professional Development in Education* (Vol 45.2 2019), I wrote about professional learning empowering teachers to stay close to their moral purpose, which for me as an educator is about inclusion. Accordingly, I was delighted to be asked to write the Foreword for this special issue on *The place of professional growth and professional learning in leading socially just schools*. It has afforded me another opportunity to reflect on my moral purpose and my work within the International School Leadership Development Network, (King and Travers, 2017) exploring the perspectives and practices of leaders who advocate for social justice. As an Associate Editor of *PDiE*, it allows me to answer the call of the editorial board to reflect on a wider set of questions and perspectives around the possibilities of professional learning, in this instance, specifically related to leading socially just schools.

One of the key issues raised throughout the special issue, is centred around how we use terms interchangeably (inclusion, equity, equality, diversity) when researching, writing and in the practice of social justice. Acknowledging there is no universally agreed definition of these terms brings with it the concern of making meanings clear, within an endeavour to build understandings of the challenges involved. Further, we know that context is key in framing such concepts and practices. Therefore, within our own professional learning contexts, it is important to articulate what we mean by social justice. Reflecting on my own work, I am always drawn back to this definition of inclusion, “the careful and thoughtful marriage of educational excellence, equity and social justice” (Pelletier, Powell, Bartlett, & Kusama-Powell, 2011, p. 6).

The focus on social justice in this special issue is timely against the backdrop of Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2015) Sustainable Goal 4, which places inclusion and equity centre stage for enhanced economic, social and political development. It also builds nicely on a recent paper in *PDiE* by Poekert, Swaffield, Demir and Wright (2020) who highlighted the “critical framing of issues towards social justice” as a key principle in leadership for professional learning towards educational equity. All of the articles in this special issue highlight the importance of professional learning that focuses on critical thinking, critical reflection and social justice. But what does this mean for us as professional educators and researchers? At its core, this involves critical self-reflection or reflexivity where we articulate our own assumptions and biases. For example, Stone-Johnson, Gray & Wright in their article in this special issue (insert page numbers before publication) call for those operating from a deficit perspective to develop an ability to critically question inequities in schools. Accordingly, we ought to think critically about our own context and how inequities and marginalization are created and reproduced, not just at an individual level but also systemically. To illustrate further, Ira Bogotch in his afterword (insert page numbers before publication) suggests “*the first critical reflective practice in any PD [professional development] would be to ask participants to turn to the person sitting next to them (at the appropriate social distances) and discuss how the pandemic has revealed truths [inequities] that are becoming evident to parents, teachers, administrators, and staff*” (p. XX). He adds that this must include a focus on the structural and systemic barriers students and staff face. Professional learning that involves critical reflection on the influences that shape our beliefs and practices as educators are equally important for example social, economic, political, personal influences.

Professional learning that creates awareness is just a first step. It needs to go beyond this as Christa Boske advocates in her recent book, “*Standing still is not an option*” (Boske, 2019). Key in this, is the teachers' role which is a political and agentic one. We need to ACT together and reflect on action, in order to transform inequitable practices. A number of the articles in this special issue argue for

professional learning that is collaborative and focuses on methodologies, to elicit and learn from the voices of those marginalized. Vigo-Arrazola & Beach in their article, clearly promote the “political act of giving voice as political agency” (pXX). Many authors believe this act will facilitate our professional learning and critical self-reflection in terms of the repositioning of beliefs and values, along with the fostering of an openness to act against inequitable and marginalizing practices and processes. Highlighted also, is the need for continuing professional learning to support staff in these ongoing actions towards the advancement of socially just schools.

Professional Development in Education would like to thank the two Guest Editors of this special issue, Christine Forde and Deirdre Torrance, for the amazing job they have done in selecting, co-ordinating and developing this publication. In particular, the organization of the articles into three themes - Leadership development and leading socially just schools; Leading in socially just schools and Teacher development to build practice in socially just schools - makes it easily accessible for readers to engage with and reflect on the theme or themes of particular interest to them in their context at this time. The afterword by leading expert in the field Ira Bogotch does a remarkable job of reflecting on the articles, posing key questions and challenges for us to engage with as readers. Social justice is of utmost importance in education, with intrinsic inequities having been highlighted further by the global pandemic. This special issue invites professional educators, researchers and policymakers alike to reflect critically on the inequities in our various contexts, to look beyond the boundaries of within-school practices to identify the barriers and then collaboratively problem-solve. Standing by and doing nothing is not an option. Social justice leadership involves us all through an activist transformative stance suggesting leadership learning ought to be part of all professional learning and development. We are being challenged to work together to hear the voices of those being marginalised, in a bid to act and transform schools and society. The potential of ongoing job-embedded professional learning to empower us to stay close to this moral purpose is evident across these articles, as they challenge us to develop approaches and methodologies to enhance awareness and act in a socially just way.

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## References

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