

A whole school approach to social justice education

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Introduction

Making a positive difference in the lives of children and young people and contributing to society and societal change are key motivations for selecting teaching as a career profession (Noddings, 2006; Rogayan, 2018). One way in which teachers can realise these transformative goals is by embedding social justice principles and pedagogies in their work. The literature indicates that early career teachers committed to social justice initially focus on promoting socially just relationships and practices within the confines of their own classrooms (Boylan, 2009). This makes sense as it is a busy and often challenging time for new teachers as they settle into school life and negotiate new professional identities. While socially just practice might begin in the classroom for some teachers, the adoption of a more holistic whole school approach to social justice education (SJE) will significantly increase teachers' capacities to challenge inequity and disadvantage at an institutional level. Embedding social justice imperatives like equity, inclusion and respect for difference into all elements of the school environment can be complex and challenging. However, if SJE is viewed as a process, with distinct but interconnected components, it enables principals and teachers to gradually and systematically reform all aspects of the school environment. This chapter exemplifies a whole school approach to SJE, where the principal and teachers share a common vision of education and are motivated by, and sustained through, working collectively to bring about positive institutional and social change.

One of the most consistent critiques across the literature of the critical theories underpinning SJE approaches is their inaccessibility to real teachers in real classroom contexts. Responding to this critique, the chapter presents a case study of Rushgreen Educate Together National School (RETNS) as a model of critical theory in action. Recognising that schools are context specific with each presenting its own particular set of opportunities and challenges, this chapter does not seek to provide a blueprint for schools. Rather, drawing critically on observed practice, it offers a framework of social justice-promoting structures, processes and practices which can be mediated and adapted by schools to suit their specific contexts. The chapter first examines the social justice theories of Critical Multiculturalism (CM) and Transformative Leadership Theory (TLT) as they provide useful tools for the analysis of policy and practice at the school. A broader framework, premised on Boylan and Woolsey's (2015) understanding of the dimensions of social justice, namely, relationality, participation and distribution, is used to structure and augment analysis. The chapter concludes with the presentation of a framework, which can be adapted and used by schools interested in promoting SJE.

Critical multiculturalism

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, multicultural education was lauded and promoted by liberal theorists as the solution to closing the achievement gap between children from minoritised backgrounds and children from dominant social groups. This particular approach focused on cultural pluralism, the idea that recognising, learning “about” and celebrating culture would affirm the identities of minoritised groups, thereby increasing their self-esteem and academic achievement (May & Sleeter, 2010). Based on the view that racism was caused by a combination of individual ignorance and interpersonal prejudice, it was claimed that it would also challenge prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behaviour (May & Sleeter, 2010). In practice, this approach generally took the form of what Banks (2007) terms an “additive” or “contributions” approach where ethnic content was added to the existing monocultural curriculum. Advocates of antiracist education (ARE) critiqued what they viewed as de-racialised and de-politicised approaches, arguing that it placed undue emphasis on identity affirmation and multicultural content and insufficient emphasis on the structural and institutional forces which reproduce and perpetuate societal inequities, particularly racism (May, 1994). Moreover, they argued that conceptualisations of culture within multicultural education were theoretically deficient and presented an understanding of culture as monolithic and static rather than dynamic and fluid (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2009). ARE sought to address these specific concerns. It was strongly resisted, however, by many teachers due to its political nature and lack of guidance at the level of practice (Arshad, 2012). Teachers found the softer apolitical multicultural approach easier to accept and implement.

In time, CM theorists reclaimed the area and sought to reconcile the differences between the theories and to present a more practical, but theoretically robust, approach to justice-oriented education. In doing so, they advocated for a more critically informed approach to multicultural education (CME) which took account of socio-political contexts and addressed the concerns of ARE theorists, particularly those regarding the oppressive structure of racism. In Berlak and Moyenda’s words (2001), this revised approach foregrounded “naming and actively challenging racism and other forms of injustice, not simply recognising and celebrating differences and reducing prejudice” (p. 92). Understanding the complexities and challenges of school life and that social injustice cannot be easily resolved, these theorists proposed more comprehensive whole school reform approaches. One of the key motivating factors was promoting an approach that would make a demonstrable change to the life chances of minoritised children, particularly through improving social, emotional and academic outcomes. The realisation of such outcomes, as acknowledged by the theorists, would require individual, institutional and societal change. One of the most useful conceptualisations of CME is provided by Nieto (2004), who describes it as a whole school reform process which addresses organisational, pedagogical and social relations and involves all members of the school community. She argues that critical pedagogy and a praxis-oriented approach to decision-making (a cyclical loop of critique, reflection and action) provide powerful ways of tackling institutional and systemic injustices. This conceptualisation, which allows for practical application, recognises that schools are microcosms of a stratified and inequitable society, but equally that through a whole school approach with committed social justice-oriented teachers at its core, there is the possibility of institutional and eventual societal transformation.

Transformative Leadership Theory (TLT)

Leaders committed to social justice advocate for the rights of marginalised children and take action to eliminate the inequities reinforced by schools' policies, practices and processes (Brown & Shaked, 2018; Shields, 2010). Furman (2012) describes such leaders as being “committed and persistent, inclusive and democratic, relational and caring, reflective, and oriented toward a socially just pedagogy” (p. 195). These leaders engage in both intrapersonal (critical self-reflection on values, assumptions and biases in order to transform themselves) and extrapersonal (systemic understanding and critique in order to transform the system) reflection (Furman, 2012). They create safe environments and support staff in engaging with this critical reflective process, which ultimately seeks to embed social justice principles into all aspects of school life (Brown & Shaked, 2018). Like CMT, TLT is ambitious in what it ultimately seeks to achieve, namely, personal, institutional and societal transformation. This type of work can be emotionally exhausting for school leaders (DeMatthews, 2018). While generally the leader is considered to be an individual, in TLT to have any chance of achieving these challenging aims arguably requires a dispersed conceptualisation of leadership, where power and responsibility are shared among all members of the school community. Reflecting CMT and TLT, the analysis of the case study which follows draws on the concepts of power relations, activism, praxis, socially just pedagogy, inclusion, democracy and relationality.

The benefits of promoting an SJE approach are considerable and vary according to context, ranging from providing children with access to equitable educational outcomes to developing children's capacity to think critically and act justly (Berkovich, 2014; May & Sleeter, 2010). This chapter seeks to augment the limited literature which examines the application of CMT and TLT theories to school contexts, including how the case study school grapples with the structural and institutional challenges it faces. Schools face significant challenges in addressing the unjust economic, cultural and political structures which deny children access to the resources which ensure their daily needs are met (Berkovich, 2014; DeMatthews, 2018). This is further exacerbated when schools are unable to secure the resources necessary to adequately tackle this disadvantage, e.g. through hiring additional teachers. Increased bureaucracy forced on schools due to neoliberal demands regarding measurement and accountability erodes time and resources that could be used to tackle inequity (DeMatthews, 2018) and foster critical and creative thinking about social injustices (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Moreover, neoliberal culture perpetuates inequity through its marketisation of education (Francis, Mills & Lupton, 2017). Incompatible school policies or ethical environments which require a bending of the rules in order to promote SJE are challenging, particularly if mediation has negative personal and professional consequences for teachers (Berkovich, 2014; Ryan, 2010). Research shows that resistance from staff, parents and the wider community, who may wish to maintain the status quo, can prove a significant challenge for school leaders who frequently feel ill-equipped to deal with resistance (Hynds, 2010). Such resistance may be because the processes involved in SJE can be unsettling and challenge deeply held ideological convictions, particularly for those who hold more conservative values (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Zembylas, 2017). Resistance is a normal part of the change process, however, and can be beneficial when addressed through dialogue, as it augments understanding (Hynds, 2010). Principals and teachers are therefore constrained by a range

of factors. However, they have the capacity to exercise agency and therefore can mediate and mitigate some of these constraints in order to bring about change.

Relationality, participation and distribution

In the analysis presented here, the theories of CM and TLT are framed by Boylan and Woolsey's (2015) understanding of social justice, namely, the dimensions of relationality, participation and distribution. These dimensions are grounded in the work of Cochran-Smith (2009), North (2008) and Fraser (2008). While the content of the dimensions reflects common aspects of CMT and TLT, they are also useful in their own right as a means of framing analysis of RETNS' approach to SJE. Relationality is concerned with affective and cultural injustices and refers to the formation of social relationships which are caring, reciprocal and underpinned by a respect for difference. It involves a commitment to tackling unequal power relations and oppression in all its guises. Participation is concerned with political injustices and relates to the enactment of democratic and participatory pedagogies and practices which support children's voice and visibility. It also necessitates involving all members of the school community in the decision-making process. Distribution is concerned with economic injustices and focuses on issues of equity, particularly the equitable distribution of access to high-quality learning opportunities and outcomes for all children (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). Before engaging with the school's practice, the following section outlines how the data was gathered and analysed.

Methods and analysis

This empirical study is underpinned by a critical ethnographic case study methodology. This means that the focus was on developing a deep understanding of policy and practice by spending considerable time in the school and using critical theories to analyse the gathered data. Reflecting both ethnographic and case study approaches, this study draws on the qualitative methods of classroom observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Four mainstream teachers were shadowed for four weeks and interviewed twice (Cathal, Keith, Rebecca and Therese). The principal (Oliver) and two members of the support team were also interviewed twice (Peter and Karen). Policy documents and the teachers' schemes of work were analysed. Purposive sampling was used as the school was known to me as a site of progressive practice in the field of SJE. Data were analysed using N-Vivo 9. A process of open coding was initially completed followed by the application of concepts from CMT and TLT. Analytic memos were constructed during both phases of coding. The case study which follows reflects the extensive time spent gathering and analysing data from RETNS, a school which recognises that SJE is a process which can be most effectively advanced through critical review, reflection and action.

Leading and teaching for social justice: a case study of RETNS

Understanding a school's local context is essential for educators seeking to promote socially just practices as it influences the leadership approach taken and the unjust structures which are prioritised for critique, amendment or replacement (DeMatthews, 2018). RETNS is a medium sized, co-educational school located on the outskirts of a medium

sized urban centre near to the city of Dublin. Under the management of an independent NGO, Educate Together, it was established in 2005 in response to the exponential rise in children seeking school places in the area, particularly children from multi-ethnic and migrant backgrounds. Despite the economic growth which prompted rapid housing development during this time, unemployment, poverty and social disadvantage continued to characterise parts of the town and its surrounding hinterland. These factors influence the school's approach to critical multiculturalism, particularly the emphasis it places on meeting the needs of children who are marginalised by social injustices. Reflective of the wider homogeneity of the national teaching population (Heinz & Keane, 2018), the principal and 26 teachers at the school come from predominantly white, settled, middle-class backgrounds. While a model of democratic leadership is promoted in the school, it is positionally led by school principal, Oliver, a dedicated and passionate social justice and human rights educator, scholar and activist. The case study suggests that there are a range of exemplary processes and practices evident at RETNS. The critical analysis which follows provides a critical reading of that practice and highlights potential areas for continued growth. It demonstrates how gradual progress can be made through the setting of targeted and achievable goals which address the challenges and injustices inherent in school and wider structures, policies and practices.

Relationality

Supportive and meaningful relationships between all members of the school community are an essential prerequisite to the promotion of purposeful SJE in any school context (DeMatthews, 2018; Ryan, 2016; Tenuto & Gardiner, 2018). These relationships, characterised by respect for difference, care, trust and mutual understanding are necessary in order to foster commitment to SJE principles, processes and practices and to sustain them over time (Berkovich, 2014; Ryan, 2016). Strong relationships are also required to motivate and support teachers to take the action required to engage in the often complex, emotional and challenging processes required in bringing about social change (Pantić & Florian, 2015). Relationships are a key consideration for other reasons. The social injustices which marginalised groups experience are enacted in and through social relationships (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). SJE therefore requires consideration of the nature of relationships with self and others. In a school context, this includes the hierarchical relationships between principal and teachers, teachers and children, the school and parents and the school and the wider community. Reflecting the centrality of these relationships, one of the key goals of SJE is to democratise unequal power relations, to build understanding and solidarity between groups and to foster recognition and respect for social and cultural differences (Bell, 2016; Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). Characterised by its mutuality and reciprocal nature, dialogue is a very powerful tool in building relationships that have the capacity to be transformative (Edwards-Groves, Olin & Karlberg-Granlund, 2016). In this context, the following sections explore how RETNS, through dialogue, has sought to nurture positive, reciprocal relationships and to challenge power disparities between groups.

Relationality: a question of leadership?

While leadership can come from an individual “heroic” leader (DeMatthews, 2018), it is widely agreed that when dispersed and shared, it is more democratic, productive and

empowering for all involved. Woods (2004) maintains that democratic leadership requires both creating a democratic and participative culture (democracy-creating) and enabling others to take initiative and act (democracy-doing). Reflecting this, Oliver states:

I've a really good team of people around me and I feel that I am actually able to allow that team to function. I hope that my leadership style would be around the kind of sense of democracy, sense of collaboration, sense of shared purpose, a sense of critical reflection.

Oliver's approach to leadership is non-hierarchical and can be described as both democracy-creating and democracy-doing. According to Peter, "Oliver obviously is the principal but there's no sense of hierarchy. He's one of us and we all work together, so it's a team and he's part of that team" (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 102). While there is a senior management team, Karen observes, "everyone else feels just as involved". Teachers are encouraged to take on leadership roles irrespective of their rank. Oliver reports, "We ... hand over as much authority as possible to the staff themselves ... Very often, any person can assume authority if it's to get something going that has been more globally agreed" (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 102).

Depending on their interests and expertise, teachers are supported in developing their leadership capabilities and in taking on leadership roles in curricular initiatives and at staff and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) meetings. Leadership authority is therefore emergent, fluid and interchangeable at the school (Woods, 2016). Speaking of the teaching teams which form around curricular subjects and new initiatives, Oliver asserts, "Now when they meet in order to execute a particular project, usually by the time they leave their first meeting, they're taking leadership of some aspect of what's coming up and ... that is very motivating" (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 103). The staff is additionally motivated by high levels of trust and professional freedom. According to Cathal, another teacher at the school, "Oliver gives you as much rein as you need. If you go to him with an idea and you think it's good and it's something you want to try out, he's more than happy to put his support behind it" (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 103).

Since becoming the school's first principal, Oliver has deliberately recruited like-minded staff members with strong human rights and social justice identities. He is held in high esteem and has a very good relationship with staff members. Teachers variously describe Oliver as being "amazing", "fantastic" and "there to support you one hundred percent, to guide you ... but at the same time to be open to you making your own decisions" (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 99). Additionally, Oliver's former teaching experience in multi-ethnic contexts, his academic expertise in the area of SJE, developed most recently through doctoral work, and his passion for SJE has given him additional standing and credibility with staff. Ryan (2016) notes that this credibility is important if leaders are to advance the goals of SJE.

While staff members are recruited who care about social injustices, like in every school context, resistance occurs, particularly when there is discussion of issues which are emotionally or politically charged (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This resistance can manifest in a range of ways, from silence and withdrawal to anger and argumentation (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). In RETNS, staff members with less strong social justice identities were brought on board through dialogue and were encouraged to make their criticisms

without fear of censure. Reflecting this, Oliver states, “I think it’s important to have an atmosphere in the school whereby people can talk frankly ... teachers are encouraged ... to be openly reflective of both their own and others’ practice” (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 132). As the literature points out, it is essential that staff understand the meaning of social justice, what it requires in terms of personal reflexivity (particularly on issues of power, privilege and prejudice) and practice and how an understanding of the realities of children’s lives can guide action (DeMatthews, 2018). In RETNS, teachers’ knowledge in this area has been developed through activities such as engagement with academic journal articles and outside speakers on issues ranging from racism to socio-economic disadvantage to fostering children’s happiness. The staff read, reflect upon and critique the articles in advance of meetings, then engage in dialogue during meetings. This praxis-oriented approach is evident in a range of areas including the school’s organisational structures and the approaches taken to decision-making and policy development. Analysis of the school’s Multicultural Policy by staff members, for example, showed a need to explicitly address racism through the development of a comprehensive and explicit Antiracism Statement. This type of critical practice in school contexts is rarely captured in the literature. Its power and efficacy lies in its capacity to be both personally and institutionally transformative.

According to Splitter (2010), teachers “are agents whose intentions, beliefs, desires, convictions, and values ... cause things to happen” (p. 208). Activism in any school can be implicit and/or explicit. While implicit activism involves making small-scale under the radar but significant changes to school structure, processes and curricula, explicit activism is public, highly visible and sometimes controversial (Ryan, 2016). Leaders often engage in implicit activism as they seek to subtly and gradually convince others of the value and merit of socially just practices but also to try to circumvent resistance or sanction (Ryan, 2016). The ethos of RETNS is underpinned by the liberal ethos of Educate Together and the more radical approach promoted by the staff is generally compatible with this ethos, particularly in the context of challenging inequity, promoting human rights, critiquing ideological assumptions and being open to multiple perspectives and truths. However, in schools where the ethos is less compatible with or open to SJE principles and pedagogies, there may be greater personal and professional risks for staff promoting this type of education. Implicit activism is required in such contexts as is moral courage. Shields (2010) maintains that leaders who seek to be transformative “must be able to work from within dominant social formations to exercise effective oppositional power, to resist courageously, and to be activists and voices for change and transformation” (p. 570).

Teacher activism in RETNS tends to relate to organisational, pedagogical and curricular structures. For example, teachers use pedagogies which foreground children’s voice and engage in curricular content which seeks to empower children to take action to challenge injustice. Oliver also engages in more explicit forms, particularly in his efforts to advocate for the rights of marginalised children and to expose structural inequities within the wider education system. Reflecting this, he speaks of his commitment to bringing “the Irish education system from where it has come to historically to a new structure that would suit modern Ireland” (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 98). He has been particularly courageous in his public critique of the school’s experiences with state agencies and in his fight for additional supports and resources for the school.

Tenuto and Gardiner (2018) state that those seeking to promote social justice are often “accused of being arbitrary, forceful, seeking change too quickly, overbearing, or not a team player” (p. 597). Those leading for change need to be patient, to listen carefully, to think strategically and to act judiciously (Ryan, 2010, 2016). They need to work on understanding the values, priorities, emotions and concerns of all members of the school community (Ryan, 2016). In terms of relationality, the experiences of RETNS staff support evidence found elsewhere that staff are more likely to get behind SJE initiatives when they feel supported, cared for, trusted and valued and perceive the person or people leading the change process to be knowledgeable and passionate about SJE (Ryan, 2010). Relationships characterised by these values can be fostered over time through dialogue and democratic leadership. Facilitating meaningful participation, which will be discussed in the next section, is therefore of central importance.

Participation

Participation involves providing opportunities for all members of the school community to be involved in the decision-making process (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). It relates to the enactment of democratic and participatory pedagogies and practices which support children’s voice and visibility. Reflecting this, Oliver observes the following about the school’s approach to CM:

So we don’t try to minimise people’s diversity but to maximise both its visibility and its voice ... we try to develop the channels and structures by which that voice is heard and is catered for in the school through parental involvement and through maximum amount of children involvement. It takes a phenomenal amount of reflective practice ... [it] is about being recognising but also willing to be critical.

(Kavanagh, 2013, p. 100)

In an effort to foster positive relationships with parents and promote participation, the school proactively encourages parents to be involved in and take on leadership roles in the school. Cognisant of the barriers which impede parents from minoritised backgrounds from participating in their children’s schooling, a number of structures facilitate parents’ voice at formal and informal levels. For example, parental ethnic focus groups were established so that parents can “air their views, learn from one another, seek advice and help, narrate their own stories, organise themselves to lobby or agitate” (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 113). The focus groups’ aims of facilitating parents’ voices and encouraging collective social action are reflective of CM. Additionally, parents are regularly asked to share their opinions on school matters via the principal’s blog, to participate in curricular initiatives and to visit classrooms to share their knowledge, expertise and life experiences.

In order to tackle the power disparities that traditionally characterise teacher–child relationships, the school promotes democratic pedagogical approaches and participatory structures such as the Student Council (SC). Reflective of this, the school describes its approach as a rights-based approach to education, which emphasises children’s participatory rights and children’s voices. The idea that children can only truly learn about the democratic way of life by actively experiencing it in the classroom is evident in Oliver’s assertion that:

the most important place for children's voice to be articulated, asserted and paid heed to is in the classrooms, so trying to ensure that the kind of pedagogies that go on in the school allow the children to feel that confident to make their assertions and that their assertions matter.

(Kavanagh, 2013, p. 105)

Teachers draw on children's cultural knowledge and personal experience and engage them in reflection, dialogue and active learning. These approaches supplant traditional understandings of teachers as active depositors of knowledge and children as passive knowledge recipients and in doing so, disrupt unequal teacher-child power relations. Significant attention is accorded to mainstream academic and school knowledge as it is recognised that the acquisition of these forms of knowledge is essential if children are to succeed academically. The school's endeavours to balance official knowledge with children's personal and cultural knowledge (Banks, 2007) are illustrated by Cathal:

we were doing a unit of work based on Islam and she [a child in the class] was able to bring in prayer beads and maps and that sort of stuff and share them with the class and share her own experience of being a young Muslim and particularly being a young Muslim in Ireland.

(Kavanagh, 2013, p. 106)

Reflecting the multicultural literature, teachers have high expectations regarding children's attainment (Nieto, 2004). Children are encouraged to ask questions and a wide variety of interactive teaching approaches are employed, including Thinking Circles, enquiry learning and off-campus fieldwork. At a more formal structural level, the SC is seen as a key example of democracy in action.

RETNS's SC is described as a forum in which "children's right to voice, opinion, freedom and experience of democracy" is realised (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 113). SC meetings are accorded status in the school, taking place once a fortnight during school hours. A new Council is elected during Human Rights Month each October and meetings are attended by a facilitating teacher. However, there are issues with the nature and authenticity of SC participation. When issues relating to teaching and learning are discussed, it is generally in the context of school events, for example, Get Active Week when children's views are sought on possible activities. Consequently, children act as sounding boards and in this context, their participation could be viewed as somewhat tokenistic (Fielding, 2004). This is reflective of other research in this area (Fleming, 2015; Quinn & Owen, 2016). While it may not be intentional, this focus means that children's influence is marginal regarding the significant decisions that affect their lives, for example, issues around in-school governance, planning, evaluation and curricular and pedagogic negotiation. In keeping with the established processes of critical reflection in RETNS, practice in this area could be further developed through dialogue with children and engagement in academic reading on child voice and participative democracy.

During Human Rights Month, children engage in a wide range of Human Rights Education (HRE) initiatives, including human rights programmes and themed assemblies; educational visits/visitors and project work. Again, this is an area which would benefit from critical assessment of the risks associated with assigning the teaching of HRE to a

specific month in the school calendar, especially given that it might dissuade “sustained engagement” in the area (Bryan & Bracken, 2011, p. 41). The teaching of HRE is accompanied by a focus on social justice, citizenship and antiracism education. According to Oliver, the school is “proactively antiracist ... Racism, antiracism would be taught in a classroom ... in the normal timetable not awaiting an incident in order for it to be post incident” (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 147). Social justice issues dominate particularly, but not exclusively, at the senior end of the school. Teachers place an emphasis on increasing the children’s familiarity with and understandings of social justice issues, human rights instruments and principles, and on fostering solidarity with and taking action to support those who are denied their rights. The children participate in action-oriented initiatives designed to bring about change in the school community, their local community and in wider society. Peter states that the children:

are encouraged to be aware of the community and to see themselves as part of the community ... so there is an understanding that we are part of something bigger and yes they would be encouraged to look after the community and to look after the school.

(Kavanagh, 2013, pp. 154–155)

In order to develop its practice, RETNS could also explore a more critical approach to HRE and SJE more generally. While teachers engage children in dialogue and draw on their cultural and personal experiences, they tend to focus on uncontroversial environmental and social issues at a local level and only to address more controversial issues when they concern people in faraway places. This is not uncommon. Exploring critically the structural, macro root causes and effects of social injustices and reflecting on them is extremely challenging work, particularly if teachers do not feel confident in this area. It would be helpful for staff to assess critically their current subject plans and, as is supported by this volume, discuss ways in which stronger, more critical social justice and human rights dimensions can be gradually incorporated into planning and teaching at the school.

Challenging political injustices through the promotion of meaningful opportunities to participate is a key feature of SJE. These inclusive structures which afford all members of the school community the capacity to exercise power and voice through engagement in the decision-making process include student councils, parental focus groups, policy consultations and use of democratic social justice pedagogies. Recognising that SJE is an approach in-the-making, the staff at RETNS acknowledge the complexity of and challenges posed by the process of promoting participation and acknowledge the need for further critical engagement and review in order to progress their practice in these areas. As is explored in the next section, at a more general level, teachers make a significant effort to ensure that all children have access to a rigorous high-quality curriculum so that they have the capacity to achieve successful outcomes.

Distribution: institutionalising antiracism and access to successful outcomes

Feeling sorry for and “being nice” to minoritised children does little to tackle the systemic and institutional forms of oppression which negatively impact their daily lives and life chances (Nieto, 2008). In a school context, distributive justice is primarily concerned

with the equitable distribution of access to high-quality learning opportunities and outcomes for all children (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015). The school recognises how racism in all its guises can deny children access to these opportunities. As a consequence, antiracism, a central tenet of critical multiculturalism, is accorded significant status in RETNS. The school's Antiracism Statement acknowledges the existence of conscious and subconscious racism at an individual and institutional level. It commits to the following practice:

In order to ensure that discrimination ... does not occur ... we undertake to: Reflect critically ... on our personal-practice conscious at all times of the possibility that we have acted personally in a discriminatory manner. Reflect critically ... on our institutional practice conscious at all times of the possibility that as an institution ... we may have acted in a discriminatory manner.

The school proactively monitors the ethnic distribution of rewards and sanctions, regularly reviews relevant policies, explicitly teaches about antiracism in classrooms and staff engage in academic reading about racism and antiracism. Recognising the imperative of challenging structurally generated inequities, RETNS acts to ensure that children have equal access to high-quality learning opportunities and to the educational outcomes that society values. The school ensures that wider normalised practices around sorting and stratification are avoided. In this regard, all teachers eschew practices such as streaming (tracking) and rigid ability grouping. Research indicates that such practices disproportionately disadvantage children from poorer, working-class and minoritised backgrounds (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). Instead, as has become standard practice in many schools, in order to cater for the diversity of needs in the classroom, the class teachers engage in team teaching with designated support teachers in the classroom. This in-class support helps to avoid the creation of a hierarchical system within the classroom and avoids the stigma which is often attached to children who are withdrawn from the classroom for additional teaching support. As required by national neoliberal policy, the school partakes in standardised testing – a practice deemed to be highly inequitable by the social justice and equality literature, due to its logical-mathematical and linguistic bias and its privileging of middle-class knowledge (Baker et al., 2009). As is acknowledged by Oliver, the linguistic bias which standardised testing perpetuates particularly disadvantages children from minoritised backgrounds who may not speak English as their first language. He contends:

[For] our children for whom English is not their first language ... it serves them very poorly. It will always and ever grossly underrepresent their intelligence and their capabilities and the rapid rate at which they make progress, once they become settled with us.

(Kavanagh, 2013, p. 124)

As a consequence, the results of standardised tests are not used to sort children; rather they are used as evidence to argue for additional resources and supports for the children. Oliver states, “the main function of standardised testing is to convince others of our need for the supports that are available in that area” (Kavanagh, 2013, p. 124). By using testing to obtain additional resources rather than to sort children, the school effectively

circumvents the inequities which these processes reproduce and reinforce. In addition, the school promotes a number of initiatives to increase the children's social and cultural capital, for example, after-school clubs, off-campus fieldwork and visits to historical, scientific, environmental and cultural sites. The school has a car which is used to transport children to and from these sites and other related events and those who cannot afford to pay attend free of charge.

While a small number of areas require further critical review, reflection and deliberation in order to progress the school's social justice agenda, there are a range of exemplary processes and practices evident at RETNS. Enacting the processes of democratic leadership, dialogue, praxis and strategic activism are key to advancing the school's social justice goals. The fostering of caring, reciprocal and supportive relationships between all members of the school community gives a sense of shared understanding of and commitment to the school's social justice vision. It also creates the groundwork for meaningful participation. This is evident in the efforts made to enact democratic decision-making processes and participatory pedagogies which support the voice and visibility of those marginalised by social injustices. The staff's use of a praxis-oriented approach to decision-making which is informed in many cases by the academic literature helps to ensure that decisions taken reflect an SJE approach. Through reflecting critically on the impact of structural inequities, facilitating access to high-quality learning opportunities and making significant efforts to increase children's social and cultural capital, the school seeks to challenge the effects of educational disadvantage and inequity. Drawing on practice from the school, the following section presents a framework for fostering SJE which can be adapted and used by schools.

Working towards a more socially just school

As previously stated, embedding SJE principles into all components of the school environment is multi-faceted and challenging. Although a whole school integrated approach is required, conceptualising the school as encompassing a series of inter-related components which can be systematically addressed, stops the process from seeming overwhelming. Reflecting this, Figure 14.1 presents a framework which can be used by schools or individual teachers seeking to promote more socially just practice.

Engaging in democratic leadership, dialogue, praxis and strategic activism is essential during each stage of the process. Stage one involves building caring, supportive and reciprocal relationships between all members of the school community (see Table 14.1 for suggested actions). Stage two involves engaging staff reflexively and deepening their knowledge and understanding of, for example, education as a socio-political process (see Table 14.1). Stage three involves conducting an audit of the school's policies, practices and processes under the social justice pillars of equity, inclusion and recognition of and respect for difference (see Table 14.1). This audit in turn informs reforms in the areas of policy, pedagogy, curriculum (hidden and formal) and assessment. The proposed framework is flexible and schools can adapt it to meet the needs of their own specific contexts. The audit can be conducted one pillar at a time or the three pillars can be audited simultaneously. It can take place over the course of a term, the entire school year or over a longer time period.

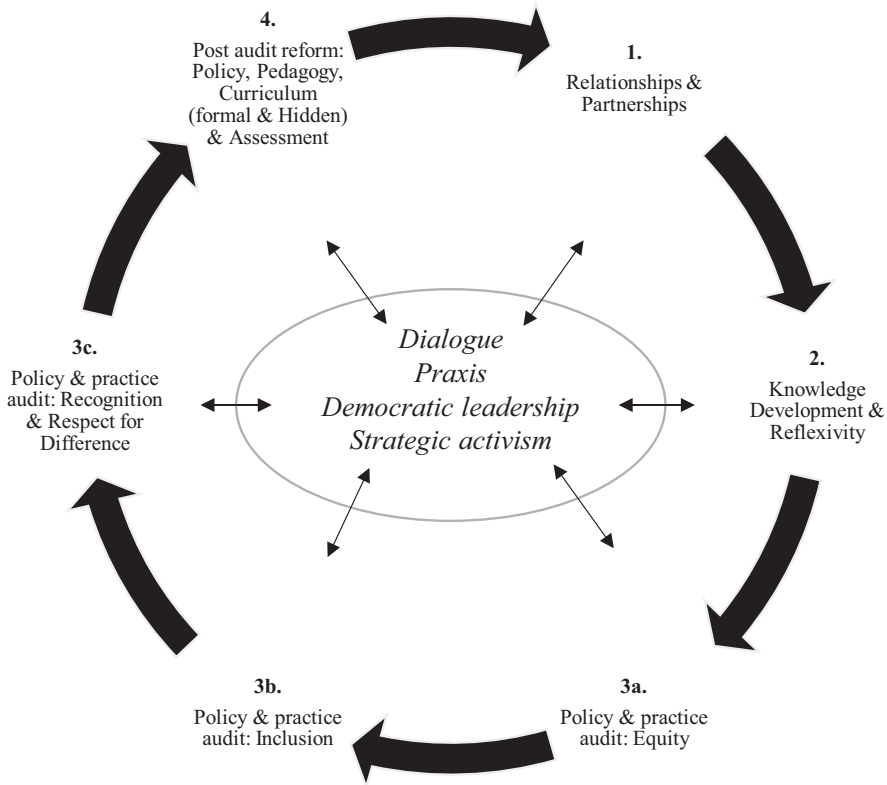


Figure 14.1 Framework for fostering SJE in schools

Table 14.1 Framework for fostering SJE in schools: suggested actions

Relationships and partnerships	<p>Foster reciprocal relationships characterised by care, compassion, trust and respect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engage in dialogue and develop understanding of the values, priorities, emotions and concerns of the school community. ● Promote culture of collaboration. ● Facilitate dispersed leadership. ● Build partnerships with local community, non/governmental organisations. ● Involve parents in as many aspects of school life as possible, e.g. policy development, support roles, classroom visits. ● Demonstrate care for children in all interactions.
Knowledge development and reflexivity	<p>Deepen knowledge and understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Children, parents and the local community, including underlying assumptions, biases and beliefs. ● Social justice pedagogies. ● Systemic social justice issues. ● Own identities (personal and professional), positionality, role as change agents. Useful reflective questions include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Am I from a privileged group in terms of my ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, language and ability? How has this shaped my experiences of life so far? Does this privilege help or hinder me in understanding my children’s lived realities?

(Continued)

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Table 14.1 (Cont.)

<p>Equity audit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do I think that some groups are superior/inferior to others? What stereotypes might I hold that lead me to treat some children in my class less favourably than others? - What social discourses influence how I see people? Do these discourses perpetuate racist, classist, sexist, homophobic stereotypes? How are they shaping my views? - What actions do I take in my classroom to promote equity, inclusion and recognition of and respect for diversity? <p>Engage in audit to assess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Access for all to a high-quality curriculum. ● Whether there are high expectations for all children and if there are achievement gaps related to group membership. ● Whether deficit narratives exist in the school about certain groups of children, and how do these narratives impact children's experience of the school? ● Steps taken to meet the needs of minoritised groups and increase their social and cultural capital. ● If and why streaming/tracking takes place. ● If and why there are fixed ability groups. ● If and why standardised testing occurs and how data is used.
<p>Inclusion audit</p>	<p>Engage in audit to assess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use of SJE pedagogies which are collaborative and participatory. ● Who is involved in the decision-making processes in the school. ● Whether and why children are segregated. ● Whether curricular content draws on children's lived experiences. ● Whether curricular content has a social justice dimension and assists children to recognise and confront injustice.
<p>Recognition and respect for difference audit</p>	<p>Engage in audit to assess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Whether teaching materials, books, wall displays, play items reflect diversity in a range of areas, e.g. ethnicity, gender, ability. ● Actions taken to support recognition of minority languages and experiences. ● Teacher knowledge of children's backgrounds and life experiences. ● What structures are in place to ensure the school environment is safe and free from harassment and discrimination, e.g. school culture, Anti-racism Statement, school rules, proactive monitoring of the ethnic distribution of rewards and sanctions. ● Whether all identities are equally recognised and respected in the school. ● How biases, prejudices, stereotyping are actively addressed through policy, pedagogy and the curriculum.
<p>Reform</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy ● Pedagogy ● Formal curriculum ● Hidden curriculum ● Assessment strategies.

Conclusion

Returning to the reasons why many people choose to become teachers – to make a positive difference and to bring about societal change – it is clear that despite many challenges, the staff of RETNS is taking action on a daily basis to realise these important

goals. While each school context is unique, this case study provides an example of SJE policy and practice in a real school context. The accompanying framework and table provide guidance on how schools can go about beginning or progressing SJE approaches. While this work can be immensely challenging, it is rewarding and can transform lives, particularly through its capacity to positively impact the life chances of children, especially those who are marginalised by societal injustices.

Note

The research study presented in this chapter draws on doctoral work which examined critically the models of intercultural education emerging in Ireland. For further details, see here: http://doras.dcu.ie/view/people/Kavanagh=3AAnne_Marie=3A=3A.html.

The school and all participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

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