

**Faculty of Education**

Department of *Administration et fondements de l'éducation*

## **Social Justice in Education**

Key points drawn from the scientific and professional literature

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### **Foreword**

For several years now, the Supporting Montréal Schools Program team and researchers from the Department of *Administration et fondements de l'éducation* at the Université de Montréal, have been studying the role of school principals in disadvantaged areas. Together, they have generated various research and development projects that document and describe school leadership in disadvantaged areas, and presented a report on the first set of research findings to the Supporting Montréal Schools Program (Archambault and Harnois, 2008). A review of the scientific literature on school leadership in disadvantaged areas was undertaken within the framework of this research (Archambault, Ouellet and Harnois, 2006).

The results of this research revealed an important characteristic of the leadership of school principals in disadvantaged areas: their leadership was centered on social justice. The literature review produced for this research also brought to light the importance of a leadership based on social justice.

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This characteristic emanates from the values of justice, equality, and equity that must be promoted, embodied, and established within the school by its principal. Practitioners and researchers who adhere to these values think it is important that the exercise of leadership is anchored in this way. School principals, who believe strongly in these values, will often do everything in their power to combat marginalization, injustice, prejudice, and the false beliefs that stand in the way of social justice.

For us, it seemed important to look into this aspect further by completing a review of scientific writings on the subject. Some sixty documents (several books, research reports and scientific articles), mostly from the United States, were consulted. An initial document containing abstracts and a complete bibliography was produced and can be obtained from the Supporting Montréal Schools Program (Archambault and Harnois, 2009a). This paper stems from that initial document and presents the key points of the scientific literature on social justice leadership in education.

We will firstly take a look at the context of emergence and at a definition of the concept of leadership for social justice in education. Then, we will focus on the foundations and characteristics of social justice in education, and the leadership practices that uphold it. We hope this document will not only help to nurture the vision and reflections of school principals and members of their team on the issue of social justice, but that it will also influence administrative and supervisory practices.

Jean Archambault

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## Introduction

Social justice in education cannot be tackled before first taking the time to define the concept of justice.

**Justice** implies respect of the law and equity as the basis of social life. The concept of justice is inextricably linked to morals and law. Its application varies depending on social structures and collective representations. Justice also pertains to other concepts such as liberty, equality, ethic, and social peace.

The concept of **social justice** appeared in writings during the last century. The philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) authored a founding work on the theory of social justice that was based on two principles:

1. The principle of *freedom-equality*: an equal right for all, without limiting the freedom of others;
2. The *principle of difference*: equal opportunity removes the causes of social and economic inequalities that disadvantage, oppress, discriminate, or cause prejudice to certain individuals. The only inequality allowed is if it benefits the most disadvantaged members of society .

From the end of the late 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the emergence of the industrial revolution, and the increasing interdependence of national economies, led to questions about the capitalist exploitation of labour. The first labour laws and the establishment of social security (at the State level) were introduced to improve the lives of individuals, to support their autonomy, and to ensure that each person could live a life of dignity and participate in the collective life of their society.

Institutions that promoted human rights (equal rights, equal opportunities, and equity in terms of living standards) were also set up across the world (creation of the International Labour Organization in 1919, and the United Nations in 1945) in response to inequities in the distribution of wealth, goods, employment opportunities (and of earnings), access to knowledge, health services, social security, a safe and secure environment, and opportunities to participate in civic and political life. These tools encouraged the respect of human rights and the

freedoms for all, irrespective of an individual's race, gender, language, or religion. On a national scale, governments established social assistance measures to help the most disadvantaged populations. In 1921, the Legislative Assembly of Québec passed public assistance legislation (the first of its kind) to cover hospitalization costs for the poor. Following on from this came, among others, the first cornerstone of a social policy and the setting up of a Department of Health and Social Welfare (1930-1940), the application of the principle of social security by the establishment of a Ministry of Family and Social Welfare (1960-1970), the application of a global policy of social security (1970-1986), and the creation of two programs by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport that intervene in the schools on behalf of children from disadvantaged areas: the *Supporting Montréal Schools Program (1997)* and *New Approaches, New Solutions Program (2002)*.

Since the end of the 20th century, the rise of globalization has led to a growing concern about the power and privileges of the ruling class. The centre of power and the concentration of wealth and resources are considered to be the source of the problem of injustice at all levels - international, national and local. There is an awareness of the human condition and of the necessity for interdependence and solidarity at the individual, local, national, and international levels. We speak of collective responsibility, citizen involvement, solidarity, and the desire for equity and justice.

What is **social justice in education**? This is what we propose to explore in this document.

### **Social justice in education**

Several researchers have been interested in this concept. The subject is certainly not new. In effect, education has become widely democratized, and measures are in place so that all levels of the education system can be easily accessed by all children throughout Québec, whatever their physical, social, cultural, or economic situation. Additional financial and professional measures have been invested in disadvantaged areas to give the same opportunities to all children. Nevertheless, according to several researchers, the education system has contributed to maintaining multiple forms of oppression and injustice. However, it also plays a key role in the process of change towards greater social justice by paying particular attention to marginalized groups that are often

poorly served by the school system, under-represented, or who face diverse forms of oppression or prejudice. These forms of injustice are based on cultural, social, religious affiliation, and economic circumstances, and manifest themselves in sexism, individual limitations, homophobia, etc. Social disparities in student achievement and in their educational pathways are regularly observed, depending on the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the families.

The education system can remedy these injustices by the exploration, recognition, and negotiation of differences and by providing a safe environment. Here each person can be openly different, fully participate in and contribute to school life, have their needs met, and learn and succeed at high levels. We are talking about a community in which difference and interdependence contribute towards the common good.

Social justice in education is founded on the following principles: 1) equity, i.e. justice, equal access to quality education, an equal opportunity to learn, and the capacity to succeed at high levels; 2) activism, such as full active citizenship, an understanding of the world, the capacity to act and change unjust situations, and 3) social literacy, which unfolds through the development of social skills, knowledge, and positive human values, and in the desire and ability to act in a positive and responsible manner (Ayers, Quinn and Stovall, 2009). Equity in systems and in political, economic, and social structures, particularly with regard to the exercise of power, the sharing of wealth and resources, and the recognition of all manners of diversity lead to social justice. The moral values of equality, justice, democracy, equity and respect, and the full participation of all contribute to this ideal of justice (Archambault and Harnois 2009b).

In the literature, social justice is often defined by its antonym, social injustice. In the absence of social justice, the so-called neutral and objective systems and structures that produce a dominant culture on which power and resources are conferred to the detriment of other persons must be called into question. But how can one instill social justice in a school? This is what we will examine below.

## Beliefs and values regarding social justice in education

An examination of the research into social justice in education allowed us to identify the underlying beliefs and values, as follows:

- Believing profoundly in the possibility of establishing an equitable school that aims for excellence;
- Believing that all students have the capacity to learn and to succeed, and the setting of high and realistic expectations for them;
- Deconstructing the false beliefs of the school team (principal, teachers, non-teaching staff and support staff) by appealing to moral principles and social justice values;
- Abandoning a deficit-based approach in favour of one that is centered on consolidating and developing knowledge;
- Having positive beliefs and attitudes about the children and their families (an approach that supports best practices and greater social justice).

## Social justice practices in education

The examination of research on social justice in education also allowed us to identify a certain number of practices that could be put in place. Most of these involve all the participants in the school community. It goes without saying that the school principal plays a key role. The seven practices listed below are described and examples of some of them are given.

1. The school's mission centers on the success of all students, and on social justice. This mission is the responsibility of all those involved with the school.
2. Pedagogical and administrative practices take into account the reality of the students and their families and are used to convey social justice values.
3. The school principal shares leadership and encourages everyone to participate fully.
4. The school principal dispels false beliefs and prejudices about the children and their families and encourages his school team to do likewise.
5. The school team ensures that the school is a safe place where a climate of openness and respect prevails.
6. Parents, community and school's members collaborate to share their experiences and their knowledge.
7. The school principal and the school team understand social justice issues.

## 1. The school's mission centers on the success of all students, and on social justice. This mission is the responsibility of all those involved with the school.

- We believe in the ability of all students to learn and succeed at high levels, without exception (equal opportunity). We encourage socially just learning that is based on equity with regard to the learning, success, and personal development of all students. All of the school's stakeholders need to be morally committed to making a difference in the lives of all the children. In successful schools in disadvantaged areas, learning is the priority of all concerned (Archambault and Harnois, 2006).
- We offer all students, regardless of the socioeconomic reality of their families the highest quality of differentiated learning through comprehensive learning situations and relevant and appropriately adapted pedagogical interventions (equity).
- We develop an inclusive approach for all students, rather than one that marginalizes or segregates them according to learning and behavioural difficulties, race, second-language learning, or a handicap, and which cuts them off from the richness of their own environment. Our representation of education also tends to exclude the concept of the student at-risk, the "them" versus the "us". This representation is a source of oppression, marginalization, and injustice. Principals must believe that students do learn better in a heterogeneous environment and share that belief with their school team. They must endeavour to get rid of any services that marginalize students and reorganize them so that students are integrated into their school environment.

## 2. Pedagogical and administrative practices take into account the reality of the students and their families and are used to convey social justice values.

- We develop pedagogical practices and create learning situations that are inspired by the reality of the students, their families and their communities, and that value and use their experiences and knowledge.

- We develop the students' critical awareness, their ability to understand and tackle social justice issues at local, national, or international levels. We initiate them into the democratic process. We lead the youngsters to take a stand, mobilize, and take action to eradicate poverty, injustice, and disparity in society. We guide the youngsters into becoming full citizens.

### **3. The school principal shares leadership and encourages everyone to participate fully.**

- The hierarchical power and authority conferred on the school principal is discussed and reorganized in such a way that it is shared. The power is redistributed among students, families, all school personnel, in short, to all the people involved in the educational process and for whom it is relevant to exercise this power. Our intent is to implement a democratic process that allows everyone to participate fully. We also ensure that all voices, as diverse as they are, can be heard.

### **4. The school principal dispels false beliefs and prejudices about the children and their families and encourages his school team to do likewise.**

False beliefs, negative attitudes, and prejudices derive from a social construction that often perceives difference as a deficit or a shortcoming. Thus, in comparison to the dominant group, the middle and wealthy classes, we tend to believe that children in poverty lack certain attitudes and attainments. This could be true of teachers, school principals, and other educational agents who generally come from the middle class. This vision of difference as a deficit is seldom constructive. Rather, it helps to create a distance, to separate, to exclude, or to devalue people from disadvantaged areas. This leads to fewer choices being offered to students, and the power of action is diminished by lowering expectations for them. This constitutes a form of discrimination. This arm's length approach is frequently the result of a sense of fear (ignorance), superiority, if not distaste associated with set ideas about poverty. These discriminatory attitudes discourage teachers, students, and their families from coming together. This reality contributes to furthering the distinction between the "them" and the "us". These beliefs, these attitudes, and these prejudices must be called into question.

Prejudices and false beliefs can be divided into two groups, depending on the subject addressed. A first group of subjects relate to social life: race, ethnicity, culture, poverty, social classes, family realities, relationships between men and women, power relationships and, lastly, religion.

An American researcher set out to verify whether certain beliefs about poverty were true or not (Gorski, 2008a). For example:

- Disadvantaged areas are dysfunctional. There is more violence, alcoholism, physical and psychological abuse.
  - False. Even if the sale of drugs in disadvantaged areas is often more visible than in other areas, people from disadvantaged areas do not abuse drugs and alcohol any more than other individuals. In fact, observations prove the contrary. (Gorski 2008a).
- People from disadvantaged areas do not want to work, are lazy, and prefer to remain on social assistance.
  - False again. In the United States, 83% of children from disadvantaged areas have at least one parent who works; 60% have a parent who works full-time, year-round; adults in poverty work more hours per week because of low earnings (Economic Politic Institute, 2002, and National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004, in Gorski, 2008a).
- Parents from disadvantaged areas are not involved in their child's schooling because they do not feel education is important.
  - False. Parents from disadvantaged areas show the same interest in their child's education as parents do from other areas. They come to school less often, not because they are disinterested but because they have fewer opportunities to engage with the school (more than one job, night shifts, precarious economic situation) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005, in Gorski, 2008a).
- Etc.

A second group of subjects relate to education: academic success for all students, social justice-based curriculum, learning abilities, high expectations for students, differentiation, integration, learning of a second language, discipline. The beliefs in this regard are addressed in this document:

- Children from disadvantaged areas are genetically inferior and have less learning potential. There are more children at-risk in schools in disadvantaged areas.
  - False. Students from disadvantaged areas have the same cognitive capacities and the same genetic make-up as other students. Therefore, their learning potential is comparable (Collectif, 2007).
- Etc.

School principals are flexible change agents. They can influence the beliefs and attitudes of their school team through different means. But above all, they must make it clear that prejudices or false beliefs will not be tolerated. Some of these means, such as confronting, discussing, and even forbidding (even though it is preferable to help to understand rather than to impose) are drawn from the scientific and professional literature on the subject:

- discourse or attitudes that lead to blaming students or their families for the difficulties they encounter. Several educational agents who hold these attitudes, have a tendency to excuse their own inefficacy in meeting the learning needs of the children that they judge to be different, not their responsibility, or simply impossible to meet. Such attitudes can lead to students being excluded. Such attitudes may also encourage the students and their parents to believe that they are incapable, and elicit feelings of discouragement, sadness, incompetence or inability, anger and injustice. These feelings may discourage students from liking school and may even lead them to dropping out.
- discourse about the deficiencies or shortcomings of students and parents from disadvantaged areas. Expressions such as “socially, intellectually, or culturally disadvantaged”, “under-developed, impoverished”, etc., must be completely avoided. Students and their families have strengths, knowledge, experiences, and competencies that may fall outside the expectations of the school, but which should be recognized and nurtured, and used as a source of inspiration.

- attitudes that lead a person to distance themselves, or be fearful of another person because of their cultural, religious, ethnic, social class, or gender differences, etc. We strive to remove from their discourse, the catchphrases that condone this detachment such as the “them” and the “us”, “those children” or “those parents”. The person should be understood rather than stigmatized, discredited, judged. Conventional wisdom is challenged and we seek to understand the facts rather than upholding the myths. Differences are recognized and valued.
- intraracial or interracial relationships that confer advantage on one group to the detriment of another.
- the silence around social justice issues. Everybody must become much more aware of the different issues faced not only by the school, but more widely in the community and the society in which we live. The school principal and the school team know and understand the issues surrounding social justice, poverty, and the reality of the setting in which they work.
- lowering expectations for students in disadvantaged areas, which usually results in a reduction in pedagogical services and fewer and less interesting learning opportunities. This prevents each student from developing their full potential and leads to a lower quality of education. High expectations for all students from disadvantaged areas nurture the development of their full potential and leads to true social justice in education.

##### **5. The school team ensures that the school is a safe place where a climate of openness and respect prevails.**

The school principal helps to create a climate that integrates democratic values and encourages the full participation and cooperation of everyone (students, families, school team, community). The importance of participation, the sharing of ideas and values, such as honesty, openness, flexibility, compassion, mutual support, etc., in a climate of listening, openness, understanding, respect, and empathy is recognized. This climate fosters a sense of belonging that, in its turn, heightens the safety of the students and staff. In effect, a climate that encourages the sense of belonging helps lower the number of discipline problems and, in consequence, lessens the feeling of insecurity.

**6. Parents, community and school's members collaborate to share their experiences and their knowledge.**

- The school is a place where parents can participate as citizens.
- The realities of families are understood and are a source of inspiration.
- A genuine partnership is established with families. Families are not only just welcome in the school, they are essential to the building of a learning community committed to the success of all students. Acknowledging a family's attachment to their child helps to engage them in a positive discourse and offers them different ways to be involved at school or at home.
- The school principal works with the community to develop alliances that enable teachers to enrich classroom activities. The school makes room for community members to initiate activities for the students and their families. Community members can open students up to broader notions about social justice in the community.

**7. The school principal and the school team understand social justice issues.**

- The principal has skills that go beyond educational leadership. The school principal learns about social justice concepts, the choice of an inclusive school, etc. that allow him to counter resistance from members of the school team and to engage in a thoughtful exchange with them. Likewise, all players on the school team are guided towards finding out about and understanding social justice issues. The first step towards eliminating social injustices is to raise awareness.

**Conclusion**

We have presented the beliefs, values, and social justice practices found in the scientific and professional literature. This presentation does not pretend to provide all the answers. Rather, it provides a starting point for reflection. It can not replace the thought and reflection exercises essential to professional development.

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Those who are committed to social justice work to reduce inequities and to promote social justice within the institution. They believe that all children can learn and succeed at higher levels. They also believe that a student learns best in an all-inclusive heterogeneous environment, where difference is respected and valued. They do not believe in a single model of values, but rather are inspired by each person's particular situation. They believe that all students should have access to quality teaching. They believe that when everyone participates, it contributes to the success of all, and that difference is a source of enrichment. The school principal is willing, on his part, to review his authority and to recognize the leadership of all the players: the students, their families, the members of the school team, and the members of the community. To do this, he works to create a climate of trust where each person feels welcomed, listened to, respected, and valued. He commits to combatting prejudices or false beliefs and supports an ongoing reflection on the different social justice issues. The school principal and the members of his team want to make a difference in the life of each child.

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