Social Justice Leadership in Urban Schools: What do Black and Hispanic Principals Do to Promote Social Justice?

Anna Sun

Rowan University

Despite the constant barrage of federal and state initiatives and reforms, many challenges to needy schools still remain. Students in the United States who are from low-income families, who are of color, and for whom English is not their first language, continue to be under-represented, undereducated, and underperform. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, this study examined how and to what extent black and Hispanic principals working in urban schools were exercising social justice leadership in their schools, sought a better understanding of how they had become social justice leaders, and explored what they had done to promote social justice.

Malgré le déluge incessant d'initiatives et de réformes de la part du gouvernement fédéral et des états, les écoles défavorisées continuent à faire face à de nombreux défis. Aux États-Unis, les élèves de familles à faible revenu, qui sont de couleur et pour qui l'anglais n'est pas la langue maternelle continuent à être sous-représentés, sous-scolarisés et moins performants. Reposant sur une méthodologie de recherche qualitative, cette étude s'est penchée sur les directeurs noirs et hispaniques d'écoles en milieu urbain pour établir comment, et dans quelle mesure, ils exerçaient un leadership en justice sociale dans leurs écoles; pour mieux comprendre comment ils étaient devenus des leaders en justice sociale; et pour étudier ce qu'ils avaient fait pour promouvoir la justice sociale.

The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that today's elementary and secondary school students in the United States are more diverse, racially and by origin, than 20 years ago. The enrollment of students who are white decreased from 59% to 50% between 2003 and 2013, while the enrollment of Hispanic students increased from 19% to 25% in the same period (Kena et al., 2016). Kena et al. predicted that while the percentage of students who are white will continue to decrease through the year 2025, the enrollment of Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students will increase. In addition, a survey by the U.S. Department of Education (2012) of 72,000 schools, which enroll 85% of the nation's students, highlights some stunning educational inequities: (1) though African American students comprised only 18% of the surveyed students, 35% of them were suspended once, and 39% were expelled; (2) male African American students were far more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their peers; (3) only 29% of high-minority high schools offer calculus, compared with 55% of schools with the lowest black and Hispanic enrollment; (4) teachers in high-minority schools were paid $2,251 less per year than their colleagues in low-minority schools in the same district.
    Increases in minority student population have posed great challenges for schools and their

leaders, in particular in urban schools that are experiencing language barriers, cultural differences, high dropout rates, constant suspensions, unwanted pregnancy, and low academic performance. Sciarappa and Mason (2014) have observed that schools facing those challenges have had difficulties in finding and keeping qualified principals due to high turnover rates or loss of principals to more affluent schools or districts. Meanwhile, the constant flow of so-called educational reforms, from No Child Left Behind (2001) to the Common Core Standards (2011), have focused more on test scores and standards at the expense of the intensified inequalities in urban schools. Cuban (2001) observed a decade and half ago that "[a]ll public schools are hardly alike" (p. 4), yet the current reforms have provided one recipe to all schools—urban, suburban, and rural schools—pressuring them to adhere to the same mold, while ignoring the differences.

Many scholars in the field of educational leadership are thus exploring the meanings of social justice, the nature of leadership for social justice in urban schools, and the implications for leadership preparation programs. In particular, Singleton and Linton (2006) have argued that to achieve equity in urban schools there is a need to recognize that both white educators and educators of color can add value and perspectives to the conversation. Despite the large number of studies on social justice, there is a scarcity of studies on how black and Hispanic principals in urban schools view social justice leadership and what they do to actualize it. This study hopes to explore specifically the perspectives from black and Hispanic principals. Three research questions are central to this study:

1. How do black and Hispanic school principals become social justice leaders?

2. What do black and Hispanic school principals do to promote social justice in schools?

3. How do black and Hispanic school principals overcome barriers to social justice?

The article begins with identifying the serious issues pertaining to social justice in schools, followed by a critical analysis of the literature. Furman's social justice leaders' capacities (2012) guide this study as its theoretical framework. The empirical findings are then presented, followed by a discussion of social justice leadership resulting from the study.

Literature Review

With the global migration, economic downturn, and terrorism threat, more immigrants are coming to western countries including the United States, which has shifted the demographics and the number of school-age children of color attending schools. Many of these immigrants settle in urban areas, where social justice is already an issue. Meanwhile, urban education has been in the spotlight for years and the initiatives and reforms aimed at improving it have come and gone repeatedly and seem to never fulfill the expectations hoped for by parents and taxpayers (e.g. Harr & Robicheau, 2008; Johnson, 2006; Taturn & Muhammad, 2012). Such a phenomenon warrants a discussion on diversity and inclusion in urban schools, where school leaders strive to prevent diversity from being a barrier and to instead "inspire transformation, improvement, and achievement for all learners at every level of education" (Santamaria, 2013, p. 38). Furthermore, school leadership is in a better position to value diversity, rather than ignore it.

Diversity and Inclusion in Urban Schools

Many researchers have recognized the importance of school leadership and management as

essential forces for achieving diversity (e.g. Furman, 2012; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Ryan, 2006; Santamaria, 2013). Based on their reviews of 128 books and book chapters as well as 308 journal articles on social justice and leadership, Khalifa et al. (2016) have encouraged school leaders to actively promote culturally responsive school contexts that emphasize and celebrate diversity and inclusiveness. In doing so, they suggested that school leaders develop their own abilities to identify the resources facilitating such an environment in their schools. Shields (2004) believes that inclusiveness is essential: "When children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success" (p. 122). On the contrary, when they feel left out or marginalized, students may act out or shut themselves down, which may have a negative effect on their academic performances and achievements, in particular with minority students. Thus, it is important for school leaders to develop a school culture that is socially just, deeply understood, and critically examined for its adherence to diversity and inclusiveness.

Capacities for Social Justice Leadership

Aiming to advance school leaders' capacities for social justice, this study is based on the theoretical framework conceptualized by Furman (2012). Figure 1 indicates what capacities principals for social justice should present. Furman (2012), reviewing most contemporary empirical studies and research on social justice leadership, has provided a detailed analysis on why it is important for school leaders to be capable of promoting social justice. He listed the following qualities and characteristics that social justice leaders should possess:

- Action-oriented and transformative. This requires social justice leaders to be proactive change agents, to be aware of issues for those who are oppressed, excluded, and marginalized, and to also recognize and understand how institutional arrangements and practices are used to favor some groups to the detriment of others.

- Committed and persistent. This requires social justice leaders to maintain a deep commitment to the social justice agenda and to make continuous efforts.
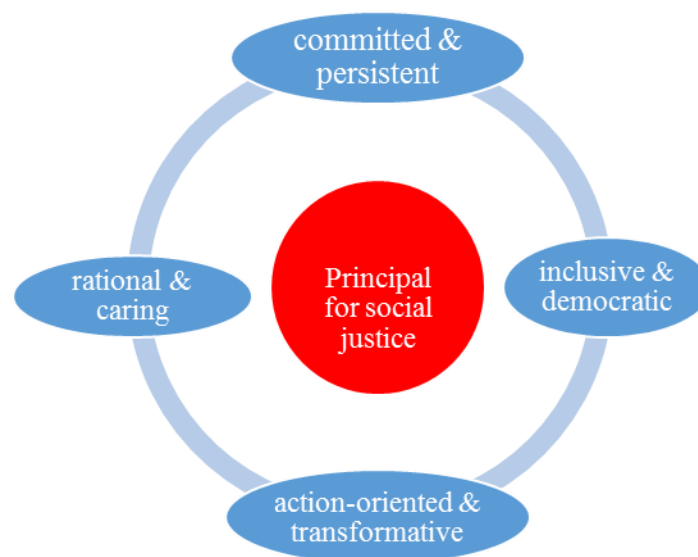

Figure 1. Capacities Principals for Social Justice Should Present

- Inclusive and democratic. This requires social justice leaders to create more inclusive practices by integrating learning environment for all students and by collaborating with parents and local community

- Rational and caring. This requires that social justice leaders to utilize meaningful and authentic communication tools in order to develop caring and fair relationships with others.

- Reflective. This requires social justice leaders to engage in thoughtful and critical self-reflection and to heighten personal awareness, which enables them to identify and come to grips with any pre-existing prejudices and assumptions that arise from their own cultural backgrounds.

- Oriented toward a socially just pedagogy. This requires social justice leaders to proactively orient and organize their instructions and to re-evaluate the curricula in order to ensure they are socially just.

Methodology

This study adapts Milner's (2012) definition of urban schools, which Milner identified as those that have exhibited urban characteristics but are not necessarily located in metropolitan areas. Yet, there are schools that often serve students who represent many ethnic minorities, who speak multiple languages, and who are largely poor. The design of the study was qualitative, with semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to obtain more specific and story-telling data. To determine its validity, a pilot study was conducted by interviewing two principals who did not participate in the later interviews. The pilot study was used to determine the clarity of the interview questions and the optimal time to conduct the interview. The researcher then revised the unclear questions and adjusted the interview time suggested by the interviewees in the pilot study.

The interview questions were adopted from the International School Leadership Development Network sponsored by the British Educational Leadership, Management, and Administration Society (BELMAS) and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), and were designed to gauge principals' perceptions of social justice, and what they have done to promote it in their schools. To begin the interview process, a cover letter was sent to district superintendents stating the purpose and importance of the study, and asking for permission to interview principals in their districts. The researcher then used networking for convenience sampling (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996), and recruited 10 principals who agreed to be interviewed. Six principals were chosen based upon the following criteria: (1) if their schools were located in urban settings defined by this study; (2) if their schools had a diverse student population i.e. students with more than three ethnic and racial backgrounds; and (3) if they self-identified as social justice leaders. Six out of ten principals of elementary schools in a mid-Atlantic state were finalized. Table 1 outlines their background and demographics information.

Interviews were conducted lasting approximately 60 min., each of which was digitally recorded. The interviews were verbatim transcribed; the data were then coded. In the coding process, the researcher employed domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis methodology to discover identical patterns, common themes, and controversial issues (Spradley, 1980). Table 2 shows examples of the analysis process.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Principals in Interviews

Principals (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years of being P	School location	School level (grades)	Student population
Decker	M	In 40s	African American	3	Urban	PreK-8	336
Rhodes	M	In 40s	Hispanic	9	Urban	1st-3rd	361
September	M	In late 50s	African American	26	Urban	Pre-8	690
Shape	M	In 30s	African	2	Urban	PreK-8	680
Nicholson	M	In late 40s	Hispanic	12	Urban	PreK-8	457
Phelps	F	In 30's	Hispanic	3	Urban	4th-6th	450

Table 2

Process of Coding

Theme	Conceptual Categories	Codes
1. how to become SJ leaders	family influence	• the way I was raised • who I am and how I grew up • my mom has been fighting for SJ as far as I can remember
	mentor influence	• my superintendent mentored me very closely • I have a coach mentor • watch other transformative leaders
	education	• when I was an undergraduate student • going to a public school
2. what do SJ leaders do	modeling	• I am a role model, and made impression on them • I model as often, as much, as possible • I am a servant leader, and will do it first • I model it for teachers
	trust & relationship building	• I trust you, and need you to trust me • I believe relationship • you plant seeds, and are then back away … they are going to spark
	reach out to local community	• I go to churches myself • I want them to know what my vision and goals are for this school • getting the words out to the community
3. challenges	policy	• Zero Tolerance policy
	funding	• 4th year I've been here with the flat funding • "We had to rid lots of teachers"

Findings

How to Become Social Justice Leaders

Six principals who participated in the study worked in urban public schools in an east coast mid-Atlantic state of the United States. They were all from schools that had presented the targeted urban characteristics (see previous section for definition of an urban school). The six schools where they worked were small to mid-size elementary schools ranging from pre-kindergarten to Grade 8 with a student population below 700. All six principals had been in their positions for more than two years, with three identifying as Hispanic and three identifying as African American. Their ages ranged from the early 30s to the late 50s: two principals were in their 30s, three in the 40s, and one in his 50s (see Table 1). There were variations in how they became social justice leaders and what they did to promote social justice in their schools. A summary is shown in Table 3.

Family influence. Research shows that social justice leaders articulate significant traits in their leadership practices: They are committed and persistent, interactive and transformational, inclusive and democratic, rational and caring, and reflective (Furman, 2012). It is thus important to know how the interviewed principals become social justice leaders, and what has influenced them in their lives. Their life stories may vary, but they could provide great insights into how they have grown and matured in fighting against injustice. Principal Decker, who is an African American in his late 40s and has been a principal for three years in an urban school of more than 300 students from kindergarten to Grade 8, referenced his family when asked who has influenced him to be a social justice leader: "My family, my father, and my household. My mentors are my father and my mother … and the way I was raised." Principal Decker came from a family full of educators. His grandfather was a high school principal, his grandmother a first-grade teacher, his father a superintendent in an urban school district, his mother a third-grade teacher, his brother an assistant principal in an urban school in the mid-west, his sister a school nurse, and his wife an assistant superintendent in a suburban school district. He frankly stated in the interview that equity and equality were constantly discussed and debated in his household where he grew up, which had greatly influenced his worldviews.

Table 3

Practices of Social Justice Leaders

Principals (pseudonyms)	Influence	Promoting SJ	Approach
Decker	family, education	modeling, trusting & relationship building, avoid using Zero Tolerance	SJ leadership
Rhodes	family, mentor	modeling	SJ leadership
September	family, mentor	modeling, servant leader, learn names of every student	SJ leadership, servant leadership
Shape	family	Reach out to locals	SJ leadership
Nicholson	mentor, education	modeling, trusting & relationship building	SJ leadership
Phelps	education	trusting & relationship building	SJ leadership, distributed leadership

When asked what were the important aspects that had influenced him to become a social justice advocate, Principal Decker made the following reflection:

> At first, I did not know what I did is called social justice. Then I heard the terminology. Oh, that's who I am! That's what I believe in. Now I can attach a term to it social justice. I believe that everyone should be treated equally. And everybody should be given the same opportunities as everyone else. That's what I do. That's how I was raised.

Principal Rhodes thought that his family had also played an important role in shaping him to become a school leader for social justice. Hispanic and in his early 40s, Rhodes has been in the current principal position for nine years. When asked how he had become social justice leader, Rhodes stated that "I think it's a combination of who I am and how I grew up, and the route I took as a result of my professional learning." Rhodes was raised by a single mom who struggled but worked hard to advance herself. Following his mom as their role model, both Rhodes and his sister went to colleges and succeeded. Unlike some college kids who were carefree and partying, Rhodes said he worked very hard to pay for his college education. He made the following reflection about his experiences:

> I worked hard to get where I've gotten to be, and I can relate myself to a lot of the students in my school who are struggling and might be in some challenging situations as what I experienced. I can just understand them based on who I am and how I grew up.

Principal September, who is an African American in his late 50s, has been a principal for more than 20 years. Working in an elementary, urban school with almost 700 students from kindergarten to Grade 8, September reflected that he had been greatly influenced by the educators in his family. His father was a teacher and a school principal before becoming an urban school superintendent, and his mother also worked at a school. He also had aunts and uncles who were teachers and superintendents. He proudly stated, "It is very natural for me to go down this route to devote myself to my students and to issues related to social injustice."

Having been a science and math teacher for about 16 years, principal Shape started his new journey as an elementary school principal two years ago; he labeled himself as a "new kid in the street." Raised by an African American single mother, Shape considered his mother as his role model. Being a first African American woman in her class, his mother had been fighting for social justice her entire life:

> My mom has been fighting for social justice as far as I can remember and it was always about getting involved in people. I learned from my mom who said you cannot sit back, see things going on but do not say anything or do something. She was really out there on the battlefront. She was always in the communities going to different events and doing different things. She is my true role model.

Shape was certain that his thinking and reflections on social justice were affected by his mother admitting that "It was inbred in me and I had no choice." Because he witnessed how his mother was determined to succeed in getting her education when being the only female African American in her class

Mentor influence. Rhodes thought that his leadership traits had been developed based on the professional training and mentoring he had received over the years. He greatly appreciated the professional development and the valuable guidance he obtained from several mentors he

had worked with over years. In particular, he thought highly of the superintendent in his school district who had served as his mentor for a long time:

> My superintendent mentored me very closely. She helped me identify types of social injustice, how to work with diverse student population, and things that are related to diversity, because it was something that was near and dear to her heart too. She was probably one of the biggest mentors I've had as a professional. So, I think all those pieces kind of came together and made me who I am.

September thought the mentors he had worked with over years in his career have helped him become an effective leader:

> I have a coach mentor for my time management, who comes in once a month. We look at how I am spending my time. To be a social justice leader, I need spend more time in classrooms. Because of the management I was coached by my mentor, I was able to increase the instructional time. I also have a mentor who was a former superintendent. He comes in at least twice a month and works with me. We work a lot on professional development on social justice. I can reach out to her at any time, sharing ideas and seeking input from her regarding issues I face.

Nicholson, who is Hispanic and in his late 40s, has been a principal for more than 12 years. He currently works in a school with almost 500 students from kindergarten to Grade 8. He discussed in the interview the mentors he had worked with and how he imitated them:
One thing that is effective is that I think watching other transformative leaders who display social justice, and you want to simulate those leaders. I have some key mentors such as the dean of the school, or other fellow principals that I had the opportunity to work with, or be mentored by. I tried very hard to follow them.

Education influence. Principals were not only influenced by their families and mentors, the education they received had also played into how they developed themselves from an early age. Nicholson said his views on social justice were changed when he was in college. When asked what influenced him at that time, Nicholson replied:

> I think I would say my experiences when I was an undergraduate student. That's when I was a student activist involved in all students' activities. That's when I can activate things that I believe. So those things are important and you become politically aware of those issues and incorporate into your work.

When public school education was criticized and securitized by many in the United States, principal Phelps's experience in the public schools demonstrated something different and meaningful. Phelps, who is Hispanic and in her 30s and has been working in an urban elementary school of more than 400 students for the past three years, claimed that it was her positive experience in the public schools that helped develop her beliefs on social justice:

> I think my personal experiences as a child going to a public school helps me become who I am. I would say that I did have role models and mentors with whom I had positive experiences at schools when I was young. As a child, some educational experiences were great to me. For example, I had teachers whom I loved, who really made a difference in my educational career. There were other teachers who told me I need work on this or they were never going to accept it.

Realizing the importance of education, principal Decker pursued and received over the years a master's degree and then a doctorate in education. The knowledge and skills he received from his education, as well as reading widely on social justice issues, provided him with a foundation for being a social justice leader. During his teaching career in higher education as an adjunct professor, Decker integrated social justice issues and school leadership into his teaching. He encouraged students to share their life stories and personal experiences, while challenging them with social injustice issues.

All six principals thought that life experiences, education, and family influence had played critical roles in shaping them to become who they were. Family members, mentors, colleagues, and education seemed to have played big roles in shaping the principals' beliefs, values, and points of view. Although some principals considered all three elements to have contributed to their development as social justice leaders while others considered only one element that was influential, all were grateful and appreciative of the experiences that fundamentally changed them.

What Do Social Justice Leaders Do

In general, school practices reflect the values of social justice. All interviewed principals narrated what they had done to promote social justice in their schools. For example: September learned the names of each of his students who were from low income families; Decker knew about the students' home circumstances and tried to avoid using the Zero Tolerance policy as the only option to a student who brought a pair of scissors to school; and Rhodes was reluctant to use the Zero Tolerance policy and refused to kick her students out of school. Five out of six interviewed principals proudly stated that what happened in their schools was unique and different from the schools where principals did not lead for social justice. The below describes what social justice leaders do in their schools.

Modeling. While school leaders set up visions and missions, students and teachers are watching administrators for their actions. Educators teach students to be respectful to adults and to one another, expect students to get along, and hope they learn from each other. Leaders should act the way they require others to act and set a good example. Modeling was one major approach that the principals interviewed embraced, and four out of six principals thought it effective in promoting social justice. Rhodes thought that modeling was a necessity for social justice leaders because he believed "You have to practice what you preach." Decker echoed Rhodes and stated the following:

> I'm a role model ... I saw a student who was already in high school. She was telling me how much she missed me when I left her. I know I make an impression on her ... And that's my job—to make an impression upon them [students]. That's what I want to do. I dress like this every day—suit and tie. So, when they see me looking like this, they tell me "You smell good." I will say I took a bath today and then joked: "Tuesday is bath day and that's why I smell good." They all laughed. I'm just always trying to make an impression on them that they can be like me.

Nicholson tried very hard to use every possible opportunity to demonstrate his belief in social justice through his own actions,

> [I model] as often and as much, as possible. I try to set a good example of my own behaviors ... It is

important to provide people with examples, and continuously remind people that this is not just what I say but what I do … And I think people do evaluate you through your actions and decisions because your actions and decisions are linked to your values.

Modeling reflects how people translate what they say to what they believe. It is even more powerful when people see what their leaders do and how they do it. September had illustrated his modeling through exercising servant leadership as servant leaders always serve people first (Greenleaf, 1970). He believed when principals served their students, they were modeling;

I am a servant leader—I'll do it first—I will go into the cafeteria and wipe tables if necessary and I have done that many, many times. I will sweep floor or mop up—you know—something that spilled or something like that.—So I lead by example. I believe if I'm preaching, all kids can learn from me.

For schools to promote a socially just environment, school principals' knowledge, skills, and dispositions are indicators to teachers and students as to what kinds of values their principals and schools endorse. Rhodes said the following after dealing with a student who was about to be sent back home by his teacher:

So, for me, to model it for teachers and to get them to understand, it's not about sending that kid home. It's about having that conversation, and it's about working with that student to be more resilient. It is about building that relationship with students. And I hope they [teachers] can handle it differently next time. It is also about building relationships with families, so that they [teachers] are comfortable having those conversations with parents.

Trust and relationship building. Building trust is key to the success of an organization, which is especially true in schools, where there is the trust between administrators and teachers, between administrators and students, between teachers and students, between teachers, and between students. To the principals interviewed, trust can be developed through the nature of their interactions with teachers and students. They regarded interpersonal trust and respect as being fundamental for school leadership, and believed trust was crucial when teachers and students were being assured that their principals were committed to help them succeed. For Decker trust was intertwined with relationship building between leaders and followers: "I believe relationships….I trust you, and I need you to trust me." However, trust does not happen overnight. Rather, it's a learning process as Decker described it: "They're learning about me, and I'm learning about them." Here is how one of his teachers came to trust him:

… for example, a teacher did something last week and I was like, why didn't you tell me first before doing it. But I knew why. She didn't trust me. She trusted someone else, but they didn't give her what she wanted. And I told her "you should have told me," and she said, "That's what everyone told me that I should have listened to you." Now she knows she should trust me.

It's apparent that it took some time for this teacher to realize that she should have trusted Decker. If leaders don't make the effort to develop relationships with their teachers, teachers may not buy into their vision and mission. Relationship building was one reoccurring theme during interviews. Nicholson strongly believed that "If we're not building relationships with the students, their families and communities, they're not going to excel socially, emotionally or academically."

The principals in this study described how they had built trust with teachers to create a culture of social justice in their schools. Knowing that they are trusted gives teachers confidence, which in turn empowers teachers to believe they can eventually make a difference in the school. This was the approach Phelps had taken because she believes it takes a village to promote social justice in her school:

> In case of some changes we need, it's so much more effective when it comes from your teachers and your staff. So, you plant the seed, and then back away. You let your teachers go for it. That's how I see it and what I do. It's more effective than me standing up there.

When asked how she managed to get teachers involved, Phelps explained:

> What happens here is that there are growing teachers who are taking opportunities and taking on leadership roles, which would not happen in the past. We have one teacher who led the African American reading last year when she wasn't sure if it's OK. I re-assured her it's even better and go for it. That's exactly what you have to do if you have teachers who are passionate. As a leader, you see a spark after you've planted the seed. Let them go and they're going to make it happen.

Phelps demonstrated her trust in the teachers by empowering them. She gained teachers' trust and made them feel comfortable to contact her without hesitation whenever needed. Clearly, Phelps developed a strong relationship with the teachers in her school.

Reach out to local communities. Along with developing relationships with teachers and students in schools, participating principals also initiated building relationships with local communities to promote social justice. Schools in the United States are generally funded by local communities, and the local taxpayers should know what the school is doing, how their children are doing in school, and how they can get involved. Shape stated several times in the interview that "we need to get out into the community." With an increasing immigrant population from Burma and Vietnam in his district, Shape took the initiative to connect with local churches and activists. He explained how he approached his local community and why he needed to do it:

> I want them to know who I am and what my vision and goals are for this school. Periodically, I'll go out to the churches myself. As a matter of fact, every year our district sets up a schedule and we all go out, which is around in January or February. All administrators get together and go to a local church that's down the road. It's a big church we go there and we visit it every year, just let them know who we are and what we're trying to do.

What the school and community relationship revealed in practice is that the local culture in each community seemed to influence expectations of school leadership; at the same time, principals could use leadership practices to challenge prevailing norms in their communities. Principals in this study realized that getting the word out about the school was equally important to the relationship building, which was a critical step that may help change the culture of a local community. Here is how Shape saw it:

> … so we have a really good relationship in terms of getting the word out to the community about what we're trying to do here. In order for us to have any success we need to have that relationship with the community … because we also try to change the culture and climate of the community.

Challenges for Social Justice Leaders

The interviewed principals had mixed feelings when being asked about how the education policies mandated by the state and federal governments may have affected their work as social justice leaders. While principals admitted they tried very hard to be aligned with those policies, they were also frustrated with top-down mandates and policies that obstruct social justice programs that were already in place in their schools.

Policy and social justice. Principals in this study were concerned that an increasing number of youths are being denied educational opportunities under the Zero Tolerance student discipline policies. They believed that social justice leaders should minimize the use of the Zero Tolerance practices. For example, Decker provided an effective approach on how he worked out strategies when a first-grader brought a pair of scissors to school. He knew that "under the Zero Tolerance policy you must take him out of school no matter what," but here is what he did instead:

> Well, first of all, I need to take into consideration why he did it and where it came from. I have to take those factors into consideration. A little frustrated boy brought a scissors to school. Under the Zero Tolerance I'm supposed to put him out of school. But why did he have it? I'm not sure I had an idea. I need to know more about it.

So, Decker approached the boy and inquired:

> I said to the boy "give it to me, and why did you have it?" The boy then said "I got it from my grandma's house." I said, 'Well, you shouldn't have this, and I'm going to tell your grandma about it." As a first grader, he doesn't even know why he has it and doesn't know what his intent is. But if I have a ninth grader, that would be different. Because I know what his intent is. According to the Zero Tolerance policy, I'm supposed to punish him in a punitive matter. Zero Tolerance type policies would hinder social justice.

Principals indicated that the students' domestic and family circumstances are taken into consideration when they apply education policies to certain students. Student behaviors have long been a universal issue in school, but rigid policies such as the Zero Tolerance may have created situations that could hardly be justified. Thus, Phelps advocated the combination of utilizing such policies with the personal knowledge of a student's family circumstances, and suggested that principals question: "Why are we doing this? Why are we doing it this way? Is it a right thing to do? Is this a best way to do it?" in order to serve students to their best interest and advantage.

Lack of funding. The interviewed principals also noted the scarce funding in school budget, which sometimes jeopardized their efforts to promote social justice. September thought that "the lack of funding had a big challenge" for social justice leaders. Based on his 20-year experiences of being a principal, he voiced his frustration:

> … for instance, we received the flat funding this year—the fourth year that I've been here with the flat funding. With the increasing mandate of providing more services, the fund stays the same. What can we do? We will have to be very creative. I think the funding is an obstruction, and we could not do what we want to do for those students who need it.

Nicholson thought that an adequate number of teachers was crucial to promote students' learning and social justice issues. He was also frustrated by the situation in his school when he had to let some teachers go due to funding:

.... we had to rid [fire] a lot of teachers this year because of funding; I think there were 39 positions that had to be let go. We had to get rid of our RTI program—(Response to Intervention Program),—there were 32 teachers right there—that whole program was gone. That program provided a lot of services for kids who weren't reading on grade level, who need an extra boost in reading. So, funding is an obstruction.

Discussions and Conclusion

The purpose of this study is not to propose one-size-fits-all model for leadership preparation. Instead, it aimed to investigate who are social justice leaders? How did they become social justice leaders? And, what challenges did they face to overcome social injustice in their schools in today's test-orientated environment? Social justice is measured by how it is reflected in actual, day-to-day practice in schools. Black and Hispanic principals in this study defined social justice as being about equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal dignity for every student— regardless of race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, and socioeconomic status. The data of who they were and how they had become social justice leaders presented in this study revealed that both black and Hispanic principals, due to their backgrounds and minority status, were aware of pressing social justice issues in their schools, local communities, and within national context. They possessed comprehensive views and knowledge about social justice issues, and were committed to inclusivity, to bridging the divide, and to speaking up on behalf of students and teachers. Findings from this study are aligned with the literature where scholars have examined social justice and educational equity in schools (Cooper, 2009; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Fuller, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016). For example, Khalifa et al. have observed that social justice leadership is about how to develop, facilitate, and promote an environment where all students are able to learn and to become critical and responsible citizens, irrespective of their geographical origin, family background, and skin color.

In discussion about improving urban education, the main focus is usually on leadership and management, but not as much on diversity (Santamaria, 2013). The findings of this study indicate that both black and Hispanic principals have advocated for all students' needs, demonstrating moral decision making through a social justice lens. The findings align with Fuller's (2012); principals in that study didn't focus solely on the managerial aspects of their leadership but also "by looking beyond that and by enacting the people-oriented values they promote in schools .... Thus mutually respectful relationships might enable the daily celebration of diversity to become embedded in the life of the school" (p.686). While leaders face various issues, they need to develop the necessary capacity to promote and initiate social justice in their schools. It is clear, based upon the narratives of the interviewed principals, their leadership goes beyond the managerial. Social justice leaders are more focused on the common good for all students, on how individual students are treated, and if such actions are beneficial to students and their needs.

Discussions about developing culturally responsive school leadership have been ongoing for quite a long time (Davis, 2002; Khalifa et al., 2016; Johnson, 2006; 2007). Principals for social justice "cultivated trust and gained community support (Howley, Woodrum, Burggess, &

Rhodes, 2009, p.12). Four principals in this study emphasized the importance of building trust and gaining community support, and believed that honest conversations, relationship building, and constant modeling were necessary to achieving either. Both black and Hispanic principals in this study modeled inclusive and socially just ideologies through conversations with students, teachers, parents, and local community, and through their own actions and behaviors in schools.

However, social justice leaders also faced challenges. Black and Hispanic principals were concerned that students in their schools were at risk of losing their education opportunities when certain policies were applied because they reinforced inequalities that had existed for years. They were also concerned that student education in their urban schools may be jeopardized due to a lack of funding, in particularly when funding was cut for innovative programs and the teachers working in those programs were fired. Based upon the analyzed data, black and Hispanic principals in this study demonstrated a variety of ways by which they applied social justice principles and developed approaches to their leadership practice. That practice included the deliberate work toward social justice and education equity.

In light of the findings, this study concludes that with more outcome-driven mandates likely to be imposed by the federal and state governments, the challenges facing school leaders will become more intense. Both black and Hispanic principals will inevitably be involved in mandate-driven processes, and thus their leadership should be recognized and their voice should be heard because they provide a value-laden and multicultural dimension to leadership practice. In essence, their practical experiences, professional ethic, and ethnic background and culture equip them to be effective as social justice leaders.

Next Steps

There are some limitations to this study. First, the sample size of six interviewees is small and the convenience sampling is not representative (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996), and the perspectives from participating principals might not reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences. The attitudes of the subjects should also be noted. The literature shows that "the way in which subjects view a study and their participation in it can create a threat to internal validity" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996, p. 248). In addition, the relevance of this study to the principals' own backgrounds may be crucial to the results. Two of the principals in this study have been in their position for only a couple of years, which may not be enough time to establish a socially just school and practice. While there are important findings from this study, future research may investigate how others—teachers, district administrators, students, and parents—view social justice leadership in schools. While this study was focused on black and Hispanic principals working in elementary, urban schools located in a mid-Atlantic state, future research may also consider examining this group at middle and high urban schools to determine if there are different trends and perceptions among principal leadership at different school levels.

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Note

Dr. Anna Q. Sun is an Assistant Professor of the Department of Educational Services and Leadership in the College of Education at Rowan University in New Jersey, United States. Her ongoing scholarship and research include educational leadership and policies, social justice in schools, online education for educational leadership preparation programs, and international development and studies in education. Dr. Sun received her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Administration and the Ed. M. in General Education with a specialization in Comparative and Global Studies in Education from the State University of New York at Buffalo (SUNY), and a B.A. in Teaching English as Second Language from Tianjin Teachers' College in China. Contact: sunq@rowan.edu