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## Introduction: Exploring Socio-Political Issues in Education

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# INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION

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*What is social justice? How can we understand it?*

In my second year as a Principal, I was invited to be a member of the Institute for Educational Inquiry, led by renowned scholar John Goodlad. The group met approximately every six weeks for deep discussions about democracy and public schools. On the first day of the Institute, I sat with 12 other people in a small room set up with tables in a square in Seattle, Washington. Undoubtedly I was the youngest, and the person in the room with the least amount of education. The group included experienced professors and a single school board member from a large school district in St. Louis, Missouri.

The invitation to this was a bit of a surprise to me. I was not overwhelmed with my company; after all, I was leading a rural public school of over 500 students. John opened the conversation, and it was silent. No one seemed to want to say anything. His question was about diversity. The silence continued for what seemed like hours, and I finally spoke up. "I think we are all mostly the same as human beings. The differences we have are only color, finances, religion, and where we live. Otherwise, we are the same." I was confident that I would at least start the conversation. A beautiful black woman, a professor at New York University, leaned up in her chair and looked at me. I could see tears in her eyes. I heard some deep breaths indicating some of the group were aghast with my comment. I sunk into my chair with a lump in my throat. I did not know what I said that caused the room to be aghast and followed with silence. Finally, John spoke up. "What do the rest of you think?" The conversation began. No one said anything to criticize me but the conversation took me to a new place. I have never forgotten the feeling that came from that conversation and my life has been different since that day. Certainly, my school leadership program did not prepare me for understanding social justice at a level that was needed to provide leadership in public schools.

I grew up in a small community, was a member of a Lutheran Church, and was unfamiliar with people who looked different from me. Growing up, I heard awful terms to describe people who were different. As a young child, I knew that this was unkind, and I did not see myself as being "better" than others are, but I know that some people had a sense of superiority because they were white Christians. The church I grew up in seemed compassionate to those in other countries who were struggling but not to those in our community. It seemed that anytime someone who was different joined a worship service, the congregation was uncomfortable, and the adults avoided the new person as though they were carrying some contagious disease.

My exposure to difference began to change when I went to college but, only slightly. There were a few black students on campus; most had grown up on farms or in small communities. The black students were mostly athletes who were recruited to attend the college. I attended the same college to earn my Master's degree in Educational Administration. The group of peers mostly looked the same. They were white males. I had three close female friends in the program. During my coursework, I do not recall learning about diversity. I was, however, personally engaged in developing an understanding of the rights of women. I knew that being a female principal was going to be difficult and I felt on my own to prepare myself.

My naivete did not stop me from confronting a guest speaker, a superintendent of a small rural school, who came to my school law class to talk about the lawsuit that he was currently facing. He had written a letter to the parent of a young girl to tell her that since her daughter was pregnant, she would have to give up her spot on the cheerleading squad. I was frustrated. When he said, "he couldn't help that she had went out and got herself pregnant," I came unglued. I jumped up from my chair in the front of the class, looked at the superintendent and said, "girls do not go out and get themselves pregnant." Class adjourned, and my comment was never again addressed.

Working on my doctoral degree at the University of Wyoming, as a female I was again in the minority. There were three women, and the remaining were white men. Five of the white men, however, were practicing Mormons, a religious minority by some terms. The room was always divided; the three women on one side, the five practicing Mormons and the remaining white men on the other. The scenario that I experienced in Seattle was repeated by a white man, who did not think there were differences in men and women and our leadership challenges would be no different. I had a lump in my throat and I could not speak. I had been through challenges as a principal that I clearly faced because I was a female. He assumed, as I did at the Institute for Educational Inquiry, that what he saw through his own life experience was the same for everyone. Having the tables turned helped me understand what happens if leaders do not take the time to understand the uniqueness of each life experience through the eyes of the students they serve. My professor, a former superintendent, was well aware of the conflict and the next time we met, we addressed the issue of difference head on. I was relieved by his cultural sensitivity and continue to have the utmost respect for him and his ability to uncover the insensitivity of some members of the class. Our group was not homogeneous, and we had much to learn about each other.

Now I am well aware of my ignorance and have an understanding of the obliviousness of others. In my own journey, I recognized difference but at the time, honestly, I didn't realize how very inadequate my understanding of difference was. I came face-to-face with my lack of understanding of the force of my predominate culture when I made a comment in the Goodland Institute that caused tears and an aghast reaction. Going back to a small conservative community, I realized that I had gained new information that others did not have and unfortunately, were not interested in hearing, or were often culturally destructive or at least culturally blind.

Educators who had not learned to be aware, as I had not when I first started my career as a school leader, will rely upon their own experiences. Awareness of diversity and the ability to put that knowledge into practice is an action that is critical for school leadership. Educational leaders need the opportunity to engage in conversations about social justice in order to solidify their own beliefs and address their own biases. Additionally, they need authentic practice in culturally diverse settings (Barnes, 2006; Guerra & Nelson, 2007; Howard & Del Arosaior, 2000).

Social justice is broad, and school leaders need to understand difference and the challenges that accompany those differences. They need this knowledge to influence teachers in their schools and respond to children through a lens that illuminates the influence of culture and life experiences. Theoharis (2007) said it best when he argued that school leaders who lead with intention of being cognizant of social justice make the issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision.

Attention to social justice is more critical and encompasses more people than in the past. A deeper understanding is needed to understand and support Muslim families, indigenous families, and rural families living in deep poverty and others who have previously been forgotten. Leadership in schools can influence the next generation and shape its understanding of others through deliberate, conscientious practice.

It has been an honor to prepare this special issue, Exploring Socio-Political Issues in Education. It is my pleasure to share the knowledge brought forward in the issue of the *Journal of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership in Education*. This issue contains 13 wonderful articles that address the topic of the special issue in a variety of ways.

*Understanding School and Community Contexts: Leading for success along the Texas-Mexico Border* was the first topic in our social justice work. Thank you Erin D. Atwood of Texas Christian University for sharing this important work. Enacting social justice leadership requires that school leaders understand social, political, and historic contexts of the communities and schools where they lead. This paper examines the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission metropolitan area and highlights some of these issues within this particular community along the Texas-Mexico border. This description of the area provides understanding of the uniqueness of borderlands contexts and allows us to understand better the social justice work of one local school district in leading for success in this context.

Our two colleagues from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Heidi R. Bacon and Lavern Byfield, write *Theorizing Social Justice: Funds of Knowledge as Praxis*. The current socio-political landscape and proliferation of hate speak are fueling a growing sense of urgency to redress educational inequities and reclaim education. In this reflective article, they discuss their experiences as teacher educators in the rural Midwest who incorporate critical approaches to language and literacy into their repertoires of practice. They aim to advance the conversation beyond the notion of social justice in theory to what social justice can look like in praxis. They argue for social justice education grounded in a funds of knowledge approach to untether social justice from overly broad or narrow representations and to locate equity and justice at the core of responsive pedagogy.

*The Missing Links: Enhancing Anti-Bias Education with Anti-Racist Education* was written by Kerry-Ann Escayq from the University of Nebraska Omaha. Kerry-Ann addresses social justice in early childhood and how it has been conceptualized to include the anti-bias curriculum, and to a lesser extent, anti-racist education. She addresses how anti-bias education falls short pedagogically and conceptually. Within these pages, she provides practical suggestions on how to align early childhood classroom practices with anti-racist principles.

We have much to learn about ourselves as we consider what we don't know about social justice. Janice M. Garnett and Germaine W. Huber of the University of Nebraska Omaha address what we know and don't know through their article, *What is Your Social Justice IQ: Leading Social Justice in Higher Education*. Their important framework helps us learn to actively address the dynamics of oppression, privilege, and isms. They share how leaders must adapt using their intelligence, emotional, and social justice quotient lenses to be successful in today's society.

The next article, presented by Kelly Gomez-Johnson, Anne E. Karabon, and Derrick Nero from the University of Nebraska Omaha, is *Examining Culturally Responsive Understanding within an Undergraduate Teacher Education program*. Gomez-Johnson, Karabon, and Nero examined how a group of elementary and secondary preservice teachers engaged in understanding "culture" and "culturally-related experiences, emotions, and perspectives" contribute to the overall understanding of cultural competency training in teacher education.

Qualitative research is the approach used to help us understand the impact that poverty and education have on school readiness. Zoyah Kinkead-Clark, our colleague from The University of West Indies, Mona, shares how poverty is a barrier to children's readiness for school in her article, *School Readiness at the Nexus between Poverty and Education: the Insights of two Jamaican Teachers*. Using two Jamaican early childhood teachers to illuminate the findings, this piece sought to gain insight into teachers' perspectives about supporting children who come from impoverished circumstances to be ready for primary school. Thank you, Zoyah for sharing your wisdom.

Rick Marlatt of New Mexico State University—Main Campus writes about diversity in texts in his important piece. Abstract Literature study in the 21st Century should be characterized by the inclusion of global texts that afford diverse students the opportunity to engage in their literacy development through and alongside authors, characters, and storylines that represent their own linguistic and cultural traditions. In this narrative analysis, he reflects on the importance of equity-driven literature study from his perspective as a teacher educator at a Hispanic-Serving Institution in the Southwestern United States. He argues that offering multicultural literature with critical literacy components is a culturally responsive choice that invites students from all backgrounds to participate in the academic community. Thank you, Rick, for sharing *Toward Diversity in Texts: Using Global Literature to Cultivate Critical Perspectives*.

James Marshall of San Diego State University and his colleague, Rachel Miller of San Diego Unified School District, share how to build visible allies for safe and supportive environments. This is done through systemic implementation of the OUT for Safe Schools Campaign. Contemporary data illustrate a greater risk in school environments for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, or queer (LGBTQ). Verbal or physical harassment, and feeling generally unsafe in school, can lead to higher absence rates and lower levels of academic performance for these youth when compared to their heterosexual peers. School districts across the country are responding to this challenge. This article profiles an implementation of the OUT for Safe Schools Campaign which is designed to provide visible adult allies for LGBTQ students throughout a school district. It highlights the systemic nature of both the OUT for Safe Schools Campaign, as well as its implementation within a carefully designed complement of synergistic programs and policies within the San Diego Unified School District. Qualitative examples of impact are detailed, along with long-term plans for evaluating the campaign's effectiveness over time. We are proud to present the important work of Marshall and Miller: *How to Build Visible Allies for Safe and Supportive Environments: Through Systemic Implementation of the OUT for Safe School Campaign*.

The next piece in our special issue, by Ferial Pearson of the University of Nebraska Omaha and Ann Hunter-Pirtle of Stand for Schools, comes in the form of a toolkit. One of the defining features of public schools is that they operate at the will of the people, with public oversight from elected school boards. In addition to being free and open to all, free from religious affiliation, and promoting civic understanding and participation, much of what makes public schools public happens through the democratic process. Pearson and Hunter-Pirtle note that many teachers are so overworked and overwhelmed - rightly focused on their classrooms and their own students' day-to-day struggles - that it is not easy for them to engage and advocate for themselves and their students in the ways they would like, even though their input is sorely needed. They hope to demystify the policy process to help educators influence public conversations about education that too often happen without their participation, knowing that many educators who want to engage in policy discussions need tools to help them do so as part of their already overwhelming schedules. They begin with a brief overview of the U.S. school privatization movement to provide context for why educator advocacy is so needed. Then they offer experiences from their state of Nebraska, one of

three states with no school privatization policies on the books. Finally, they give educators ideas of how to get involved where they live. Thank you Ferial and Ann for *In Defense Of Public Schools: A Toolkit From The Midwest*.

Heidi T. Penke, Millard Public Schools, shares the history of ELL students and the challenges they are faced with in an educational setting. She shares her research on literacy development and language acquisition for the English Language Learner. Literacy development is discussed as educators need to be aware of its importance of for English Language Learners. Thank you, Heidi, for sharing *ELL Students: Literacy Development and Language Development*.

In *Exploring Solidarity in Teacher Learning and Activism for Social Justice*, Rebecca Rogers of the University of Missouri-St. Louis and Luzkarime Calle Díaz of the Universidad del Norte, Colombia share how teaching and organizing for social justice can be an alienating experience in the current educational climate. Being a part of a network of educators can help create community, support, and solidarity. Solidarity is a socio-political topic that has been understudied and, they argue, holds great potential for understanding the transformative power of educators organizing for social justice. In the paper, they draw on examples of narratives of solidarity by educators who contributed to a social justice event organized by a grassroots educator network. Through the narratives of a community organizer, a classroom educator, and a community-based arts educator, they highlight the themes and discursive resources that were typical expressions of solidarity across the data set. They argue that being able to recognize solidarity as a process and practice can lead to a more strategic approach to social justice movement building for schools and communities.

Dr. Adam Sempek of the University of Nebraska Omaha has much to share on a critical topic in his article, *English Language Learners and Special Education*. Language acquisition is not a cut and dried process, nor is the evaluation of English Language Learners. Adam shares the many factors that go into decisions that must be understood, and considered, by educators when it comes to working with English Language Learners.

International students are the topic of our final article. Taiwo O. Soetan of Red River College and David Hoa K. Nguyen of the University of Texas at San Antonio teach us about employment prospects and the socio-political implications for colleges and universities. While the increase of the international student population has been a significant issue on a global scale, it is rarely discussed in the context of two border countries in North America – the U.S. and Canada. In addition, attention to skilled migration as a policy preference has increased among governments in an effort to address labor market gaps arising from economic shifts and structural aging. Governments invent a list of desirable characteristics in international students, such as education, age, language, and work experience, that allows them to be able to apply for employment after graduation. Countries like Canada and Australia are able to retain these students after graduation, while more restrictive U.S. policies have implications on international student decision-making and on American institutions of higher education. This article explores the impact of immigration policies on higher education institutions' efforts in the U.S. and Canada in attracting international students to their campuses as a result of national immigration laws and priorities. Thank you Taiwo and David for sharing your work: *Employment Prospects of International Students in the U.S. and Canada: Socio-political Implications for Colleges and Universities*.

We think you will enjoy our Special Issue, Exploring Socio-Political Issues in Education. The variety presented in this special issue is refreshing and thoughtful. Thank you!

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