

Chapter 12 Transcending the personal and political: Provocations

Michele Morrison, Ross Notman, and Rachel McNae

Each case study in this book stands alone. The leaders portrayed in these narratives, and the authors who collaborated with them in the re-storying of their lived experience, bring unique worldviews and particular theoretical lenses to bear. It is appropriate that readers should do the same. In this concluding chapter we seek not to prescribe meaning nor constrain interpretation but to highlight three emerging themes: complexity, agency, and action. Rather than summarise each case we select examples that evoke and illustrate the points we wish to make. We consider the implications of complexity, agency, and action for practitioners, policy makers, and the education profession (pre- and in-service). Finally, we conclude with a series of provocations that we hope will ignite passionate debate, professional commitment, and the political will necessary to reach national consensus over what we mean by social justice and how we best go about achieving this.

Complexity

Byrnes' (1998) definition of complexity as "the domain between linearly determined order and indeterminate chaos" (p. 1) will bring more than a wry smile to leaders charged with meeting the needs of

those least well served by the education system and turning around less than optimal performance indicators. The leaders in this book are well acquainted with complexity and a tendency for the spaces between to resemble more closely the edge of chaos than a semblance of order. Complexity arises because “outcomes are determined not by single causes but by multiple causes ... [which] may, and usually do, interact in a non-additive fashion” (Byrne, 1998, p. 20). This necessitates a move away from reductionist approaches to change, towards holism and acknowledgement that the whole is often greater than the sum of its constituent parts.

Complexity is inherent in the different education sectors in which leaders work, and in the individual settings located within these sectors. Spanning early childhood, primary, intermediate, and secondary sectors, the settings represented in this book include not-for-profit and for-profit kindergartens and early childhood centres, low- and high-decile schools, and faith-based and secular organisations that are variously thriving, striving, and sometimes barely surviving. Two of the three early childhood settings, for example, are situated in areas of social disadvantage, and two faced insolvency and imminent closure. The assumption that the two settings possess these features in common is an erroneous one, however.

Immersed in distinctively local settings, leaders face many opportunities and challenges that are context-specific. That is, they arise from the particular attributes of, and circumstances facing, the school or organisation. These include factors that are primarily endogenous to the school or organisation such as student roll composition, staffing profile, material resources, organisational history, and culture; and those that are exogenous in origin such as national education policy, accountability regimes, and geographic, demographic, and economic variables. Leaders themselves constitute an integral dimension of context. Their personal and professional biographies shape leadership habitus, espoused commitment to discourses of equity and justice, and the ability to enact these in their daily work. Taken as a whole, then, context describes the idiosyncratic mix of external environmental conditions, internal organisation dynamics, and leaders’ prior experiences/backgrounds that together constitute fluid, relational leadership environments (Morrison, 2017).

Leaders bear ultimate responsibility for discerning context, determining which contextual factors are of pressing as opposed to peripheral concern, and responding accordingly. The merger of the local intermediate and primary schools into a full primary school (Years 1–8) made forging a new organisational identity Whetu Cormick's immediate priority. Sheralyn Cook inherited a school under statutory management with fractured relationships and significant debt, while organisational stability lent support to Penny Deane's focus on democratic pedagogy and the authentic application of 'real-life' learning in cross-cultural communities of difference. For Lisa Morresey, the annual turnover of half her intermediate school roll intensified an urgent need to address anti-social student behaviour and create safe learning contexts.

The cases in this book also demonstrate the competing priorities that add complexity to change processes. For Heidi Greenwood, one of the greatest tensions lay in endeavouring to remain financially viable whilst holding fast to values underpinning opening hours. Steve Berezowski grappled with the potential for individual and collective conceptions of social justice to inflict injustice. Reconciling these dilemmas requires leaders to live with ambiguity and juggle multiple rights.

The nature of home-centre/school relationships adds another dimension to complexity. In some settings, relationships are such that the education provider becomes a central locus of community, whilst in others it lies on the periphery at best and is estranged at worst. Healthy home-centre/school partnerships thus require leaders to reach out and communities to reach in. Sonya Jephson and Caryll Resink saw the potential for their early childhood settings to meet the multiple needs of children and their parents, providing the latter not only with a point of connection but also opportunities to develop personally and professionally.

In Wairoa, iwi agitation for the school to join Te Kotahitanga met sympathetic reception in a principal willing to countenance a positive counter-narrative, to be guided by the community, and to engage in authentic power sharing. This example serves to illustrate the conscientisation and resistance arising from multiple educational realities and adds yet another layer to complexity. Honouring Treaty obligations involves more than surface manifestations of bi-culturalism in curriculum and organisational rituals; it requires culturally responsive

leadership and pedagogies that enhance distributive, cultural, and associational justice.

Agency

The impetus for change among these social justice and high-needs cases has multiple points of origin. One motivating factor for change came in the form of previous lived experience on the part of the school principal. For Robyn Curry, it was a strong background in special needs work that drove her leadership directions. In the case of Steve Berezowski, it was a number of key experiences in his personal biography that shaped his later commitment to social justice practice (for example, his working class origins; early friendships with Māori families; and a particular work ethic directed towards helping families with financial disadvantage).

An overarching impetus for all case study leaders lay in their sense of moral purpose, a concept summarised by Bezzina and Tuana (2014) as “the commitment to ends that express underlying values and ethics” (p. 283). A clear moral vision was a key factor behind Heidi Greenwood’s success in re-vitalising her early childhood centre. Her underlying concern for children with special needs was a driving force in doing what was right in the interests of her students. It was this shared vision that sustained centre staff in challenging times as they worked reduced hours with zero wage increases. Similarly, Penny Deane’s “immense moral fortitude” and deep-level understanding of her students enabled her to lead from that place. Sonya Jephson, too, had strong moral convictions about how she would lead her early childhood centre in a holistic and multifaceted way (for example, her refusal to engage in any form of deficit thinking about her disadvantaged children; her willingness to meet the human needs of parents; and her preparedness to take up a significant advocacy role for children and their families). This call to advocacy in the face of perceived social injustice takes a moral position by speaking on behalf of those people whose voices are not always heard. This public action is outlined by London (2008), whereby:

Advocates speak out and take action to effect change, often overcoming resistance. They increase awareness of an issue and generate positive attitudes. They recruit and retain volunteers who become advocates themselves. They influence government policies.

They deliver services, raise money, and build organizations to sustain their advocacy goals. (p. 314)

This advocacy role is driven by an inherent passion that “seeks to change people’s values and beliefs from self-centred to other-centred” (Theoharis, 2008, p. 16). It is also underpinned by the fusion of leaders’ personal and professional values where there is often little that separates the person of the principal from their leadership practice. Allied to these belief systems of leadership in social justice settings is the concept of leading from a position of hope. Sheralyn Cook sees positives in this leadership perspective for her students: “You have the opportunity to do whatever you want to do, and be whatever you want.” This stance links well to the field of positive psychology where agency or motivation is the belief about one’s personal capacity to reach desired goals (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). Nowhere has this been better illustrated in New Zealand than in Christchurch school leaders’ resilience and sense of hope following the trauma of the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes (Notman, 2015).

Action: Leadership strategies for success

Successful strategies employed by school and early childhood leaders centred around three thematic areas: parental involvement, leadership professional practice, and personal dispositions.

One of the central findings about leading for social justice in high-needs educational environments was the consistently high priority given by leaders to encouraging and sustaining parental involvement in their child’s education. This finding is reflected in Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd’s (2009) seminal work that advocates for the influential role played by parents and whānau in helping to improve students’ learning outcomes. As an example, Sonya Jephson is one such leader who maintains a high level of parental involvement in her early childhood centre. She accomplishes this by means of information events, access to children’s learning books via the internet, and a community-wide Christmas party to celebrate the year’s end. In what could be described as a symbiotic relationship with her parents and community, Sonya enhances this relationship by addressing parents’ social and emotional needs; offering daily access to each child’s learning; and sharing her suggestions for parenting skills or behaviour management techniques

to be used at home. In similar fashion, Wairoa College leaders engaged with their Māori elders, establishing whānau-like relationships with their community, while Steve Berezowski fosters student cultural identity by links with the local marae and by using community elders as a teaching resource.

The area of leadership professional practice reveals key strategies employed by leaders and teachers who work in challenging environments. Collaborative work practices with their staff, together with the process of distributed leadership, is a common approach. Heidi Greenwood made full use of shared curriculum leadership responsibilities, while Robyn Curry re-established roles for her senior leadership team based on individual strengths in curriculum and in special-needs/student behaviour. Knowing how and when to adapt the pace of change was another leadership strategy, ably demonstrated by Whetu Cormick in his merged school. His staff commented: “He’s very aware of staff dynamics and staff capability, and knowing when to put the accelerator down and when to put the brakes on.”

Another uniformly shared strategy was that of leadership reflective practice. This was typified in Lisa Morresey’s case study in which she blended reflective practice and emotionally intelligent leadership, “where the leader is readily able to recognise their own and other people’s emotions in order to use this awareness to guide their leadership thinking and behaviour.” In a number of cases, the concept of emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) is a major part in the success of these New Zealand leaders. They have an ability to ‘read’ people in a social justice and high-needs context, and understand the impact of working alongside them instead of forcing an accommodation to suit their preferred leadership approach.

The use of longer term strategic thinking was an effective strategy used by Sheralyn Cook at her Waikato school. Here, she used strategic goal setting and a shared vision with staff to support school-wide decision making. Other effective leadership strategies across the 10 cases included having honest and respectful conversations about difficult issues; building a supportive school/centre culture; and growing teachers’ pedagogical skills and leadership capacity. This latter strategy was exemplified at Wairoa College where school leaders prioritised tikanga Māori and resourced full-time te reo teachers. In addition, Penny Deane

and Steve Berezowski took the theme of social justice directly to their students by developing opportunities for them to safely explore and question issues of injustice in their own school context.

The case studies revealed personal dispositions that were associated with leading for social justice. These personal characteristics included being passionate about teaching and learning; treating adults and children with respect; exhibiting an authentic ethic of care that resulted in students' experience of school as a safe and secure place. They also demonstrated leadership courage, as in Sheralyn Cook's case, where she was required to "make decisions that, for some, might seem unfair, but it was the right thing for them at a particular time." Finally, there was a fundamental belief among all the school and early childhood leaders that students could improve their learning capabilities. As Robyn Curry asserted: "I so believe in these kids—they have so much potential." And it appears a unifying objective for leading a high-needs school or centre in a socially just environment that case study leaders fought vehemently to guard against the loss of human potential among their students.

Future thinking, implications, and provocations

Leading in, through, and for social justice

One of the aims of this book was to share the stories of educational leaders who lead for social justice across and within a variety of contexts. In doing so, it was our hope that some enduring ideals and understandings might be synthesised. While this has been the case, what has also emerged is recognition of the complexities shaping each educational leader's response and commitment to leadership for social justice. The rich accounts of leading for social justice and working in high-needs settings, along with the diverse strategies of engagement shared in this book, contribute to an evolving tapestry of understandings. Given the contextual and highly personal nature of each leader's response, what learning can we draw from these cases for those tasked with the responsibility of leading in educational settings? With an eye to the future, what are the implications for educational leaders and how might you, as a reader of these cases, draw inspiration, hope, and a sense of activism to lead for social justice yourself?

Recognising the complexity of social justice leadership

Just as the introductory chapter illustrated broad and varied definitions of social justice, it has become clear that simply defining and illustrating socially just leadership is not enough for sustained socially just leadership. The experiences of these leaders illustrate the complex moments in which they found themselves; where responses and actions were demanded in often extremely challenging circumstances, and deep-seated values and moral stances were continually challenged. Working from a socio-ecological perspective (Ministry of Education, 1999), educational leaders can explore, notice, and become attuned to the complex interrelationships and interdependence that exists between themselves, others, and society.

It has become apparent across each of these cases that the intersectionality of experiences (Crenshaw, 1989), which continue to sustain and support a form of resilience founded on a sense of moral purpose, are frequently bound by often-static structures that fail in their responsiveness and relational attributes to address aspects of injustice. Day (2014) argues that:

diverse and sometimes competing demands of policy, local context and educational values not only challenge the breadth of qualities, knowledge and skills possessed by leaders, but also test their adaptivity, flexibility and intellectual, and emotional energy on an everyday basis. (p. 638)

The educational leaders in this book have illustrated that leading for social justice in high-needs contexts transcends traditional leadership perspectives, as they deliberately work to shift power and address inequality at multiple levels. Consequently, implications arise for those involved in education in its broadest sense, whether at the 'chalk-face', in the playground, around the boardroom table, or preparing teachers and leaders for challenging environments. When examining these implications, the contextual nuances cannot be ignored.

Implications for leaders

Leading for social justice happens within and across relationships. Re-establishing, reforming, and sometimes rupturing relationships can be central to the work of a socially just leader. Understanding and sometimes brokering existing and historical relationships from within

the context can provide insight into some of the enabling or limiting factors that continue to perpetuate unfairness and inequality. Knowing and working within and across these relationships can play a key role in forming and implementing initiatives (for example, exploring ways to gain community support for raising student achievement).

Leading for social justice requires time. Often this element is in opposition to the pressured, fast-paced decision making that schools and centres demand of leaders. In the ‘busyness of the business’, time presents itself as a precious commodity in educational contexts. In order to sustain leading with socially just intent over time, it becomes essential to carve out space for personal and professional reflection and decision making. Taking time to search for information and explore options in decision-making processes, along with embarking on consultation, is important as sometimes the most obvious pathway ahead is not the most appropriate. In a job that demands so much, ensuring a commitment to personal wellbeing is important. This means surfacing, reflecting upon, and making sense of the affective, emotional, personal, and physical demands of the work, as well as seeking an alignment between personal values, moral purpose, and actions (McNae, 2017).

Implications for policy development

Encouraging educational leaders, teachers, students, families, researchers, and policy makers to participate in a national conversation about socially just leadership would elicit and illuminate multiple perspectives. This can help to craft a national definition of social justice in education, which can be aligned to a more inclusive achievement agenda informed by research and lived experiences. The development of policy that connects schools to their communities, promotes inter-agency support, and reflects upon challenging structures that perpetuate inequality (for example, the perceived stigma attached to the school decile rating system), can create shifts in discourses about the shape of success and achievement. Conversely, acknowledging what is already working within school and communities is essential, together with supporting the continued resourcing of educational initiatives known to work.

Implications for researchers

Researchers play a key role in exploring the complex intricacies of social justice in education. In examining global discourses and specific

contextual elements, researchers can propose research agendas that attend to areas that have been overlooked, marginalised, or excluded from current educational debates. Using a lens of social justice to refocus educational and political agendas on the core business of education, researchers have an obligation to explore unjust practices and interrogate the current landscape of socially just educational leadership. By conducting research with approaches that align with social justice elements (for example, narrative inquiry, voice, ethnography, and case study) researchers can shift from a focus on skills and traits to exploring and embracing the human side of leadership.

Implications for pre-service education providers

Pre-service teachers are an accessible point of contact and an influential unit for change. Working with pre-service teachers to surface morals and values is a critical step in the formation of teacher identity. If teachers are given the opportunity to explore the concept of social justice, learn the skills needed to interrogate contexts and stereotypes, and develop strategies for enhancing resilience, while building a sense of activism, this group of future educators will likely become more attuned to injustice. It is this group of teachers who will plan and lead activist interventions when they encounter injustice.

Recent rapid expansion in early childhood education provision has seen newly qualified teachers taking up leadership roles without adequate experience or preparation. This suggests that the inclusion of leadership and management learning in pre-service programmes is necessary, not just for organisational sustainability but for personal wellbeing and socially just outcomes as well.

Implications for leadership preparation

The importance of uncovering personal values, life narratives, and moral underpinnings cannot be emphasised enough. In order to build leadership understanding and develop new knowledge about leading for social justice, recognising, understanding, and validating justice in its more diverse forms is essential. Once identified, issues of injustice can be more readily addressed. As such, preparing leaders for the holistic nature of their job becomes paramount. This includes developing the abilities to attend to the social, cognitive, and behavioural needs of young children, along with the parenting needs of adults, creating

new awareness of what it means to be a learner in a particular context. Supporting aspiring leaders to become attuned to issues of social justice and injustice in its multiple guises is an essential part of their leadership formation.

Provocations

To conclude this chapter, we share a number of provocations that reflect the complex and frequently under-theorised aspects of the work performed by educational leaders in the name of social justice. Based on the high-needs and social justice contexts shared in this book, the following reflective provocations are offered.

Reflecting on freedoms and opportunities for educational leaders

The work of the educational leaders in this book encourages us to reflect upon the opportunities and freedoms teachers and leaders have to create contexts, cultures, and curricula that pay attention to and address issues of social justice. It becomes clear that social justice leaders are deliberate and intentional in supporting and enhancing the wellbeing of others. This being the case:

- How might educational leaders examine their own contexts from the inside?
- What role might a critical friend play in drawing attention to everyday happenings and disrupting patterns of thinking and behaviour?
- What opportunities do educational leaders have to reflect upon their emotive responses to leadership? How do leaders maintain emotional resilience in the face of challenging situations?
- How might leadership in educational settings create space for affective responses as well as policy responses?
- In what ways are principals supported in their work as they lead a school from a crisis situation to one that is flourishing?
- What actions do leaders of high-needs workplaces take in order to advocate for families, as well as take care of children's educational needs?
- What is the interplay between personal values and actions when responding to policy initiatives aimed at particular changes, that may exclude and marginalise further students?

- How do educational leaders manage the tensions between policy-driven decisions and their own personal values?

Reflecting on possibilities and responsibilities

Embarking on leadership for socially just outcomes is demanding. However, as contributions in this book have indicated, it is extremely rewarding and, of course, necessary. This work and its associated value can take various shapes and forms. Most importantly, whatever the action(s), the work must place children/students and their wellbeing at the centre. Teachers have a critical role to play in this regard:

- How might teachers design, integrate, and implement curricula from a position of social justice, so that learning experiences are more enduring, authentic, and meaningful?
- In what ways do teachers model leading for social justice in the classroom and what is the impact of this?
- Who is responsible for initiating conversations about social justice within the school and beyond the school?
- What role can students play in addressing the tension/disjuncture between curriculum demands, testing outcomes, and real-life experiences?
- To what extent are teachers accountable for raising levels of student performance? How can other participants assist in a child's learning (for example, parents and government agencies)?

Reflecting on context and cultures

Developing an awareness of socio-cultural and historical discourses requires courage and resilience. Having a firm understanding of contextual influences—the things that constrain or support leadership for social justice—can support educational leaders in their decision making and reflective practices:

- How do you respond to the contention that the less powerful and less privileged best understand how to transform oppressive relationships?
- What does it mean to be a Treaty partner in education?
- How do we ensure that success today does not compromise success in the future?

- Conversely, how do we ensure that benefit for future student cohorts does not come at the expense of current students?

Future research possibilities

Providing opportunities for individual teachers and leaders to develop and enhance their understandings about social justice is critical. Beginning and drawing attention to a national conversation about social justice, while simultaneously generating dialogue within local contexts, could support this learning. Further research exploring what this conversation might look like at a national level would be useful. Who would be involved in this conversation? Whose voices get heard in the cacophonous calls for support, aid, and attention; and perhaps more importantly, where are the silences? What is not being said?

Interestingly, few of the case study participants in this book recognised their educational leadership preparation programmes as sources of learning or support in their work for social justice. Investigation into the ways educational leaders are prepared for their roles, along with an in-depth exploration of the content, access to, and evaluations of educational leadership programmes, should be seen as valuable.

The core business of most social justice work revolves around students. There is a need to examine social justice work/leadership from the *perspective of students*. What does this work mean for them? What might they learn through their involvement? Future research might include uncovering student perspectives of social justice from within their school settings and exploring notions of activism and agency through the actions of the students themselves.

There is also a need for educational leaders to become attuned to and better understand the key intersecting characteristics of *injustice* that impact on young people, staff, and the wider community. Research that examines these characteristics could provide valuable insight into broader contextual debates about social justice leadership.

Further research into global discourses about social justice, combined with greater attention to a diverse array of cultural contexts, could open up further conversations about social justice which are more culturally responsive and culturally located. Those working in educational leadership may then be better positioned to understand how broader physical, social, political, economic, ethical, and cultural

contexts enable and constrain their efforts to enhance social justice and meet high needs in schools and centres.

Considering how and when this research might take place becomes central to this research agenda. Already, a sense of urgency permeates communities where injustice surfaces. Noticing and responding to this urgency become critical elements of an educational leader's and a researcher's way of working. However, efforts to illuminate and investigate issues of social justice in high-needs settings must be socially just in themselves, seeking to create change where possible, in ways that recognise context, are sensitive to individual needs and, above all, are initiated and enacted for the right reasons. Research methodologies that value and embody spaces for the personal narratives of leaders also support multiple realities and allow the complexities of this work to be examined deeply and carefully.

Concluding remarks

The cases shared in this book create a starting point for what we anticipate will be many new conversations about leading for social justice in high-needs contexts. It is our hope that insights into the lived experiences of these leaders provide an opportunity for readers to reflect upon their own contexts and valuable leadership endeavours. It may be that these insights support the validation of experiences infrequently talked about and assist leaders to surface silences and disrupt systems and discourses that continue to perpetuate injustice in the workplace.

Traversing the delicate balance of diversity and unity, community and individual needs, along with conceptions of personal and political action, the complexities associated with such work are less obvious. The responsibility for educational leaders to remain attuned, reflective, and engaged in local, national, and international conversations about leading for social justice is crucial to meeting current and future challenges. This book comes with the hope of triggering a call for action that focuses our attention on the humanity within leadership, and what it means to lead in socially just ways, for socially just outcomes for every student.

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her research investigated principal perceptions of self and change. She has recent and forthcoming publications in pedagogical leadership practices, and the transformation of professional identity in experienced primary school principals.

Debbie Ryder is a Senior Lecturer at Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand where she teaches in the Postgraduate Diploma in Leadership (ECE). Debbie has also lectured across a range of courses and programmes in her 11 years' experience in the tertiary education sector. She previously taught for over 20 years in ECE settings, predominantly managing and leading two community-based early childhood centres. Currently, Debbie is undertaking a collaborative research project with colleagues, *Leaders Growing Leaders*, and she is in the final year of completing her PhD.

Cathy Wylie's main research focus has been on policy and its impacts for school leadership, teaching, and students, and the longitudinal study *Competent Learners*, which has provided important understanding about different trajectories of engagement and achievement in learning. Her 2012 book, *Vital connections* (NZCER Press), makes a cogent case for system change to strengthen all our schools and counter uneven educational opportunities. She is a Chief Researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.