Scoping paper on school leadership and equity

EPNoSL UK Team, Work Package 2 (2013)


Abstract

This paper offers a review of the literature on school leadership and equity in order to help provide policy with an evidence base on school leadership from the perspective of equity. It does so by: (i) considering how discourses constitute objects; (ii) exploring the rationale of policy on school leadership and equity; (iii) considering the various models of school leadership and equity; and (iv) examining literature on the practical application of ideas about school leadership and equity. In so doing, this paper draws attention to the positive claims made internationally about the utility of school leadership strategies to promote social justice in modern multicultural societies. In particular it considers the alleged value of the dual concepts of ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘equity of results’. Drawing upon Foucault’s (2009) account of discourse formation, this paper cautions that literature on the efficacy of school leadership and equity may help constitute a “de-stated” account of governance that places onus on school leaders to take responsibility for social processes that may, in reality, lie beyond their control.

Introduction

The aim of this literature review is to help provide policy with an evidence base on school leadership from the perspective of equity. We do so by: (i) considering how discourses constitute objects; (ii) exploring the rationale of policy on school leadership and equity; (iii) considering the various models of school leadership and equity; and (iv) examining literature on the practical application of ideas about school leadership and equity. In so doing, we draw attention to the positive claims made internationally about the utility of school leadership strategies to promote social justice through critical reflection and ‘transforming dialogue’ (Woods, 2011, p. 134). Although cognisant of the benefits of creating a shared vision of equity in schools, we draw upon Foucault’s (2009) account of discourse formation, and caution that literature on school leadership and equity may help constitute a “de-stated” account of governance that places onus on school leaders to take responsibility for social processes that may, in reality, lie beyond their control.

Discourse formation

When commencing a literature review of school leadership and equity, it is helpful to consider Foucault’s account of discourse formation. According to Foucault (2009, p, 49), ‘Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention’. Thus, the discourse on school leadership and equity constructs the phenomenon that researchers seek to identify, and researchers contribute to discourse formation through their publications. Although inequalities and injustices are not merely “constructs” in various researchers’ discourses, critical postmodernism serves to remind us that policy (as the political enactment of discourse) is both an attempt to solve real world problems and an attempt to persuade social actors to subscribe to particular beliefs that delineate action (Nudzor, 2009). Researchers’ empirical enquiries thus play a significant role in constructing the social landscape. Because researchers utilise various perspectives in their accounts of school leadership and equity, the emergent discourse is diverse and complex. For example, in their paper on school
leadership practice and preparation across seven nations, Ylimaki and Jacobson (2013, p. 6) discuss organisational learning (OL), instructional leadership (IL), and culturally responsive practices (CRP). Meanwhile, in their paper on how leadership influences student learning, Leithwood et al (2010, p. 673) talk about four leadership ‘paths’: ‘Rational, Emotions, Organizational, and Family’.

In spite of the enormous variety of papers about school leadership and equity, researchers are able to produce literature reviews that identify overarching narratives by categorising disparate accounts under discrete headings. For example, in their review of the literature, Ross and Berger (2009, p. 464) organise discussion using headings based on what they describe as the ‘three main conceptions’ of leadership: (i) transformational leadership; (ii) distributed leadership; and (iii) instructional leadership. Similar conceptions are identified by Earley et al (2012, p. 21) in their review of the literature on school leadership, where they discuss (i) transformational leadership; (ii) instructional leadership; and (iii) pedagogic or learning-centred leadership. Consistency of categorisation implies consensus, yet Foucault’s (2009) assertion that writers help create what they aspire to discover alerts us to the danger of producing a literature review that implies homogeneity in accounts of school leadership and equity, and conceals our intervention in the construction of consensus. The authors of the present literature review therefore attempt to highlight the salient features of the literature on school leadership and equity, whilst acknowledging that the identification of broad themes does not render interchangeable disparate ideas about leadership and social justice. Because the reading process is disrupted by parenthetic lists of multiple authors, we do not provide extensive lists of authors who have written upon a particular topic in this paper, but instead reference texts by authors who do provide such lists.

The rationale of policy on school leadership and equity

Goddard (2007, p. 5) identifies an ‘increasingly ethnoculturally diverse global community’ and suggests that the discourse of leadership and equity has developed in response to the ‘great movements of people taking place around the world’ (ibid, p. 1). While it appears that there is agreement that the discourse of school leadership and social justice is bound up with the concept of ‘equity for all’ in modern multicultural societies, it is less clear how this ‘new mantra’ (Brown, 2004, p. 80) came into being. Most papers on school leadership and equity focus on why it is necessary (for example, to enhance race relations) and how it might be implemented (for example, through prejudice reduction workshops), without interrogating the foundation of these ideas about social justice. Instead, much of the literature contains assertions that are presented as self-evident truths, for example that school leaders are acting in an ‘increasingly complex environment’ (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p.2) and that we need to ‘trust schools more and see them as the levers of reform’ (Collarbone & West-Burnham, 2008, p. 6).The tendency to ignore the ideological basis of policy on equity means that the promotion of school leadership strategies is presented in much of the literature as a “natural” and non-contestable offshoot of policies, rather than a political action performed on the individual.

When authors do attempt to locate policy on school leadership and equity within a wider socio-political narrative, they tend to position it as a global expression of neoliberal marketisation. For example, Serpieri (2009, p. 123) is highly critical of the introduction of ‘homogenous head teacher training models’ in Italy which, he claims, are designed to reposition head teachers as managers/entrepreneurs as part of the ‘marketisation of the public service’ (ibid, p. 130). In her study of school leadership and equity in Slovenia, Trnavcevic (2007, p. 79) states that Slovenia has undergone ‘a radical adjustment from a socialist, planned economy to a market-driven economy’, and argues that school leaders are employing inclusion strategies to ‘strengthen the ‘market position’ of the school’ (ibid, p. 88) rather than promote social justice. Fitzgerald (2009, p. 155) condemns the marketisation of education in New Zealand, claiming that ‘access to schools has been rationalised’ so that ‘a particular group, the middle classes, can exercise their choice with regard to the school, and ultimately the university, to which they send their child’. Fitzgerald claims that teachers have been repositioned as ‘producers of commodities’ (i.e. students’ skills and knowledge) that can


‘contribute to the national and global economy’ (ibid, p. 157), and suggests that the identification and measurement of “standards” in education is ‘a compensatory attempt to create an imagined community of sameness’ that obscures the advantage that marketisation confers upon the elite (ibid, p. 158). Fitzgerald calls upon school leaders to resist the abuses of marketisation by promoting a ‘social justice agenda’ in schools (ibid, p. 159), but this possibility rests upon the assumption that the discourse of school leadership and equity stands outside, rather than within, the metadiscourse of neoliberal marketisation; a theory refuted by Serpieri (2009) and Trnavcevic (2007). Foskett and Lumby (2003, p. 181) claim that ‘macro changes sweeping the world’ translate into ‘micro changes within the work of leaders in schools and colleges’, and it seems that these changes entail the adoption of micro policy on leadership and equity informed by macro neoliberal economic principles. Evidence for this is found in the OECD (2010) report on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in which it claims that ‘educational outcomes are a strong predictor of economic growth’ (ibid, p. 3), and argues that educational outcomes (and thus economic growth) may be enhanced through effective school leadership strategies.

In spite of the apparent international consensus over the function of school leadership as a means to foster equality of opportunity in local and global contexts, Foskett and Lumby (2003, p. 183) argue that ‘ubiquitous western concepts such as transactional, transformational and instructional leadership’ are not universally applicable, as ideas about such things as gender equality vary widely between cultures. In the absence of a universal definition of “leadership”, Foskett and Lumby (2003, p. 195) suggest that we might conceive of leadership as ‘the individual’s moral agency’; an idea that features widely in the literature. For example, Sergiovanni (1992) talks about sources of moral authority in school leadership; Fullan (2003) considers the moral imperative of school leadership; Bosu et al (2011) discuss the moral use of power, and Bottery et al (2012) explore how school leadership is guided by a sense of moral purpose. Whether or not the concept of leadership is held to have a moral foundation, much of the literature suggests that the overriding aim of policy on school leadership and equity is to promote equality of opportunity for pupils in the global free market economy, irrespective of race, gender or class. The extent to which this aim is realistic is, of course, challenged by those writers on school leadership and equity who subscribe to Sandel’s (2012) view that the act of commodification corrupts education and undermines social justice. For example, in his study of leadership, personalization and high performance schooling, Fielding (2006, p.353) argues that market values render the personal ‘subservient to the functional’, and Hatcher (2005) critiques the tension between democratic principles and managerialism in his study of the distribution of leadership and power in schools in the market society.

Having briefly considered the socio-political basis of policy on school leadership and equity, the following section of this paper looks at the models of leadership and equity that might be said to emerge from the literature.

Models of school leadership and equity

As stated previously, the literature on school leadership is replete with terminology, and for the sake of simplicity most authors subsume accounts of leadership under various typologies. Of these, the most prevalent are:

1. Transactional leadership, which posits a ‘leader-follower dichotomy’ (Harris et al, 2003, p. 16) and is associated with a central command model of governance.
2. Transformational leadership, which is associated with inspiring others, building a shared vision, providing support and developing a collaborative culture (Yu et al, 2002, pp. 372-373).
3. Distributive leadership, which is associated with the distribution of the performance of tasks across the ‘three constitutive elements of leader, follower and task or situation’ (Robinson, 2008, p. 243). A more radical reframing of how leadership is understood sees leadership as an emergent phenomenon that arises through complex, interactive processes across organisations and groups (Gronn, 2002; Woods & Woods, forthcoming).
4. Instructional leadership, which is associated with ‘setting and communicating clear instructional goals and expectations’ and ‘promoting and participating in teacher learning and development’ (Brown & Chai, 2012, p. 753).

Writing in the 1990s, Clegg and Palmer (1996, p. 212) identified a ‘popular trend’ for leadership to be considered in terms of ideas like ‘empowerment’, ‘vision’, and ‘culture’. This trend shows no sign of abating, and the leader-follower transactional model does not feature strongly in the literature on school leadership and equity. Instead, the other more “negotiated” styles of leadership identified above are described, and these models are contextualised through reference to social justice. For example, Capper et al (2006, p. 218) discuss how leadership preparation programmes aimed toward social justice tend to focus on developing educators’ ‘critical consciousness’ and sense of shared responsibility.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the amount of literature on school leadership and equity, Furman (2012, p. 192), flags up the paucity of literature about the actual practice of social justice leadership in K-12 schools and the capacities needed by school leaders to engage in social justice. Furman (ibid, p. 192) also notes that the ‘literature on leadership preparation is thin in regard to explicit methods for developing these capacities’. Furman suggests that a preoccupation with the raising of consciousness, rather than action-oriented behaviour, may account for this deficiency in the literature, which she attempts to address through her account of praxis. However, a second explanation offered by Furman is perhaps more likely, in light of our earlier discussion of the socio-political basis of the discourse of school leadership and equity.

Citing North (2006), Furman (2012, p. 193) describes social justice as an ‘under-theorised concept in education’ and calls it an ‘umbrella term’ with ‘multiple meanings’. A possible explanation for why social justice is presented as a nebulous construct in the literature is found in Harris et al’s (2003) account of school leadership policy. According to Harris et al (ibid, p. 164) policy serves the demands of governments ‘for raising standards of school performance in terms of the economic “market-led” agendas’. Equity, or social justice, is positioned under the market model as “equality of opportunity” in terms of access to education and the global standardisation of education (measured through such things as PISA). This policy has, Harris et al (ibid, p. 164) claim, in fact disadvantaged ‘many inner-city, migrant and socially deprived communities’, where ‘an increasing number of children’ are, for whatever reason, ‘unable to cope with a national curriculum’. The pervasiveness of the market model may have stifled the development of competing theories of social justice. Evidence of this is provided by Goddard and Hart (2007) in their study of school leadership and equity in Canada. Goddard and Hart (2007, p. 15) found that Canadian principals ‘actively resisted any attempts to recognize diversity and difference’, as they were wedded to the notion that all students should be ‘treated the same’. Goddard and Hart (ibid, p. 16) are uncomfortable with this finding, arguing that ‘Such an assimilationist approach limits the experiences of the minority-culture child’, yet the principals’ attitude is obviously consistent with the concept of social justice as “equality of opportunity”.

In a report commissioned by the OECD, Levin (2003) identifies the respective positions on equity held by the Canadian principals and Goddard and Hart:

Historically there have been two main approaches to addressing equity in education. One focuses on what is called ‘equality of opportunity’. In this view, it is access to education that is critical. The responsibility of the state is to provide opportunities to participate; whether people choose to take advantage of that access or are successful in doing so should not be a primary focus of public policy. The second view is more concerned with equity in the results of education, such as graduation and access to employment. From this perspective, providing the same opportunity is not enough because different people will need different kinds of opportunities and some people will need more support in order to be successful. (Levin, 2003, p. 8)

The desire to enhance ‘graduation and access to employment’ through equity of results (Levin, ibid) is symptomatic of the re-conceptualisation of education as a means to serve the needs of industry by cultivating individuals’ employability (Ward, 2012), a project that has been promoted internationally by US
backed multilateral agencies (such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and the European Union (Connolly, 2013). In spite of the unease over performativity evident amongst authors identified in this paper (e.g. Fielding, 2006; Hatcher, 2005), a ‘paradigm convergence’ (Ball, 2001, p. 48) over the efficacy of the market model of education has created political consensus around the idea that marketisation automatically creates a meritocracy based on the pursuit of self-interest (Ward, 2010). Under this model, we are all ‘free to make the most of our talents’ (Ward, 2010, p. 203), and actions and outcomes are the result of the exercise of free choice, rather than compulsion. Thus, the role of government is to ensure that standards of education are consistently high (hence the standards agenda); parents must choose their children’s schools wisely (hence the league tables), and pupils must work hard to maximise the utility of their education by gaining credentials for employment (ibid). In theory, the market model of education supports and sustains economic development by ensuring that every member of society is educated to be a productive component of the knowledge economy (Ball, 2001; Ball, 2010), and it is possible that the equity of results approach to education may prove more conducive to this aim than equality of opportunity. Indeed, Levin (2003) claims that the equity of results model of social justice is gaining in popularity, and the OECD (2010) report mentioned earlier appears to confirm that governments around the world are increasingly interested in implementing leadership strategies to enhance educational outcomes. However, in spite of international attempts to promote equity of results, Brown (2006, p. 394) argues that we have entered a ‘zero-sum game’, where the winners take most, if not all, of the opportunities available in the free market; a supposition which may lead us to question the idea that social justice is guaranteed in a neoliberal meritocracy. Furthermore, given that the concepts of equality of opportunity and equity of results have become embedded in policy stances that aim to promote markets, competition and neoliberal ideas about education, we might argue that Levin’s (ibid) identification of ‘two main approaches’ is something of a false binary, and that policy makers are in fact mired in a monodiscourse of neoliberal free market fundamentalism.

Although literature on social justice and school improvement constitutes a significant research field in the area of school leadership and equity, Heck and Hallinger (2010, p. 678) identify a paucity of large-scale, longitudinal empirical studies of the relationship between school leadership and academic performance. To explain this phenomenon, Heck and Hallinger (2010, p. 880) cite research that indicates that the ‘inherent complexity’ of organisations makes it ‘difficult to establish empirically a causal linkage between changes in leadership or organizational processes and changes in performance over time’. However, another possible explanation (which is not considered by Heck and Hallinger) is researchers’ incredulity towards the idea that school leadership produces equity of results, and this scepticism is evident in some of the literature. For example, in her study of social justice and school improvement in the poorest neighbourhoods, Lupton (2005, p. 591) criticises the English initiative, ‘Schools in Challenging Circumstances’, on the grounds that its discussion of inequity of results is ‘dominated by references to the poor practice of heads and teachers’. Lupton argues that, in reality, inequity of results is the product of ‘widespread material poverty’ outside the school (ibid, p. 594) that obliges teachers to divert teaching time into pastoral activities (ibid, p. 598) and forces principals to divert strategic planning time into policing pupil behaviour and liaising with external agencies (ibid, p. 599). Lupton (ibid, p. 602) argues that equity of results will not be achieved through improvement measures that concentrate on ‘upskilling and motivating staff’, and that fail to address systemic constraints on social justice. Interestingly, this theory is endorsed in Levin’s (2003, p. 8) report for the OECD, where he states: ‘efforts to promote equity in education cannot rely solely on schools but must also include policy options around issues that are largely outside the educational system’, and there is evidence for the existence of these policy options within the literature. For example, Harris et al (2006) report on a UK government sponsored project that specifically aimed to address the effects of local contexts, and in particular deprivation, on school performance.

In the next section of this paper, attention is turned from theory to practice, and a review is presented of literature about the implementation of ideas about school leadership and equity.
Implementation of ideas about school leadership and equity

As stated previously, the literature on school leadership puts forward three dominant models of leadership: transformational; distributive and instructional. These models are readily adapted within the literature on school leadership and equity to serve the interests of social justice, and writers typically focus on: (i) distributive justice, or the fair distribution of social and material goods (Yavuz, 2010); (ii) a cultural approach, where marginalised groups are more strongly acknowledged and supported (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002); and (iii) relational or participatory justice, where individuals are empowered to take a full part in relationships and in society (Lumby, 2013a). These categories of social justice are not discrete, nor are they aligned to particular models of leadership. In much of the literature all three approaches are described simultaneously, to produce what might be described as two main "paradigms of action": (i) the cultivation of critical reflection, where educators look inwards to discover and challenge personal beliefs about equity, and/or teach for critical engagement (ii) the cultivation of a common vision, where educators look outwards to negotiate a shared policy on social justice (N.B. in some instances this common vision is co-created with pupils and the wider community).

In order to consider the value that authors attach to these paradigms of school leadership and equity, accounts of how various strategies have been successfully implemented in schools are detailed below. While this appraisal of practical ideas for policy implementation is by no means exhaustive, it should be noted that, within the literature on school leadership and equity, there is a paucity of guidance for practitioners on how they might enact leadership strategies for social justice (Furman, 2012).

Critical reflection

Brown (2004, p. 77) seeks to develop a ‘process-oriented model’ to prepare educational leaders who are ‘committed to social justice and equity’, and she argues that critical reflection is the first step towards transformational practice. Brown (ibid, p. 89) defines critical reflection as ‘the examination of personal and professional belief systems, as well as the deliberate consideration of the ethical implications and effect of practices’. Brown recommends a number of activities to stimulate the development of critical reflection:

(i) cultural autobiographies, where participants identify their ethnic/cultural group;
(ii) life histories, where participants ‘identify and interview a person who is older than 65 years of age and attended school in the United States’ (ibid, p. 100);
(iii) prejudice reduction workshops, where participants take part in ‘a series of incremental, participatory activities that empower individuals of all ages and backgrounds to take leadership in building inclusive communities in their workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods’ (ibid, p. 100);
(iv) reflective analysis journals, where participants record their thoughts throughout the semester ‘as a means of identifying and clarifying thoughts, feelings, beliefs, perspectives, worldviews, challenges, hopes, and aspirations’ (ibid, p. 100);
(v) cross-cultural interviews, where participants engage in a ‘one-on-one encounter with an individual’ who is different from them in ‘ethnicity/race/religion/sexual orientation’ (ibid, p. 101);
(vi) educational plunges, where participants are encouraged to ‘select an activity that will challenge them to move beyond their present level of comfort, knowledge, and awareness and yet not be so uncomfortable or threatening that they are unable to be open to the “minority experience”’ (ibid, p. 101);
(vii) diversity panels, where participants ‘engage in a sharing of their educational experiences, and participate in an informal question and answer session’ (ibid, p. 102);
(viii) activist action plans, where participants ‘identify issues that can trigger conflicts (i.e., unequal distribution of material/social resources or differing values, beliefs, and cultural expressions)’,
and ‘then develop practical, doable strategies for avoiding them and/or resolving them’ (ibid, pp. 102-103).

Brown does not provide empirical evidence to support the claims for the efficacy of the activities listed above, but she does identify numerous studies that highlight the utility of such strategies as a means to stimulate inward reflection on social justice.

**Teaching for critical engagement**

In their study of plural conceptions of social justice, Gewirtz and Cribb (2002, p. 506) identify an approach to teaching that involves ‘a redistribution of the cultural tools needed to decode and critically engage with dominant cultural forms’, and they support their discussion through reference to the Citizen School in southern Brazil:

The starting point for the construction of curricular knowledge is the culture(s) of the communities themselves, not only in terms of content but in perspective as well . . . The students are not studying history or social or cultural studies through books that never address the real problems and interests they have . . . the students learn history by beginning with the historical experience of their families. They study important social and cultural content by focusing on and valorizing their own cultural manifestations. A real shift is occurring because the focus is not on the ‘core/official’ knowledge organized around dominant class and race visions of the world, but on the real problems and interests of the students and the community. (Gandin & Apple, in Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002, p. 508)

Teaching for critical engagement is similar to Brown’s (2004) process-oriented model of critical reflection, as both seek to cultivate the individual’s understanding of his/her subject position. However, there is a significant difference between the two approaches. Brown’s methodology aims to eradicate feelings of cultural superiority/otherness by engaging school leaders with the experiences of marginalised groups. The methodology identified by Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) aims to eradicate feelings of inferiority held by marginalised pupils by valorising their cultural manifestations.

**The cultivation of a ‘common vision’ of equity**

In their study of leadership practices within a secondary school in Australia, Niesche and Keddie (2011, p.66) describe how ‘a common vision about the significance of equity’ has been developed and sustained through the work of the school’s Equity and Action Group (EAG). This group was established in 1996 ‘in conjunction with a state government initiative encouraging schools to address issues of social justice’ (ibid, p. 69). The weekly EAG meetings are open to all staff members and attendance is voluntary. The meetings enable guidance officers, administrative staff, teachers and therapists to meet and share their ideas and concerns about social justice, and Niesche and Keddie praise the collaborative and flexible approach to responding to issues of equity that is fostered by the EAG. Members of the EAG describe it as:

...the school’s ‘guardian of equity’; as a ‘powerful’ mechanism to ensure that ‘equity is never off the agenda’ (senior school head of curriculum); as ‘taking the pulse of the school’ in terms of equity (creative arts teacher 2); and as a way to ensure that the school ‘walks the talk’ in relation to equity (principal). (Niesche and Keddie, 2011, p. 70)

The interventions that are developed by the EAG are ‘geared towards reducing the negative effects of the students’ specific material and cultural disadvantages’ (ibid, p. 69). They include the successful development of support groups for refugees and immigrants; extra language and mathematics support; music and art therapy; family services, and ‘acknowledgement of Indigenous heritage and issues through the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee week’ (ibid, p. 69). The variety and scope
of the initiatives developed by the EAG appear to confirm that the EAG has enabled the school to develop ‘a “collective wisdom” on addressing the barriers to student learning’ (ibid, p. 72).

‘Transforming dialogue’

Within the literature on the cultivation of a common vision of equity, the development of collective wisdom is often linked to transformational language practices. For example, in his study of how we might shape a democratic future by transforming education policy, Woods (2011, p. 134, italics in original) identifies a ‘democratic approach’ to leadership that ‘reflects a valuing of student voice and professional participation’ and in particular aspects of ‘transforming dialogue which aims to enhance understanding’. Woods describes a UK secondary school that has a Leadership Forum similar to the EAG reported by Niesche and Keddie (2011), but which supplements this forum with a School Council. The School Council meets once a month to discuss problems and develop action points in response to issues that pupils put forward via ‘student representatives’ (ibid, p. 137). These issues include such things as the school dress code and access to the library at lunchtime, and the pupils believe that the School Council system ‘works well’ and is democratic (ibid, p. 137). In the words of the Head Boy: “The smallest person with the quietest voice can make a difference” through the School Council’ (ibid, p. 137). According to Woods, the model of distributive leadership adopted by this school enables the school principal and ‘students in key positions’ to both play roles ‘as critical democratic actors’ (ibid, p. 135). Similarly, in their study of school leadership and equity in New Zealand primary schools, Robertson and Miller (2007, p. 100) identify ‘Team Talk’ as ‘a very inclusive way of actively including every child in the school in discussion and play’. Before lunch and playtimes, ‘the class, as a community’, sits together in a circle, and the children ‘plan among themselves what would happen when they went out to play, as ‘an inclusive way of dealing with any potential problems’ (ibid, p. 100).

In some of the literature on leadership and equity, the development of transforming dialogue is supplemented by the gathering of background data. For example, in her study of the utility of transformative leadership theory in practice, Shields (2010, p. 560) explores the practice of two US school principals ‘who have successfully “turned their schools around,” making them more inclusive, socially just, and academically successful’. The first principal identified small groups of ‘willing teachers’, and asked them to collect data about the background and progress of every child in the school (ibid, p. 575). The principal then convened a series of staff meetings to develop teaching methods informed by the pupils’ disclosed needs:

[The] teachers, beginning with the data they generated, spent long hours in dialogue, in newly created team meetings, trying to develop new approaches to achieving success with all students...The constant questioning about what they would do if there were no constraints led to creative new approaches and to a shared rejection of after-school tutoring, noon-hour instruction, or Saturday school - in favor of strategies that placed the onus on teachers and did not “punish students.” In fact, they recognized that too many of these common practices arise from deficit thinking—a belief that children need to be cured rather than a belief that teachers using multiple pedagogical strategies can help all children to attain high standards. (Shields, 2010, p. 576)

The second principal that Shields writes about made use of frequent staff meetings, similar to those reported by Niesche and Keddie (2011) and Woods (2011). These meetings focused on ‘trying to understand the needs’ of students from disadvantaged families (Shields, 2010, p. 576) and led to pedagogic and pastoral interventions. For example, a ‘community partnership’ was developed with retirees from the community to benefit those pupils who lack ‘the consistent presence of a caring adult in their lives’ (ibid, p. 576). Although the approaches of both principals led to school improvement, Shields (ibid, p. 578) expresses the belief that the principal who collected data about the background and progress of every child ‘was more explicit and more intentional in her use of power to transform’.
This section of the paper has considered various strategies for the implementation of school leadership and equity. Some of these strategies are directed inwards, to raise educators’ consciousness of racial, sexual and cultural discrimination and to valorise pupils’ own cultural manifestations, while others are directed outwards, to create spaces for democratic discussion about how we might enhance the social and educational inclusion of all pupils. Common to these diverse accounts of school leadership and equity is the desire for positive change. For Brown (2004), change is achieved through the individual’s clarification of thought, while for Niesche and Keddie (2011) change comes about through dialogue that cultivates a common vision of equity. Woods (2011, p. 134) uses the term ‘transforming dialogue’ to capture how democratic communication enables the development of this negotiated understanding of equity. What is clear from the studies cited above is that the educators who encountered the real world application of these particular ideas about school leadership and equity are convinced that critical reflection and the cultivation of a common vision through transforming dialogue are beneficial to pupils, teachers and (in many instances) the wider community.

Conclusion

The literature on school leadership and equity is both complex and simple. This apparent contradiction stems from the contrast between the straightforward aim of school leadership and equity to make education fair, and the abundance of complicated terminology that is used to describe styles of leadership and the structure of organisations. Of course, the issue of ‘fairness’ is far from simple, and this literature review has demonstrated that the dominant concepts of equality of opportunity and equity of results are both underpinned by neoliberal economic theory, which is condemned by some as inherently unequalitarian (see for example, Harvey, 2009). Ramonet (2008) describes how ‘the market penetrates all society’s interstices, like a liquid, that leaves nothing and spares nothing’. Although numerous researchers identified in this paper, such as Fielding (2006) and Hatcher (2005), have spoken out against marketisation, our review of the literature suggests that the discourse of school leadership and social justice is largely saturated with market principles. In support of this diagnosis, Ball (2012, p. 34) argues that the construct of school leadership is bound up with performativity and ‘governing by numbers’, rather than equity. Ball claims that ‘leadership is a means of reworking and narrowing the responsibilities of the practitioner by excluding ’extraneous’ issues that are not directly related to performance outcomes’ (ibid, p. 34), and we might consider here the use of “metrics” and so called “big data” in the USA. The implication of Ball’s theory is disturbing: this paper has highlighted a number of school leadership and equity strategies, such as educational plunges (Brown, 2004); Equity and Action Groups (Niesche & Keddie, 2011), School Councils (Woods, 2011), Team Talk (Robertson & Miller, 2007) and pupil data collection (Shields, 2010), that have been implemented around the world in good faith by educators who are interested in establishing equity in education. However, if Ball (2012) is correct, then policy on school leadership and equity has, in fact, been implemented by governments as a means to identify and exclude factors that inhibit national education performance, which is measured through PISA to produce performance league tables for international comparison (OECD, 2010). The standards agenda is, arguably, incompatible with the account of equity as the reduction of social injustices that affect people’s lives: as noted previously in our discussion of Fitzgerald’s (2009) critique of education policy in New Zealand, the standards agenda creates a spurious meritocracy that favours the interests of middle class pupils.

Lupton (2005) argues that government policy on school leadership and equity lays responsibility for both equality of opportunity and equity of results firmly at the door of principals and teachers. Ball (2012, p. 35) is highly critical of what he terms the ‘new professionalism’, whereby social actors are required to take ‘responsibility’ and have “appropriate” reflexive moral capacities’, often in relation to issues that reside beyond their understanding or control. A prime example of this is the structural constraints on equity identified by Lupton (2005): it is simply unreasonable to expect educators to ‘take responsibility’ for issues of material poverty that undermine pupils’ educational performance. Various researchers identified
in this literature review describe earnest attempts by educators to develop their critical consciousness and foster democratic governance, yet if Ball is correct, these educators are in fact engaged in a process of desatitization – which involves ‘re-drawing the public-private divide, reallocating tasks, and rearticulating the relationships between organisations and tasks across this divide on whatever territorial scale(s) the state in question asks’ (Jessop, 2002, in Ball, 2012, p. 36). It is not surprising then, that the attempt to make school leaders, rather than the State, responsible for the integration of immigrants and/or minority groups into the dominant culture is found to falter in some of the literature reported in this paper (see for example, Goddard and Hart, 2007).

While we agree with Ball that educators should not be held responsible for the effects of an unequal society, we also recognise that the idea that individuals’ social and economic prospects are bound up with their education is longstanding, and pre-dates the instigation of the market society by many decades. Indeed, going back to Waller in 1932, it is clear that schools and school professionals embody a ‘grammar’ of schooling, which advantages some and disadvantages others (Lumby, 2013b, p. 3). This ‘grammar’ has, it seems, proved difficult to modify: in their account of schooling in Western Europe, Jones et al (2008, p. 10) claim that despite the ‘verve and energy of alternative or critical educational projects’ during the 1960s, ‘the curricula and pedagogies developed in earlier periods remained dominant’. Jones et al (2008, p. 18) show how the ‘grammar’ of advantage was vehemently reasserted in England in the wake of the 1970s economic crisis by neoliberal politicians who linked the ‘populist energies of regressive campaigners’ against progressivism with the ‘modernising’ claim that ‘the school was out of step with economic needs’. Although teachers should not be considered helpless victims in this scenario, Jones et al (ibid) point out that resistance to neoliberalism has been destabilized by the weakening of trade unions, media campaigns against child-centred and radical classroom practice, and market-friendly legislation that has undermined local comprehensive systems. Lamentably, neoliberalism has resulted in a ‘social polarisation’ that has further undermined the post war project of educational equality (ibid, p. 94). The literature reviewed in this paper demonstrates that strategies to enhance equity through individual action, systemic change, and complex processes of interaction and initiative at different levels are available to educators for use in schools toady (see Woods, 2011), but these practices take place within a neoliberal culture that is as intractable as anything encountered by would-be reformers in the 1960s. For example, the UK Coalition’s Education Secretary, Michael Gove (2013), recently gave a speech entitled ‘The Progressive Betrayal’, in which he condemned progressive education and praised ‘the leadership of brilliant head teachers’ who had helped inspire his ‘uncompromisingly radical’ educational philosophy.

In spite of the questionable socio-political rationale of discourses of school leadership and equity, this literature review has demonstrated that policy on school leadership and equity produces results in real world settings that are often found to be positive and, indeed, life enhancing. Summing up the findings of their research into primary school leadership and equity in New Zealand, Robertson and Miller (2007) state: Schools such as Fern, Rainbow and Daffodil represented more than a child receiving an education. These schools that have an inclusive philosophy of community contribute, in their unique ways, to a more culturally inclusive society. These schools became a vital community connection for the families as they attended functions and made friends, helping to dispel any sense of isolation and trauma that immigrant families would have experienced in coming to a new country. Parents had the opportunity for input in the classroom curriculum concerning their land and culture. (Robertson & Miller, 2007, p. 101)

Notwithstanding such enthusiasm, Foucault’s (2009) theory of discourse formation reminds us that literature on leadership and equity helps create the discourse that constructs social phenomena. With this in mind, we should perhaps exercise caution when making claims about the utility of policy on school leadership and equity. As demonstrated by Jones et al (2008), politicians and the media in England and elsewhere have undermined attempts to promote educational equity by simultaneously ignoring pupils’ material poverty and ridiculing progressive pedagogy, advocated by researchers such as Gewirtz and Cribb (2002), that might help raise marginalised pupils’ critical consciousness. Without due caution, literature on
school leadership and equity that fails to acknowledge structural constraints on social justice in neoliberal societies may help constitute a “de-stated” account of governance that places onus on school leaders to take responsibility for social processes that may, in reality, lie beyond their control.

References:


