EMERALD POINTS

SCHOOLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Problematizing Theory, Policy and Practice

DENISE MIFSUD

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SCHOOLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

This important book interrogates key educational concepts of social justice, equity and inclusion through a thought-provoking and novel approach. Drawing on Actor Network Theory, Bacchi's post-structural analytical approach to policy, and empirical studies of Malta and Australia, it raises crucial questions and insights for theorizing and conceptualizing some of the most major but intractable issues in schooling today.

Jane Wilkinson, Professor of Educational Leadership,
Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia

This book is essential reading for researchers and practitioners of social justice, equity and inclusion in education. It draws on insights and analysis from two of the critical field's leading thinkers and researchers to interrogate and trouble assumptions that are commonly held or deployed about leading for social justice and equity in schools. This vital book represents a significant leap forward in our understanding of how schools work when they aim at practice and outcomes which are socially just and inclusive. The book is exemplary as a critical text in its expert theorization of the landscape, mechanisms and outcomes of schooling – and leading – for social justice. Its dual, comparative focus on the cases of Malta and New South Wales, Australia is illuminating and incisive, and points the way to new ways of thinking internationally.

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SCHOOLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Problematizing Theory, Policy and Practice

BY

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I would like to dedicate this book to all those who have suffered any form of injustice throughout their lifetime as students and/or education practitioners at various levels in compulsory schooling, and simultaneously to those who strive to bring about more socially just education systems.

I have been inspired to write this book by my various experiences of social injustice in education that I have either lived directly or witnessed at the triage of theory, policy and practice as a student, teacher, educational leader and academic.

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CONTENTS

1. Social Justice and Equity in Education and Schooling 1
   Denise Mifsud
2. Schooling and Educational Leadership as the Main Protagonists in the Social Justice Script? Unveiling the Social Justice Discourses from an Actor-Network Theory Lens 27
   Denise Mifsud
3. Problematizing Equity in Educational Policy: An Application of Bacchi's Post-structural Analytical Approach 63
   Denise Mifsud
4. Culturally Responsive Leadership: A Case Study of Improving Relations Between Indigenous Communities and Schools 95
   Richard Niesche
5. Concluding Commentary 119
   Ira Bogotch

About the Authors 125

Index 127

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1

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING

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ABSTRACT

This introduction aims to set the context for the subsequent chapters that problematize various aspects of social justice, equity, and inclusion through particular lenses, and/or methodologies. This is done by presenting the 'problem' of social justice and equity in education, while simultaneously making links with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The term 'social justice' is appearing in numerous public texts and discourses within the education field, thus becoming a key concept in current education policy and practice. Moreover, the concept of social justice is crucial to theorizing about education and schooling, consequently being considered by politicians, policymakers, and practitioners in their thinking about the nature of education and the purpose of schools. Regrettably, education practitioners, researchers, and policymakers often

utilize this umbrella term (social justice) while leaving out salient details about its social, cultural, economic, and political bearing. Notwithstanding the unanimous agreement on the desirability of social justice as an educational goal, this is complemented by a parallel contestation over its actual meaning and application in relation to schooling, that is, in relation to the formulation of policy and how it is to be included in practice. This chapter seeks to unravel the conceptual confusion around the terms social justice, equity, and inclusion in relation to schooling and education, through an exploration of the existing literature in the field.

Keywords: Compulsory schooling; equity; inclusion; OECD policy; research methods in education; social justice; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

INTRODUCTION

Following substantial periods of pandemic-induced school closures, students returned with unequal levels of knowledge and skills. Some students, especially those from more underprivileged backgrounds, failed to return. Moreover, COVID-19 moved the curriculum online as it became 'embedded in devices that technologize our children' (Pacheco, 2021, p. 11) leading to the question of whether the 'sustainable, inclusive human development' (United Nations, 2019, p. 64) is achievable through this new accelerating normal post-pandemic. The COVID-19 impact highlighted inequalities of multiple kinds, especially so in school provision and family support, thus the necessity of a global focus on the common good. Therefore, understanding and mitigating the impact of school closures, especially in terms of learning losses is high on the agenda of education policy makers who are struggling to minimize disruptions to education, particularly towards the neediest. This leads to an explicit emphasis on equity in education, and its counterparts of inclusion and social justice, issues aligning closely with the global SDGs of 'No Poverty' (SDG 1) and 'Quality Education' (SDG 4) (United Nations, 2015). The main purpose of this book is to problematize discourses of social justice, equity, and inclusion that are presented as given constructs to schools and through which they are expected to initiate schooling provision and practices to 'solve' a wider societal, national, and global plaguing setback. This will be done via applications of social theory to conceptual and empirical case studies from Malta and Australia, two English-speaking Commonwealth countries that despite diverging in

area, population size, and geographic location, present issues that can be applied across different contexts, demonstrating the universality and simultaneous distinction across thorny matters related to social justice, equity, and inclusion in schools worldwide.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION AND COMPULSORY SCHOOLING: A CASE OF FORBIDDEN FRUIT?

According to Connell (2012),

> *Education is dangerous, because schools do not just reproduce culture, they shape the new society that is coming into existence all around us … Social justice concerns the nature of the service itself, and its consequences for society through time … [a time where] Education becomes a zone of manufactured insecurity, with achievement through competition as the only remedy. But in a zero-sum competition, achievement for one means failure for all the rest. (p. 681)*

Connell (2012) above draws attention to a major shift in school systems inequalities based on institutional segregation to new forms steered by market mechanisms with students redefined as competitive clients in complete disregard to educationally relevant differences such as poverty, gender, ethnicity, rurality, sexual orientation, and migrant status, among others. This points to a lack of adequate educational responses to deep diversity in terms of curricular justice and the social encounters constituting an (un)just education system.

The term 'social justice' in the field of education in general and particularly in schools has been the subject of much scholarly debate, resulting in a plurality of conceptions and interpretations, with no clear consensus as to what constitutes a socially just society, and consequently, a socially just school. A significant shortcoming in the literature is the lack of say from those non-Anglophone nations not considered as geopolitically dominant (Gumus et al., 2021), leading to a reconsideration of educational systems in transitional and previously under-represented areas and their having to take the direction of Western countries. Stressing the vital nature of context, Waite and Arar (2020) problematize the concepts of 'the social' and 'culture' in social justice education, that 'in their mundane, common usage, are problematic and can get us into trouble' (p. 172), thus advocating a recognition of difference. MacDonald (2023a) notes that the existing literature advocates for an all-embracing understanding of social justice in an attempt to attend to the differences in educational outcomes resulting from social, cultural,

economic, and political opportunities, or lack of. Notwithstanding, all educational struggles for social justice 'remain unfinished and incomplete' (Bogotch et al., 2008, p. xii). Fraser (2013) prefers a particular way of thinking about injustice by focusing on distribution and querying 'How much economic inequality does justice permit?' (p. 192); on recognition in terms of 'What constitutes equal respect, which kinds of differences merit public recognition?' (p. 192); as well as representation, 'If representation is the defining issue of the political, then the characteristic political injustice is misrepresentation' (p. 192). In the context of globalization, Fraser (2013) suggests that the focus on injustices revolves around 'integrating struggles against maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation within a post-Westphalian frame' (p. 208). This three-dimensional theory encompasses the economic, cultural, and political dimensions (Fraser, 2005). Distributive principles, the economic dimension, acknowledge the inequitable allocation of material aids, including exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation. Recognitive principles, the cultural dimension, focus on the equal acknowledgement of the historical and cultural perspectives of all groups within a particular society. Representative justice, the political dimension, gives all people the right of participation and opinion.

Pijanowski and Brady (2020) argue that despite the lack of consensus on definitions of social justice, there are recurrent themes and concepts in the plurality of social justice meanings, by identifying two primary conceptualizations of social justice in education across theory and practice. These concepts of distributive justice and social recognition, though 'not mutually exclusive in theory, they can in practice serve to unintentionally undermine the other' (p. 2). Distributive approaches to social justice have been however critiqued for positioning children as consumers without acknowledging them as products of social processes (Young, 1990). Similarly, North (2006) highlights two tensions that emerge from the amalgamation of distribution and recognition in relation to social justice in practice. The first tension incorporates disparate emphasis on equality as difference and equality as sameness, while the second source of friction evolves from varying degrees of attention to both macro (e.g. policymaking) and micro (e.g. individual behaviours) level processes. For educators and scholars, social justice encompasses what a socially just education system looks like in practice, and the role of education in the development and maintenance of a socially just society.

Pijanowski and Brady (2020) argue that social justice is so elusive to singularly define due to its 'multidisciplinary and multi-action nature', further stating that 'simply dividing complex constructs like education evenly or equitably falls short of acknowledging how various oppressive systems heavily influenced the design of those same educational goods and how

systemic oppression has affected the ways in which people access education' (p. 4). Social justice as an issue cannot be compartmentalized into and attributed to the schooling milieu, teachers and schools are not the problem, but rather the structural and systemic inequalities that politicians and policy makers tend to ignore through the lack of adequate policy focus. Lingard (2021) further argues that in contemporary politics and policy, social justice has been datafied and framed by metrics in what Mau (2019) calls the 'metric society', thus the need to retether to a way of thinking about injustice (Lingard et al., 2014). The meritocratic and social mobility function of schools is linked to the extent of structural inequality, with Wooldridge (2021) stating that 'the meritocratic elite is in danger of hardening into an aristocracy which passes on its privileges to its children by investing heavily in education, and which, because of its sustained success, looks down on the rest of society' (p. 17).

THE SUBORDINATION OF EDUCATION TO ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES

Reay (2022) argues that educational policy is bound by the prescriptions of the OECD and its global monitoring systems, stating that 'the OECD has always been, and remains, an economic institution led by economists' (p. 436). However, economics as a discipline has proven itself weak on social justice and inequality (Walraevens, 2021). Under the guise of being a global driver of educational improvement, the OECD has neglected other immeasurable aspects of school life, such as well-being, relationships, and collegiality, that are equally important to improve performance holistically (McNamara et al., 2021).

MacDonald (2023a) highlights the fact that the terms 'equity' and 'social justice', are used interchangeably in studies of poverty and disadvantage, while the OECD equitable policy schooling recommendations consider equity in terms of fairness and inclusiveness (Field et al., 2007). Social justice has been reformulated as equity to be regarded as a gauge of comparative performance (Keddie, 2012; Lingard et al., 2014), with both terms becoming problematic in that 'stronger conceptions of social justice as equality of opportunity in an equal society have given way to weaker conceptions of equity as fairness in a meritocratic society' (Lingard et al., 2014, pp. 71–712). Rizvi and Lingard (2009) also suggest that equality has been relegated by the OECD from being a moral value to becoming a component of human capital development. Boyum (2014) also criticizes the OECD policy documents for their inherent meritocratic outlook, stating that it 'explicitly operates with a loose idea of equal opportunity … but implicitly with a meritocratic variant of fair equality of opportunity' (p. 865). He further concludes that the processes of the OECD

set apart educational justice from social justice in general emphasizing 'equality of opportunity as a means through which to achieve positions in the social hierarchy … [without any] discussion of the rightfulness of that social hierarchy itself' (p. 867).

This subordination of education to economic imperatives is reiterated by Ross (2021):

> *Meritocracy has turned education into a competition for accreditation. Equality of opportunity is used to justify the concentration of educational resources on the fraction of the population who are judged to* best benefit *by its efforts … It is turned into a game, with the metaphor of* a level playing field *being used to justify winners and losers. Despite the rhetoric of* raising standards*, the objective of the educational system is to identify and mark sheep and goats. The losers … become the authors of their own subsequent misfortunes, and are encouraged to believe and accept this. (pp. 8–9, original emphasis)*

Inevitably, issues of social justice and equality are sidelined in a system where educational inequalities have been rationalized as a matter of economic inefficiency that needs to be addressed to increase productivity rather than social justice. Educational inequalities are tightly interwoven with social inequalities and cannot be addressed in isolation. Reay (2012) questions the extent to which a socially just educational system is possible in an unjust society, calling out the focus on social mobility as 'a red herring', as it is 'primarily about recycling inequality rather than tackling it' (p. 593). Consequently, she identifies three main areas acting as barriers to a socially just educational system that revolve around attitudes, the economy, and neoliberalism. The pre-set belief of the upper and middle classes of their own social and intellectual superiority, together with the myth of a swelling middle class despite the reality of a large working-class cohort amid growing relative poverty are problematic notions. These two factors are buttressed by the highly competitive culture of neoliberalism that prohibits far-reaching systemic changes, social redistribution, radical curriculum innovation, and discursive shifts required for a socially just educational system.

Do educational policies act as change agents or reproducers of social structures? It is possible, and highly probable, for educational practices to replicate the existing, persistent inequalities within society. Hartsmar et al. (2021) identify three main claims that are generally utilized for educational policies targeted at reducing social inequalities. These are attributed to social reasons (unequal treatment among different social groups); economic justifications (inequalities engendered by the exclusive focus on education to increase economic competitiveness);

and the human rights and equity argument (encompassing recognition of all group differences to minimize the differential access to rights imposed by society). Potentially disadvantaged groups may fall under the following broad categories: socioeconomic disadvantage; minority ethnic disadvantage; gender; indigenous minorities; disability; linguistic minorities; and religious minorities. It is also the case that degrees of disadvantage exist and the conceptualization of social difference varies between countries, nations, and geopolitical standing. There is also the issue of intersectionality of factors among those various disadvantaged groups that may yield complex inequalities that are challenging to address. Various explanations for inequalities in schools have been provided, all bearing implicitly and explicitly on policy. These include pathological explanations; transmitted deprivation; home-based factors; school factors; and societal structure. Education alone cannot reduce inequality; moreover, policies in other areas may inadvertently undermine the impact of educational policies targeted to address inequity. Hartsmar et al. (2021) identify four particular policy responses that hamper the achievement of equitable educational outcomes. The first is the denial of the existence of disadvantaged groups, where countries are reluctant to acknowledge the lack of homogeneity. The second response was to confuse categories, including all inequalities under the (socio)economic umbrella. Equality policies may also be in competition with other policy agendas, thus having a counter-effect on schooling. Some policies fail to address equality of outcome, with their sole focus being on the provision of 'equality of opportunity', blaming individuals who fail to be 'opportunistic'. I regard the four responses hereby discussed as 'policies of evasion' rather than 'policies of engagement' leading to further systemic inequity.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN PRACTICE: ENACTMENTS IN CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS

As discussed previously, the identification of an exclusive, universally accepted definition of social justice in education remains elusive, but there appear to be three evolving views of the social justice phase in the field (Pijanowski & Brady, 2020). The social justice lexicon is becoming more expansive and inclusive in terms of philosophical explorations and activity types, while social justice conversations within educational systems, whereas previously considered as politically volatile, have become politically normed. Furthermore, stronger links have developed at the convergence of distributive justice, social recognition, and macro/micro conceptions of justice.

School leaders are expected to foster an inclusive and equitable environment for all students, irrespective of background and of the inherently inequitable

society within which the school operates. A social justice approach has been conceptualized as 'positionality, a set of analytical skills, and a disposition for positive transformation' (Pijanowski & Brady, 2020, p. 11). DeMatthews et al. (2021) classify school principals as either improvement-focused or intersectional-focused in their attempt to foster school-inclusive cultures. Improvement-focused leaders regard developing inclusive practices and raising student achievement as complementary, while intersectional-focused ones engage in ongoing critique of traditional approaches to special education practices and routines. While different levels of intentionality in the weaving of social justice framing in educators' modus operandi exist, it is evident that effective leadership practices cannot be extricated from social justice concepts (Bogotch, 2002; Theoharis, 2007).

Notwithstanding the moral justification for social justice efforts in education, a number of obstacles remain at both operational and conceptual levels. Promoting the academic and socio-emotional growth of all students is problematic. Moreover, the segregation and exclusion of underprivileged and disenfranchised social groups is frequently simulated in schools where fostering an environment that acknowledges and embraces differences is increasingly difficult. These may be exacerbated by other barriers to social justice leadership initiatives that try to mobilize intra-institutional activism. This may be due to the principals' ethical commitment to upholding rules; other hindering policies; traditional community values; the convergence of multiple socio-economic challenges; and the existence of contradictory social justice goals (Berkovich, 2014). Other issues relate to a lack of recognition of cultural variations, lack of acknowledgement of sociopolitical issues in diverse geographical areas, as well as the challenges of addressing students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Qureshi et al., 2020). Of greater concern is the 'implicit bias' present in schools that ultimately has a negative influence on students not considered 'mainstream'. Implicit bias acts on students through four pathways, that are: teacher expectations; teacher traits; curricular materials; and access in a system where 'social justice is often vaguely represented as more of a phenomenon than a measurable concept' (Beachum & Gullo, 2020, p. 20). In addition to the above-mentioned obstacles to social justice in schools, many countries lack the infrastructure necessary to assess the effectiveness of those measures adopted to foster social justice (Samman et al., 2018). In the present scenario where current education policy 'disadvantages too many in the interests of the too few' (p. 42), Woods (2021) advocates for scepticism among educators and researchers in their quest for 'high quality, high equity education systems':

> *The question to be asked of evidence-based practice is* what evidence. *The question to be asked of national benefit is* benefit for who. *The questions to be asked when told that all children must*

> *learn basic skills, is* whose children *and* whose basics. *The question to be asked when told about* these children, *is* how do you know. *(p. 41, added emphasis)*

These 'hindrances' to social justice in education have implications for policy and practice. As a result, research in educational leadership suggests that principals committed to social justice will tend to exhibit a range of practices. MacDonald (2023b) summarizes these (normative) practices as follows: focus on pedagogy; leadership dispersal; critical thinking; shared social justice ethos; networking and partnerships; supportive social relationships; political activism; as well as critical reflection and reflexivity. Research in educational leadership for social justice has challenged these normative assumptions (MacDonald, 2023a; Mifsud, 2021) through illustrations of disjunctions between leaders' conceptualizations of social justice and their practices in schools, especially when set against the policyscape background of what ought to be happening. Are such principals acting in socially just ways, despite their intention not translating as such in practice? Or is it a matter of academics and policy makers reconceptualizing socially just leadership practices? Qureshi et al. (2020) propose a framework for social justice in education, that among other elements, would include: inclusive and relevant curricula; focus on children's values; local community involvement; employment of qualified, competent professionals; optimal material resourcing; additional after-school hours support; in addition to the basic infrastructure of the physical school environment.

> *Although it is easy to see that we do not currently have a state of social justice, it is not always obvious what the policy prescriptions should be. Gains that are made by following one approach may be offset by losses in other areas. (Francis et al., 2017, p. 424)*

Enacting social justice in schools is a complex matter not only owing to its conceptual confusion, but also due to the fact that how it is translated in practice is not clear-cut either in terms of educational functions and content, or in terms of modes of configuration and provision.

EQUITY AND INCLUSION AS COUNTERPARTS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

'Universal education of good quality … is not a panacea for authoritarian, inequitable, and unjust societies' (Shaeffer, 2019, p. 191). Notwithstanding, disparities in basic education provision exist with many children still not attending school, while others are attending but not learning. There are various reasons

why these children, as 'members of particular groups – marginalized, disadvantaged, excluded' (Shaeffer, 2019, p. 182) are denied a good quality education. This may be due to lack of government resources in terms of poor human and financial assets, corruption, or national budgets not prioritizing basic education. Another reason is discriminatory government policies or school/community attitudes denying equal opportunities to certain groups, further exacerbated by neglect and disinterest from the same governments, communities, and/or schools.

Inclusion (as applied in education, especially compulsory school settings) is a convoluted and disputed concept, with researchers, policy makers, and practitioners debating its meaning, rationale, and implementation. Inclusive education is often promoted as a right for all learners, a perspective affirmed by UNESCO (2017) by placing inclusion and equity as guiding principles for all educational policies and practices, in addition to its prominence in key European documents (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017; Council of the European Union, 2018a, 2018b; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). On the other hand, inclusive education in academic literature is presented as a philosophy guiding practice for quality education provision to all (Allan, 2014). UNESCO (2009) proffers three arguments to justify inclusion: its response to diverse learner needs; the promotion of a fairer society; and the value-for-money presented by inclusive rather than segregated schools. Kefallinou et al. (2020) problematize the educational and social justifications. Since inclusive education provides equitable opportunities *and* outcomes, the effectiveness discourse relies on research exploring the relationship between inclusion and achievement. Moreover, inclusive education goes beyond the provision of quality education at compulsory school level. How far and wide is this happening? Can all 'achievement(s)' be measured? Are all 'achievements' measurable? What constitutes an 'achievement'? Which system features influence equity, or to be more precise, the provision of equitable opportunities (and hopefully equitable outcomes) in school? Eurydice (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020) identifies education policies and structures that may influence equity in education as falling broadly under stratification, standardization, and support measures. (In)equitable provision may come about due to: diversity of school types; school choice policies; and school admissions policies. Various tracking setups, grade repetition requirements, and support for low achievers and disadvantaged schools may lead to diverse opportunities to learn. Different levels of school autonomy and school accountability may also limit equity, as well as the level of public funding and early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision.

Inclusion and equity can be confusing as terms as they have a different significance for different people and are often used concurrently and interchangeably. While regarding inclusion and equity as principles, Ainscow (2020a) regards

inclusion in education as a process that ought to be concerned with the identification and removal of barriers; focused on advancing the presence, participation, and achievement of all students, especially those at risk of marginalization, exclusion, or underachievement. Student learning and participation are impacted by within-school factors (e.g. policies and practices); between-school factors (e.g. local school systems characteristics); and beyond-school factors (e.g. local demographics, economics, cultures, and histories).

Despite ongoing endeavours by policy makers, academics, and practitioners to develop inclusive schools comprising inclusive cultures, politics, and practices, inclusion remains a troubled, problematic, and contested field (Allan, 2014). Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) detect a dilemma between efforts and limits due to the gap between vision and implementation, as well as different conceptualizations of the same phenomenon. By default, this leads to a dynamic relationship between inclusion and exclusion, that is, by definition inclusion always leads to exclusion. Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) further identify definitional dilemmas in this conceptual plurality that lead to problems in research and practice. In summary, these dilemmas are:

> *Should I focus on cost efficiency or student welfare? … On inclusion as a precondition for learning achievements … or … consider other social contexts as arenas of inclusion and exclusion? … On numbers and social participation in school … or … also consider students' experience of being recognized by the social community? (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018, p. 807)*

Qvortrup and Qvortrup additionally argue that the act of labelling a student as 'included' is an act of exclusion, while it must also be acknowledged that 'inclusive work will never reach a stable state of total inclusion' (p. 810) in schools. Thus, they suggest an inclusive education system operationalized according to different levels, types, and degrees of inclusion. Who, then, are the excluded? Children excluded from education make up a heterogeneous population, with UNICEF (2018) identifying three main categories of out-of-school children. Total school exclusion may happen due to location, status of living, and group identity. There are also those who were pushed out of school, and those who are enrolled and attending but not learning due to individual or group characteristics (e.g. language, gender, poverty, special needs) or due to the poor quality of education provided (e.g. inadequate school facilities, untrained and unpaid teachers, irrelevant curricula). Shaeffer (2019) advocates a shift in the blame culture for school exclusion by reinterpreting the causes of failure – 'Children do not suddenly drop out of school;

they are rather slowly *pushed out* by the system and by school itself' (p. 187, emphasis added).

Literature advocates various ways of developing more inclusive education systems and schools in order to promote more just, equitable, and cohesive societies, at both the macro and micro levels. Ministries of education need to carry out a more systematic identification and mapping of those excluded from school and design specific programmes to focus on certain groups such as girls, boys, minorities, the poor, rural and remote populations, learners with special educational needs, and refugees and migrants, among others. Specific reforms may also tackle teacher education; curriculum and teaching-learning materials such as textbooks; as well as student assessment mechanisms (Shaeffer, 2019). Measures at the micro-level would encompass a whole school approach (Ainscow, 2020a) directed towards inclusion and equity by essentially developing child-friendly schools where school development is prioritized by the administration which also invites community involvement. To what extent can this inclusive development be evidenced?

Kefallinou et al. (2020) argue that despite the justification for inclusion in theory, a vacuum exists between the aim of inclusive education and the evidence of its effects, asking, 'To what extent does research evidence support inclusive education and its implementation?' (p. 136). If effectiveness is evaluated on the basis of restricted or unsuitable performance indicators, the use of data may invite misinterpretation; conceal more than they reveal; and have an adverse effect on professionals' conduct – under the guise of promoting the causes of accountability and clarity. Collected evidence needs to relate to the '*presence*, *participation* and *achievement*' (Ainscow, 2020b, p. 10, original emphasis) of all students, especially those identified at risk.

'NO POVERTY' AND 'QUALITY EDUCATION': THE SDGS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO MORE SOCIALLY JUST, EQUITABLE, AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING

> *Inequity is not inevitable. Inequality is a choice. Promoting equity – a fair chance for every child, for all children – is also a choice. A choice we can make, and must make. For their future, and the future of our world. (UNICEF, 2016, p. vii)*

The SDGs are a set of 17 goals and 169 targets (building upon the Millennium Development Goals [MDGs]) adopted by the UN member nations (United Nations, 2015), coming into force in January 2016 and

intended to drive international development work until 2030. The social justice issues explored in this book closely align with two of the SDGs: No Poverty (SDG 1) and Quality Education (SDG 4). SDG 1 calls for the eradication of poverty in all its manifestations, with a vision for shared prosperity, a basic standard of living, and social protection benefits for everyone. SDG 4 aims to safeguard access to quality education to all throughout all life stages, as well as increase the number of youths who have the relevant employment and entrepreneurship skills.

Monitoring of these SDGs has revealed progress in aspects of multidimensional poverty, with an increase in participation in basic education, but inequity, exclusion, and social injustice are yet rampant as will be discussed below (Eurostat, 2023; Sachs et al., 2023). Slow and uneven progress on poverty reduction may leave hundreds of millions in extreme poverty by 2030. If current trends continue, only one-third of countries will have national poverty by 2030. Amid overlapping crises, coverage and expenditures on social protection programmes remain low. However, the share of government spending on essential services, including education, health, and social protection has increased over the past two decades in advanced, emerging, and developing economies globally. Children and young people are more affected by the risk of poverty or social exclusion than other age groups, this risk being determined by their parents' situation, with 24.4% living in households at risk in the European Union (EU). This level of risk is also determined by subgroups, which in the EU in 2021 were children living in households with parents having a lower secondary level of education; unemployed parents; non-EU migrants; and a household composition of single adults with dependent children (Eurostat, 2023). Progress towards quality education was already sluggish and protracted before the pandemic, but COVID-19 has had devastating impacts on education, causing learning losses in four out of five of the 104 countries studied (Sachs et al., 2023). Primary and secondary school completion is rising worldwide, albeit at a very slow and uneven pace. The progress on improving primary school reading levels is disappointing with an estimated 300 million children and young adults lacking basic numeracy and literacy skills by 2030. Access to early childhood education has expanded, but progress has slowed since 2015. Digital skills are still low. Basic school infrastructure varies widely across regions – one in four primary schools globally lacks basic services like electricity, water, sanitation, and handwashing facilities. Access to computers, the Internet and disability-adapted facilities is even lower, with fewer than one in two primary schools having access, on average. Regions with the lowest access to basic facilities include Central and Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover, in 2020, more than 14% of teachers were not qualified

according to national norms, with sub-Saharan Africa facing the biggest challenge (Sachs et al., 2023). The EU exhibits similar trends in relation to SDG 4 (Eurostat, 2023), where participation in ECEC is rising too slowly to meet the 2030 target, and educational outcomes in reading, maths and science have continued to deteriorate as revealed by the poor OECD PISA results (European Commission, 2019).

Boeren (2019) warns against regarding the 17 SDGs as fragmented 'work packages', with correlations among the various goals, as demonstrated in the discussion above outlining the effect of poverty on quality education. Education is mentioned specifically in a number of SDG targets, namely SDG 3 on good health and well-being, SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, and SDG 8 on decent work – all having a bearing on social justice and equity in schooling. The SDG 4 targets have however been criticized due to their sense of becoming 'lost in translation' to indicators (King, 2017), given the intended vision of inclusive, equitable education. The emphasis is on forms of performance review rather than elucidation of intricate concepts and fundamental implications of equality (Unterhalter & North, 2017). Unterhalter (2019) critiques the narrow interpretation of equity across the SDG 4 indicators, due to the focus being solely on metrics of distribution and participation, where 'Equity is portrayed as some kind of numerical relationship (parity or equivalence), but not an undoing of structural inequalities' (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 46). The meaning of the SDG 4 targets on quality education seems to mirror the contemporary neoliberal discourse on education policy that is steered towards benchmarks, indicators, and targets – a 'governance by numbers' (Ozga, 2012) approach. This progress monitoring towards the achievement of targets exerts pressure on countries and on the learners themselves. Boeren (2019) argues that such performance reports do not provide enough contextual information as countries may score high on a certain measure which is likely to be the result of a wide range of aggregate factors. Hence, the importance of context in tackling social (in)justice and (in)equity in schooling, rather than replicating policies in order to generate a 'quick fix' of broken education systems (Nir et al., 2018).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

How do we act in a way that does not reproduce ethnocentric, gendered, class-laden values and treat all – learners, educators, policy makers – in a way that accords them their equality, without imposing our own suppositions about social justice and educational

> *transformation? … How can we justify our critique of the state against our own determination of social values and the public good? … How can we challenge such power [in society], and disseminate our findings to it and beyond it? (Ross, 2021, p. 314)*

While globalization has increased pressures on education systems to adopt neoliberal economic strategies, this benchmarking approach to comparison has led to skewed understandings of system effectiveness and 'what works'. Torrance et al. (2023) thus suggest focusing on the connections between the context of a system, the influence of global trends and drivers on national education policy, increasing globalization, and the interests of transnational organizations, proposing a comparative framework exploring the micro, meso, and macro levels within a system. Eryaman (2006) proposes a set of philosophical principles to guide social justice research for the public good, that are presented in Table 1:

These considerations consolidate UNESCO's (2015) construction of the public good in education as a shared social endeavour comprising school responsibility and commitment to solidarity in the individual and collective dimensions. Ross (2021) argues that to counter for population groups achieving a less favourable distribution of education-related outcomes than the majority,

Table 1. Philosophical Principles to Guide Social Justice Research for the Public Good (Adapted from Eryaman, 2006, p. 1213).

Philosophical Principles	Applications to Social Justice Research
Ontological	challenging presumptions, subjectivities, and prejudices
Epistemological	linking language and discursive practices control to the present unequal knowledge distribution
Political	questioning control of knowledge selection and distribution
Economic	linking language and discursive practices control to the present unequal knowledge distribution
Ideological	querying what and whose knowledge is most worthy of teaching and learning
Technical	deciding on the best access strategies to the community
Aesthetic	making links with our own discursive practices without being objective and ethnocentric
Ethical	balancing responsible and fair treatment to others without imposing presuppositions
Historical	exploring existing discourses on educational and social research issues

differential (unequal) treatment must be meted out. In other words, the failure of policy initiatives addressing social (in)justice and (in)equity suggests that it is the outcome of policy and practice that is significant, rather than the intention.

This book thus considers the triage of theory, policy, and practice (Mifsud, 2023) in the presentation of the subsequent chapters, where it is attempted to maintain an awareness of our own bias within distinctive systems, due to our previous and current positionings within the various local contexts at theory, policy, and practitioner levels. We explore methods for the co-production of knowledge, emphasizing research with participants, rather than research on participants (Mifsud, 2021). Niesche and Gowlett (2019) argue for the 'inescapable connection' between theory and practice – to which I also add 'policy' – given the hidden theoretical premises in everything. This book adapts Strunk and Locke's (2019) stance 'that research [in social justice and equity in education] must always be theoretical, and that without theory, research becomes reductive and meaningless' (p. xix).

The potential of Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach to problematize current policy problems, their construction and representation, and more importantly to think creatively about alternatives is exemplified through a worked example of policy analysis presented in this book. Furthermore, this study highlights the fact that there are a number of persistent challenges for achieving equity in education, especially the immigrant-native educational gap, despite European policy makers having been very active in the educational field, evident in numerous educational reforms in the last decade (Hippe et al., 2016). Education policies need to be re-thought to reduce inequity and inequality, while measuring policy impact and utilizing evidence-based research is also vital to policy making. Problematizing the notion of social justice in education as presented in the literature via Actor-Network Theory is meant to generate scepticism and critique among the policy makers, academics, and education practitioners who are concerned with issues of social justice and equity in schools. The adoption of a culturally responsive leadership approach to contribute to the improvement of outcomes for Indigenous students in Australia identifies one way of achieving more equitable and socially just educational leadership to overcome the historical marginalization of Indigenous students in relation to non-Indigenous ones. The issues raised in this book are legitimate across the international context, especially due to the increasing globalization of education policy (Ball, 2008) and the global extension of practices of policy borrowing widely established among Western nations (Lingard, 2010; Whitty et al., 2016), moreover when combined with the expansion of social justice leadership research across various global regions (Arar et al., 2017).

This book provides examples of case studies from Malta and Australia, two English-speaking Commonwealth countries that despite their diversity present issues that can be applied across different contexts. Besides this, these two nations have strong ties due to the huge wave of migration that was initiated in the mid-20th century that has now resulted in more Maltese (first/second/third generation) citizens living in Australia, actually outnumbering the 0.5 million population living in the Maltese archipelago. Both nations also seem to be performing at a similar pace in relation to SDG performance, with Australia being indexed at 42/166 with a 75.9% index score and Malta following closely with an index rank of 41/166 and a 75.5% index score as indicated in the Sustainable Development Report 2023 (Sachs et al., 2023). Various measures of the 2023 Budget in Malta were integrated with the SDGs, spread across various sectors, whilst building on previous years' initiatives aimed at further reducing the risk of poverty for the most vulnerable in society and addressing past injustices. Consequently, 7.7% and 6.1% of the national budget were allocated to SDG 1 and SDG 4 respectively (Ministry for the Environment, Energy & Enterprise, 2023). While both Malta and Australia have reported progress in SDG 1, significant challenges remain, especially in the latter nation. Malta is faring well in SDG 4, mainly in the increase in net primary enrolment rate and lower secondary completion rate, with a slight stagnation in pre-primary organized learning. While challenges in Australia remain due to the decrease in pre-primary organized learning, the other two indicators of primary enrolment and lower secondary completion have been achieved, albeit having stagnated at present (Sachs et al., 2023). As previously discussed, education systems across the globe are very contextual, despite the global neoliberal influences, therefore the above brief implementation monitoring descriptors of SDG 1 and SDG 4 are not meant to act as a comparative exercise but to show that Malta (an island state) and Australia (a continent) are both facing challenges in maintaining schooling systems that are socially just, equitable, and inclusive.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The first chapter sets the context for the rest of the book that problematizes various aspects of social justice, equity, and inclusion through particular lenses, and/or methodologies. This is done by presenting the 'problem' of social justice and equity in education, while simultaneously making links with the SDGs. Chapter 2 presents a problematization of the social justice concept within education as presented in the literature, while setting out to critique this concept

as an educational goal, as well as the role educational leadership is expected to play in the promotion of equity and social justice discourses through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT offers concepts that trace the dynamics of educational reform, in this case, schooling for social justice and equity, including the emergence of actors within the play of heterogeneous linkages among humans and non-humans, and how these actors are performed into being by these connections. Chapter 3 concentrates on equity in the Maltese education system, with a particular focus on how the policyscape makes provision for achieving, improving, and maintaining equity in compulsory schooling. As an EU member state, Malta has been affected by the evolution, causes, and consequences of social, educational, and economic inequalities that have been an ardently contentious and controversial issue given the recent economic crisis in Europe. Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach is adopted to analyse national school inclusion policy in Malta as illustrative of policies mobilized to address the problem of inequality, therefore acknowledging the need for a provision of equity as a major agenda. In Chapter 4, Niesche draws on a research project designed to embed Indigenous perspectives in schools and classrooms as an example of socially just leadership practices in New South Wales, Australia. Community members were recruited to work with teachers as co-constructors of learning activities that explicitly value and work with Indigenous perspectives to go beyond simple behaviour assistance that has historically been a feature of such roles. The practices of community members, teachers, and principals are theorized using the notion of culturally responsive leadership. Chapters 1 to 4 also provide further resources for engagement in terms of reflective questions and annotated lists for further reading. In Chapter 5, Bogotch provides a commentary of the preceding chapters, further subjecting the concepts of social justice, equity, and inclusion in education to skepticism, critique, and problematization. Bogotch is provocative, raising questions for the reader, thus opening up a dialogue on how schooling at large, and educational leadership and policy in particular, are meant to 'solve' the social (in)justice, (in) equity, and (non)inclusion present in society.

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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. *What do you understand by the terms 'social justice' and 'equity' broadly and in relation to schooling more specifically?*
2. *To what extent is a socially just educational system possible in an unjust society?*
3. *Do educational policies act as change agents or reproducers of social structures?*
4. *What are the barriers to enacting social justice in practice in classrooms and schools?*
5. *How have SDG 1 and SDG 4 contributed to more socially just, equitable and inclusive schooling?*

FURTHER READING

1. **Atkins, L., & Duckworth, V. (2019).** ***Research methods for social justice and equity in education*****. Bloomsbury Publishing.**

This book offers researchers a full understanding of very important concepts, showing how they can be used a means to develop practical strategies for undertaking research that makes a difference to the lives of marginalized and disadvantaged learners. This book, that is divided into three parts covering theorizing, research methods and applications in context, explores different conceptualizations of social justice and equity, and leads the reader through a discussion of what their implications are for undertaking educational research that is both moral and ethical and how it can be enacted in the context of their chosen research method and a variety of others, both well-known and more innovative. The authors draw on real, practical examples from a range of educational contexts, including early childhood, special and inclusive education and adult education, and cultures located in both western and developing nations in order to exemplify how researchers can use methods which contribute to the creation of more equitable education systems.

2. **Bogotch, I., & Shields, C. M. (2014). (Eds.).** ***International handbook of educational leadership and social (in)justice*****. Springer.**

This international handbook, comprising 62 chapters, creates a first-of-its-kind international forum on conceptualizing the meanings of social justice and leadership; research approaches in studying social justice and combating social injustices; school, university and teacher leadership for social justice;

advocacy and advocates for social justice; socio-cultural representations of social injustices; global policies, and leadership development as interventions. The Handbook is as much forward-looking as it is a retrospective review of educational research literatures on social justice from a variety of educational subfields including educational leadership, higher education academic networks, special education, health education, teacher education, professional development, policy analyses, and multicultural education. The Handbook celebrates the promises of social justice while providing the educational leadership research community with concrete, contextualized illustrations on how to address inequities and combat social, political and economic injustices through the processes of education in societies and educational institutions around the world. The editors have been commissioned to publish a second edition which is currently being prepared with chapter updates and new chapters that will be available in print in 2025.

3. **Strunk, K. K., & Locke, L. A. (2019). (Eds.).** ***Research methods for social justice and equity in education*****. Palgrave Macmillan**.

This textbook provides theoretical, methodological, and practical information on how to mobilize educational research and research methods for social justice and equity in education. This book is divided into three sections. Part 1, 'Theoretical and Philosophical Issues', highlights issues such as power, positionality, and reflexivity, as well as some of the most commonly used frameworks of critical race theory, intersectionality theory, queer theory, liquid modernity theory, etc. Part 2, 'Approaches to Data Collection and Analysis', addresses the very practical, procedural questions about the conduct of social-justice-oriented and equity-oriented research. Chapters deal with the ethical approval process and provide various applied examples of both qualitative and quantitative methods of data generation and analysis. Part 3, 'Developing a Research Agenda', includes narratives from scholars articulating their research agenda and how they have worked with various methodologies in service of that research agenda to become scholar-activists.

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2

SCHOOLING AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS THE MAIN PROTAGONISTS IN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE SCRIPT? UNVEILING THE SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSES FROM AN ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY LENS*

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ABSTRACT

Educators have had good reason to be concerned with social justice in a context where diversity has become more pronounced in both our schools and communities, with widening divisions between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Internationally, increasing

* Some extracts in this chapter have been taken from the original publication: Mifsud, D. (2021). Social justice and education in the Maltese state school system: Some political and practical issues. In D. Mifsud & P. Landri (Eds.), *Enacting and conceptualizing educational leadership within the Mediterranean region* (pp. 11–36). Brill Sense.

emphasis has been placed on utilizing the role of school leadership to address issues of social justice and equality, within a scenario where comparative studies of the performance of educational systems dominate the policy imagination globally, thus leading to increased pressure on school systems. This chapter presents a problematization of the social justice concept within education as presented in the literature, while setting out to critique this concept as an educational goal, as well as the role educational leadership is expected to play in the promotion of equity and social justice discourses through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This theoretical chapter has implications for theory, policy, and practice.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory; educational leadership; equity; OECD-generated performance assessment; policy discourses; schooling; social justice

INTRODUCTION

Diversity has become more prominent in both our schools and at a wider society level, with widening demarcations between the haves and the have-nots (Ryan, 2006) and with the school consequently being held solely responsible as the agent of change to close the attainment gap by addressing inequities in educational outcomes (Mowat, 2018). Concern about social justice is therefore high on the agenda of educators and education practitioners at various hierarchical levels. Moreover, mounting emphasis has been focused on employing, or rather exploiting, the role of school leadership to address issues of social justice and equality on a global level (Bogotch, 2008), issues that are undeniably endemic within society. Francis et al. (2017) highlight that the advancement of social justice in state education is complicated and contested in multiple ways both due to the distinct definitions of social justice, in addition to the fact that its meaning in practice is not straightforward either in terms of educational purposes and content, nor in terms of modes of organization and delivery. Notwithstanding,

> *If the school system is dealing unjustly with some of its pupils, they are not the only ones to suffer. The quality of education for all the others is degraded … The issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is about. (Connell, 1993, p. 15)*

There is a growing research literature on social justice as a key concept in current education policy and practice, as well as educational leadership

in relation to discourses of equity and social justice, that I contributed to as author (Mifsud, 2021a, 2021b), instigated by my high-level leadership position at the triage of theory, policy, and practice as I observed leadership performances, policy perceptions, and subsequent enactments by the head-teachers as the appointed social justice agents in schools. The enactment of leadership for social justice depends on the leaders' perceptions of the social justice concept, that translates as the provision of equality, as well as the facilitators and hindrances (in this case teachers) present within that particular school context and local education policy scenario (Mifsud, 2021b). This led to further critical reflexive research (Mifsud, 2021a), where I sought 'to transgress and unsettle social justice leadership discourses currently positioning [local] school leaders, through which they simultaneously re-position themselves as social justice leadership actors and the stakeholders under their responsibility' (p. 75) by illustrating the ways in which issues of social justice and equity are enacted through dysfunctionalities and contradictions emerging in the juxtaposition of policy and practices via leadership performances within various state schools in a small nation-state in the Mediterranean region.

This chapter presents a problematization of the social justice concept within education as presented in the literature, while setting out to critique this concept as an educational goal, as well as the role educational leadership is expected to play in the promotion of equity and social justice discourses through the lens of Actor-Network Theory [henceforth referred to as 'ANT']. ANT offers concepts that trace the dynamics of educational reform, in this case, schooling for social justice and equity, including the emergence of actors within the play of heterogeneous linkages among humans and non-humans, and how these actors are performed into being by these connections. An ANT reading of educational reform thus highlights insights about the material practices and fluid spaces that simultaneously inhabit and lead to the dynamics of change (Fenwick, 2011). As Law (1992) explains, an ANT sensibility focuses on

> *a concern with how actors and organizations mobilize, juxtapose and hold together the bits and pieces out of which they are composed; how they are sometimes able to prevent those bits and pieces from following their own inclinations and making off; and how they manage, as a result, to conceal for a time the process of translation itself. (p. 386)*

The following section presents a brief outline of the main concepts of ANT and how this assemblage relates to an exploration of social justice and equity discourses within compulsory schooling. The social justice concept within the schooling context as presented in the literature is problematized, while tracing the influence of neoliberalism in the global promotion of social justice. The chapter then critiques social justice as an educational goal, while

problematizing the foreseeable and taken-for-granted role of school leadership in addressing diversity and equity issues.

This theoretical chapter has implications for theory, policy, and practice in its aim to transgress social justice discourses as presented in the literature and policy documents in order to instigate a critical and reflexive dialogue around the conceptualization and enactment of social justice discourses among academics, policymakers, and education practitioners. The themes that emerge are mainly valid due to the increasing globalization of education policy (Ball, 2008) and the global extension of practices of policy borrowing widely established among Western nations (Lingard, 2010; Whitty et al., 2016).

EXPLORING SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSES IN EDUCATION FROM AN ANT-ISH PERSPECTIVE: AN OVERVIEW OF ANT SENSIBILITIES

Latour (1999) outlines the agenda of ANT as comprising: the *attribution* of both human and non-human characteristics; the *distribution* of properties among them; the *connections* generated; the *circulation* of these elements; as well as their *transformation*, thus incorporating both relational materiality and performativity (Law, 1999). I adopt Law's (2007) stance in regarding the ANT approach as a 'toolkit', a 'sensibility', rather than a theory, for the exploration of relations and their assemblage. ANT traces the ways in which human and non-human elements are enacted as they become assembled into collectives of activity. These complex, interwoven 'networks' can spread across space and time, and produce policies, knowledge, and practices. ANT-inspired studies trace the micro-interactions through which diverse elements or 'actants' are performed into being: how they come together – and manage to *hold* together – in 'networks' that can act. These networks produce force and other effects: knowledge, identities, rules, routines, behaviours, new technologies and instruments, regulatory regimes, reforms, and so forth (Fenwick, 2010). ANT sensibilities are useful particularly for following these relational strategies. An ANT approach notices how things are invited or excluded, how some linkages work and others don't, and how connections are bolstered to make themselves stable and durable by linking to other networks and things.

I now proceed to present a brief outline of the central concepts of ANT that will be adopted in this conceptual chapter. ANT allows researchers to explore the assembling, disassembling, and re-assembling of associations, empowering all actors with a voice to speak their sociologies, being especially concerned with the discursively and materially heterogeneous 'world-making' activity of

actors (Baiocchi et al., 2013). One of the central concepts of ANT is that of symmetry as human entities are treated in an equal way to non-humans, both regarded as relational effects (Latour, 2004). ANT traces how these entities assemble and hold together, being both capable of 'translating' each other. A non-human is regarded as a mediator, providing added value to an association, while simultaneously being regarded as 'gatherings' where action is always 'interaction'. ANT has been described as a 'sociology of translation' (Latour, 1987) where entities assemble and connect, with the working entity being an '*actor*' and the worked-upon entity being an '*actant*', with the 'action' aspect being emphasized. Nothing lies outside the network of relations. '*Punctualization*' involves aligning actors to be considered as a sum of other, smaller actors while there are '*ordering struggles*' by actors to translate one another and thus appear to become stabilized, that is '*black-boxed*'. Network elements are converted to '*immutable mobiles*' by being defined and ascribed roles. Actors are connected into a network through '*intermediaries*' which are actors translating their intentions into other actors, while '*mediators*' are entities that multiply difference. Callon (1986) proposes a four-stage typology of network growth by which networks assemble and extend themselves through 'moments' of translation. Through '*problematization*', an entity attempts to establish itself as an '*obligatory point of passage*', in the meantime attracting other entities to join the network in the moment of '*interressement*'. Those entities to be included experience '*enrolment*', while the moment of '*mobilization*' reveals network durability as its translations have been extended to other locations.[1]

Landri (2020) proposes a reinvigoration of the critical studies of educational policy and leadership studies with ANT, regarding the latter as a 'virtual cloud', a 'sensibility that refuses to be enclosed in fixed theoretical cages' (p. 34), thus inviting diverse translations, leading to an ecological understanding of educational leadership. An ANT sensibility highlights the 'vitality and the politics of the materiality' (Landri, 2020, p. 35) of leaders and educational leadership. I choose to employ the all-encompassing definition given by Fenwick and Edwards (2010), to employ 'ANT as a marker – understood to be a contingent and conflicted signifier – for approaches that share notions of symmetry, network broadly conceived, and translation in multiple and shifting formulations' (p. 3). I demonstrate how ANT could therefore function as a valuable lens when researching the contested, diffuse field of education, leadership, and policy – sensible to what is explicated, amplified, and linked. ANT thus helps researchers reflect on the different kinds of connections and associations created among things; the networks produced through these connections; in addition to the different transformations and sometimes twisted ends served through these networks. ANT can demonstrate how assemblages in

educational practices can be simultaneously made and unmade, with unconventional forms and spaces taking shape and developing strength (Mifsud, 2020). Notwithstanding,

> *Literature reveals that ANT is still relatively under-utilized in in the ELMA field in general, and in policy issues in specific – in fact, one may safely state that it has barely reached its stage of maturity since its inception in the 1980s. (Mifsud, 2024, p. 3)*

Consequently, in this chapter, I regard Social Justice (and social justice discourses) as THE ACTOR-NETWORK, and attempt to trace this network, thus assembling all the elements that impinge on the unfolding of social justice and equity in compulsory schooling, while simultaneously highlighting how social justice discourses attract, assemble, and translate educational leadership and policy in order to mediate educational reform. While admitting that writing about ANT and its application is extremely difficult due to its messy, fluid, disorderly, dynamic, chaotic, and ambivalent nature, it is the very 'messiness', 'fluidity', and 'chaos' of this 'sensibility' that offers invaluable insights to researchers in the education arena (Mifsud, 2014, 2020).

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SCHOOLING: IS SOCIAL JUSTICE THE 'DRIVING ACTOR' OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING THEORY, POLICY, AND PRACTICE?

The term 'social justice' is appearing in numerous public texts and discourses within the education field, thus becoming a key concept in current education policy and practice (Clark, 2006; North, 2006). Moreover, the concept of social justice is crucial to theorizing about education and schooling, consequently being considered by politicians, policymakers, and practitioners in their thinking about the nature of education and the purpose of schools. Regrettably, education practitioners, researchers, and policymakers often utilize this umbrella term (social justice) while leaving out salient details about its social, cultural, economic, and political bearing. Notwithstanding the unanimous agreement on the desirability of social justice as an educational goal, this is complemented by a parallel contestation over its actual meaning and application in relation to schooling, that is, in relation to the formulation of policy and how it is to be included in practice.

From an ANT-ish perspective, social justice can thus be regarded as the 'driving' actor of education and subsequently compulsory schooling, in terms of steering theory, policy, and practice. Using Latour's (1999) reasoning, this

unfolds via the attribution of social justice discourses to both humans (e.g. policymakers, school leaders, and education practitioners) and non-humans (e.g. policy documents, leadership practices, standards, and resources); the distribution of properties (in both equal and not-so-equal measures) among them; the generation of connections among these human and non-human elements; their circulation within schooling, leadership, and policy networks; and their transformation as they are simultaneously acted upon and act upon each other in a constant, fluid assemblage of the social justice network.

According to Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005), 'The prevalence of social justice language in educational settings and scholarship portends a new movement with as many meanings as actors on the scene. This visibility is cause for celebration as well as unease' (p. 202). Despite the centrality of social justice issues in education, not enough prominence has been attributed to the precise meaning of social justice discourse (Gewirtz, 2002), with social justice being regarded as 'an *old* but not an *old-fashioned* concept' (Arar et al., 2017, p. 192, original emphasis). Literature refers to the elusive meaning of social justice and the lack of clarity of the term. The 'conceptual plurality' (Liasidou & Antoniou, 2015, p. 348) of this ambiguous and contested notion derives from one's 'epistemological commitments and theoretical preferences' (Johnson, 2008, p. 310). These plural conceptions of social justice have implications for policy sociology in three distinct and simultaneously interlapping ways (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002). This is mainly due to the enlargement of the social justice agenda which has incorporated more comprehensive models; tensions within and between diverse facets of social justice; as well as diffusion for the responsibility of social justice whose promotion is no longer solely done by the state, but by all those operating within educational institutions, thus collapsing the distinction between action and evaluation. The conceptual plurality of social justice discourse, or should I say discourses, and the lack of precise meaning of the term (Gewirtz, 2002) is a tactic, or technology, utilized by social justice to 'enlarge' the network via the assembling, disassembling, and re-assembling of associations that come into being due to the multitude of social justice versions and their inherent ambiguities and contradictions.

Ryan (2006) attempts to explore the difficulties behind the definition of the concept. This is due to the multitude of versions that exist, coupled with inherent ambiguities and contradictions within these definitions. Moreover, many of the approaches are simply unreasonable and unfeasible. Most social justice commentators concede that it revolves around legitimacy, fairness, welfare, and inclusion. Clark (2006) outlines the philosophical constituents of the social justice concept as the 'perfect world argument', 'just society', 'educated citizens', 'just schools', and 'school instrumentality' in enabling these social justice

interests. ANT sensibilities empower all actors, human and non-human, hereby referring to the various issues falling within the social justice network, to 'speak' their sociologies, being especially concerned with the discursively and materially homogeneous 'world-making' activity of the actors. Educational reform has been comprehended as both the *problem* and the *solution* in addressing the new work order demanded by the constantly complex social change, with education itself identified simultaneously as a gatekeeper of opportunity and a powerful distributor of life chances. Notwithstanding, education reform unfolds for and is instigated by the social justice agenda *and* social justice is *the* driver of education reform, with social justice often positioned as a panacea for the leadership of successful educational reform (McNae & Barnard, 2021). How does education reform assemble, hold, and translate in the social justice network? Are education reform and social justice actors that achieve by '*scaling*, *spacing*, and *contextualizing* each other?' (Latour, 2005, p. 184, original emphasis). ANT encourages questions about the kinds of worlds we are helping to make and legitimate in our accounts, and the ways in which we are helping to compose and reconfigure the very communities, processes, and actors within the social justice network. Why is social justice positioned as the 'elixir' to leadership of successful education reform? Isn't this a reversible and symbiotic relationship? This is perhaps evidence of ANT's 'relational epistemology' (Parker, 2017) where the social justice network is constantly made and re-made, and where both social justice and leadership assemble and hold together as entities, both being capable of translating each other; where action is always 'interaction'. School leaders are tasked with the ordeal of assessing potentially inequitable consequences of these reforms to eventually embark on educational change to generate fair outcomes. On the other hand, school autonomy functions in complex and contradictory ways as both a facilitator and an obstacle in the unfolding of social justice practices. School autonomy can thus be regarded as both a push and pull factor in its function of simultaneously being able to assemble and disassemble the social justice assemblage. Holloway and Keddie (2020) notice a distinction between local and system levels of social justice where the micro does not necessarily translate into the macro. In relation to school autonomy policy discourse, this signifies that principals are '*notionally* empowered' (p. 798, original emphasis) for self-governance to improve their school performance. However, school autonomy may reinforce the competition climate among the stratified and discriminatory school system with access to different resource levels by negotiating policy endeavours for redistributive justice at individual school level.

Francis et al. (2017) highlight that the modus operandi of social justice in state education is complicated not only because of the various definitions

of social justice, but also because of the complicated nature of its policy to practice trajectory. They sketch a number of dichotomies that haunt issues and debates pertaining to social justice in education, which are presented below:

- Locally relevant/engaging curricula versus national entitlement to 'high status knowledge'
- Future outcomes versus engagement (student experience of schooling)
- Teacher professionalism and autonomy versus accountability
- Teachers making *a* difference versus teachers making *the* difference
- Mandatory education versus democratic choice
- Local democracy versus universal principles
- Diversity of provision versus comprehensive equality
- Social diversity versus recognition of difference (choice)
- Public provision versus private provision

When applied to educational policymaking, ANT reconfigures the policy terrain, and in the case of this particular issue under exploration, provokes questions about how actor-networks constrain or enable the performance of social justice and how it is presented in policies and subsequent translation/enactment expectations. The policy-to-practice dichotomies presented above represent the struggle between two network types as identified by Latour (1992) the 'spaces of prescription' in stabilized, convergent networks in relation to the 'spaces of negotiation' in provisional, divergent networks. This constitutes the messy network of social justice in education, while concurrently contributing to its fluidity.

In a perfect world, social justice is not a relevant consideration – it can only be invoked as a ground for policy and practice if the difference leads to an inequality which offends against a principle deemed to be constitutive of a fair society. At the heart of a just society lies equality as a regulatory principle. It is debatable which form this equality ought to take: (1) equality of opportunity, (2) equality of treatment, and (3) equality of outcome (Clark, 2006). Do we regard equality, or rather, the equality principle, as an 'intermediary' and/or a 'mediator' of the social justice actor-network? Is it 'worked-upon' by social justice in order to be utilized as the 'language of the network', thus communicating with schooling, school actors, and related entities, thus translating its intentions into other actors? Or is it the 'mediator', the non-human entity that multiplies the difference of the network? Citizens are not naturally endowed with a spirit of social justice, hence its importance as an aim of

education. Schools must subsequently be so arranged as to achieve this end. Consequently, the school as a social institution may be regarded as an instrument to be used in the interests of social justice, with instrumentality being both internal and external.

Ryan (2006) explores the use of inclusion/exclusion as a lens for addressing social justice issues. Students can be excluded from school premises, learning processes and activities because of their ability, age, race, class, gender, sexuality, and poverty. This approach shifts the blame away from individuals, thus uncovering the taken-for-granted role of institutions and systems in shaping the unequal human relations, and the unjust distribution of goods, rights, and responsibilities. Barad (2007) argues convincingly that justice

> *is not a state that can be achieved once and for all. There are no solutions. There is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly. (p. x)*

Thus, the presence of tensions within social justice categories. North (2006) depicts the three social justice categories of redistribution/recognition, sameness/difference and macro/micro level forces as multidirectional, intersecting spheres, in that these seemingly dichotomous categories often overlap and remain in tension with each other, with the possibility of friction and contradiction within and among spheres. These complex, fraught interactions that emerge when various conceptualizations of social justice collide aid in the promotion of continued dialogue and reflexivity on the aims and potential of education for social justice. The next section traces the role of neoliberalism in the assemblage of the social in/justice network in schooling and education.

ACTOR-NETWORKS OF THE STATE TRANSLATING SCHOOLING IN THE NAME OF THE GLOBAL POLICY CLIMATE?

The politics of the later part of the 20th century have been denoted by the emergence of neoliberalism (Doherty, 2007), which has thus become the dominant political and ideological paradigm of our time (Pinto, 2015). Peters (2001b, pp. 143–144) offers a very succinct outline of the main elements constituting neoliberal governmentality. I will not elaborate on each one due to chapter length constraints, but will briefly mention those relevant to the issues being explored in this section. Neoliberalism fosters a critique of state reason, thus constituting a permanent appraisal of the activity of rule and government.

A current iteration of this is the neoliberal critique of the welfare state. Government is conceived as the community of free, autonomous, self-regulated individuals with an emphasis on the 'responsibilization' of individuals as moral agents. It also incorporates quasi-autonomous individuals and entities through the promotion of self-management, as well as 'degovernmentalization' of the state. 'Government at a distance' is developed through new forms of social accounting, simultaneously with increasing decentralization, 'devolution', and delegation of power, authority and responsibility from the centre to the local institution. Social justice operationalizing through educational leadership and school reform may be regarded as the state's way of 'governing at a distance' and ensuring its welfare state agenda permeates the schooling system by turning it into an education goal.

In this context, neoliberalism may be deemed as the overarching actor-network within the state, that in the sake of network growth, assembles and extends itself through Callon's (1986) four-stage typology of 'moments' of translation. It recruits social justice through 'problematization', by establishing this as a must for successful and equitable school reform, thus attempting to establish itself as an 'obligatory point of passage'. In the meantime, social justice attracts educational leadership and policy in the moment of 'interressement' as they are enrolled to generate school reform. These mobilization moments reveal network durability, in terms of the translations of neoliberalism and neoliberal discourses being extended to other locations beyond the state as the actors and actants from heterogeneous networks aligned by common interests and engaged in convincing others to 'enrol' in the interests defined by the neoliberalism actor-network. The concept of network assemblages draws attention to the 'nodes of action', in this case, schools as social spaces, where the power of the state is enacted and performed through and for the interests and furtherance of social justice.

According to Dean (1999), however, 'The notion of freedom and the free conduct of individuals once again becomes the principle by which government is to be rationalized and reformed' (p. 155). Accordingly, Joseph (2007) describes neoliberalism as 'a political discourse concerned with the governing of individuals from a distance' (p. 7), further stating that it 'gives the pretence of freedom while acting in a coercive way' (p. 8). Government may have become 'more multiple, diffuse, facilitative and empowering', but it is also 'more disciplinary, stringent and punitive' (Dean, 1999, p. 171). This hegemonic neoliberalism has been portrayed as 'the closest thing to a global metanarrative' (Peters, 2001a, p. viii). We have thus witnessed social justice principles integrated in education policy for school leaders to enact in their individual and diverse micro-settings within the meso and macro often socially

unjust systems. These leadership standards, under the guise of social justice principles, might function as 'obligatory points of passage', or critical network channels, in the translation of policy into practice. These become the central assemblages through which all relations tend to flow, for example, leadership practices, school vision and mission, teachers' pedagogy, school textbooks, parents and other stakeholders, the outside community, etc. The power of these obligatory points of passage, in this case standards, can be seen in how these frame the context for policy reception and enactment, while simultaneously influencing leaders' (or leadership) engagements and translations.

Consequently, the global policy climate is 'now impregnated by the tenets, assumptions, ambitions and operational technologies of a neoliberal ethos of government' (Doherty, 2007, p. 202). Neoliberalism can be thus regarded as a set of accountability practices, 'paradoxically re-assert[ing] the State's role … centraliz[ing] and decentraliz[ing] the State' (Webb, 2011, p. 736), with the intention of developing 'governmentality constellations' (Webb, 2011, p. 735). Neoliberal policy tends to be centrally conceived, imposed, and reproduced in the absence of democratic practices and the involvement of the potential perpetrators (Pinto, 2015). Such policies, often propelled by narrative in the form of educational crises, provide governments with a rationale to hastily implement reform in a rhetorical move to provide constancy and manipulation of the crisis situation (Pinto, 2012; Sonu, 2011). Rigorous neoliberal control embedded in policy layers, constructs and performs educators as regulatory tools of the State (Ball et al., 2012; Honan, 2004), besides eroding their professional autonomy. Neoliberal policy within the education system is often characterized by the desire to do away with local government and control, thus allocating more independence and self-management to the schools. Notwithstanding, 'neoliberal public policy quite often runs in tandem with neo-conservative attitudes' (Gillies, 2013, p. 76), as evident in top-down leadership and prescribed curricula.

Ranson's (2008) model of governance seems to be contradicted by the seemingly wider international trend for school autonomy *and* novel forms of state control. This trend, according to Helgoy et al. (2007), incorporates both accountability and 're-regulation' where the 'centre reclaims control, often in an indirect manner, through target setting, performance measurement and the use of quality indicators' (p. 198). For Ball (2003), this simply leads to the appearance of freedom in a 'devolved environment', as he further states that 'it is a misrecognition to see these reform processes as simply a strategy of de-regulation, they are processes of *re-regulation*' (p. 217, original emphasis). According to Lingard and Sellar (2012), a government's agenda which ties in decentralization and autonomy with accountability is a veiled effort to steer schooling

policy from a distance, as 'such governance is strictly regulated through policy setting … and holding providers to account' (Keddie, 2015, p. 2).

ACHIEVING EQUITY AND A SOCIALLY JUST EDUCATION SYSTEM: A PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN POLICY SCRIPT ACTING THROUGH STUDENT DIVERSITY, SCHOOL SUCCESS, AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS DISCOURSES?

Educators have had good reason to be concerned with social justice in a context where diversity has become more pronounced in both our schools and communities, with widening divisions between the advantaged and the disadvantaged (Ryan, 2006). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that educators, policymakers, as well as the general public are increasingly conscious of the fact that in spite of the numerous well-intentioned restructuring, reform, and curricular efforts, many children who are in some way diverse from the previously dominant and traditionally most successful white, middle class children are not achieving school success, with 'success' being translated in terms of access to a wide range of teaching, learning and achievements related to the development of an 'educated citizen' (Shields, 2004). We can observe social justice 'translating' student diversity discourse in relation to school success in order to fit the school effectiveness agenda required by the neoliberal state. There is 'punctualization' at play, with the actor social justice being considered as a sum of other, smaller actors, in this case student diversity, school success, and related discourses. Do these 'ordering struggles' by actors to translate one another become 'black-boxed'? Are student diversity and school success to be regarded as 'immutable mobiles', functioning as the delegates of social justice discourse/s?

Mowat (2018) states that 'the quest to address inequities in educational outcomes associated with socio-economic status is not new, is enduring and is of global significance' (p. 300). She puts forward the case that the problem cannot be tackled via a primary and exclusive focus on the school as the agent of change, but on addressing endemic inequalities within society. Income inequalities have been growing steadily within most OECD countries, being at their peak within the last three decades (OECD, 2016). Social class is closely associated with student and school characteristics, thereby wielding a powerful influence on learning outcomes and student achievement (Schleicher, 2014). OECD highlights the salient attributes of top-performing education systems as having high expectations of all pupils with a specific prominence on equity. This data is derived from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), within a culture of performativity in which nation states

are fuelled by international league tables (Ball, 2003, 2015). The ANT-ish concept of 'symmetry' brings to the fore the relations and forces of 'non-human' actors in the social justice network where income inequalities, social class, the OECD, educational outcomes, and complex school systems 'assemble' and 'hold' together, while simultaneously translating each other. This also constitutes and contributes to the 'assemblage' of the 'blame culture' where the school, which is 'acted-upon' by social justice, is then expected to move from 'actant' to 'actor' state in order to mobilize all the related entities (teachers, students, parents, policies, outcomes, diversity, school success), while connecting them and eventually circulating them in the name of social justice. Harris et al. (2015) question the viability of such comparative international reports that seem to suggest that the replication of strategies in new contexts will automatically result in better outcomes. The complexity of school systems together with the contextual and cultural boundaries in which they function are thus disregarded. How is equity being perceived in OECD reports? (Boyum, 2014). Furthermore, Schleicher (2014) critiques the OECD which frames the problem in terms of what education systems, schools, and teachers can do in order to redress inequalities in society, rather than how redressing inequalities in society can lead to more equitable educational outcomes. This leads to a 'blame culture' in which the entire school community is held accountable and responsible for the circumstances in which it finds itself and for solutions to the problem (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013). Notwithstanding, the OECD does seem to be veering in the other direction of relating educational equity to equity more broadly in society, 'Education's powerful role does not mean that it can work alone. Reducing inequality also requires policies for housing, criminal justice, taxation and health care to work hand in hand with education to make a lasting difference' (OECD, 2016, p. 10).

Francis et al. (2017) argue that research on issues of social justice in education has often failed to engage constructively with education policymaking, which is partially attributed to a lack of precision about what a socially just education system might look like and the means to achieve this. Recent international neoliberal policy trends such as the marketization of education, the increased blurring of the public and private in education provision (Ball, 2013a, 2013b; Hogan, 2014), and the diversification of education for the sake of consumer choice (Mills et al., 2014) have been positioned as challenging and unjust. Notwithstanding, an interest in social inequality in educational outcomes has featured in succeeding global policymaking, especially in Global North countries, in the 21st century. This interest can be partially credited to the findings and influence of the OECD (Francis et al., 2017) via the growing influence of the international league tables enabled by PISA testing

(Sellar & Lingard, 2014; Whitty et al., 2016). Despite receiving critiques for the generation of competition and encouragement of New Public Management techniques (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009), the OECD has promoted the investigation of social inequalities in educational outcomes as part of their PISA research agenda (e.g. OECD, 2010, 2013) via the provision of statistical information frequently drawn upon by those interested in promoting social justice in education. Therefore, while it is acknowledged that social inequalities in educational outcomes need to be addressed in most countries of the Global North, the political question of *how* remains (Francis et al., 2017). These international league tables stabilize themselves as an 'immutable mobile', travelling around education spaces, dictating terms and even shaping the actualities of knowledge and action that are set as the 'standard' for acceptable educational competency and performance.

Comparative studies of the performance of educational systems govern the global policyscape, thus leading to increased pressure on school systems. One particular example is the PISA assessment regime (OECD, 2014) that steers schools to focus solely on an improvement agenda in order to reduce the achievement gap between the groups of high-attaining and low-attaining learners, especially targeting those groups who continue to be marginalized in school education. Thus, within the context of globalization, nations increasingly turn to policy borrowing as a solution to identified problems, with the current policy focus being actively concerned with closing the attainment gap. However, the relationship between policy generation and enactment is not linear, with various points of translation, and mistranslation, of policy intentions (Reeves & Drew, 2012). Forde and Torrance (2017a) consequently deem that,

> *There is a danger that unidimensional and politically expedient solutions will be generated that are short term and largely concerned with targeting individual pupils to improve their examination scores rather than looking at systemic change to address the needs of diverse learners. (p. 117)*

It becomes a case of actors mobilizing politically effective networks and heterogeneous possibilities embedded within any formal iteration of educational standards brought about by these international league tables. It is a matter of these standards, generated by the OECD in the form of PISA results, attempting to create comparability by controlling conduct across space and time, instantiated via the assemblies of texts, objects, bodies, practices, and desires.

Ward et al. (2016) draw attention to the neoliberal hegemony that has come to dominate policy discourse globally while considering the potential for policy compliance and contestation within such a scenario where education

policy serves as an arena for the playing out of political control and authority over the purpose and nature of education, as well as its structures and practices. Governments seek to persuade acceptance of policy by embedding novel ideas within the existing discourse (Harvey, 2009), driven by the policy technologies of marketization, managerialism, and performativity (Ball, 2008). This widespread endorsement of neoliberal beliefs ensures that policy consistent with neoliberal common sense is embraced. Thus, 'specific education policy discourses are deliberately and constructively (re)used, (re)emphasized, and (re)iterated until they enter the public consciousness and become reified' (Ward et al., 2016, p. 46). This is illustrated in their small-scale qualitative study of the implementation of the leadership standards for social justice in Scotland (GTCS, 2012), reified by a documentary analysis of the interpolation of leadership into policy development in Scotland following the OECD (2007) report. How can policy debate about neoliberal policy unfold if a neoliberal consensus and policy ownership have been pre-established?

The under-theorization of social justice in education policy is acknowledged by Gewirtz (1998) who attempts to sketch out a framework for conceptualizing social justice in the context of education policy research. Despite the passage of two decades and the developments in the field of education policy, the following questions are extremely relevant, especially within the hegemony of neoliberal policy discourses globally. Gewirtz (1998) invites us to consider five issues within educational institutions and the wider education system, to investigate the rationale and extent of education policies supporting, interrupting, or subverting: (1) exploitative relationships; (2) processes of marginalization and inclusion; (3) the promotion of relationships based on recognition, respect and mutuality rather than the production of powerlessness; (4) practices of cultural imperialism; and (5) antagonistic practices. This framework is not intended to provide an absolute conceptualization of social justice but to generate scepticism among researchers as to their (un)successful contribution to a social justice agenda. Consequently, applications of ANT add to the ongoing dialogue about written policy versus enacted policy (Colston & Ivey, 2015) by positioning standards as prescriptions that are staged and deliberated across strenuous relational ties and scales of influence (Saldanha, 2002).

Gewirtz (2006) thus argues that social justice in education is both level- and context-dependent, outlining that cross-national or other comparative assessments of social justice cannot be made without considering the various modes in which justice is enacted in practice. Indeed,

> *What criteria can we use to judge whether an educational policy or practice is socially just? How do we make comparative assessments of social justice in education? In other words, how can we tell*

> *whether one national or local education system or one educational institution or one educational policy or practice is more socially just than another? (p. 70)*

The significance of justice can only be properly comprehended within particular settings of interpretation and enactment.

Shields (2004) argues that

> *difference is normal. It is neither to be celebrated nor denigrated. The differences in our schools provide a rich tapestry of human existence that must be the starting point for a deeply democratic, academically excellent, and socially just education. No one is defined by a single factor or characteristic … Difference is an inescapable and foundational quality of our society and our education system. (pp. 127–128)*

The notion of social justice in education has been established within the prevailing neoliberal discourse that has achieved the status of 'an unquestionable orthodoxy that operates as if it were the objective truth' (Patrick, 2013, p. 149). In this light, Newman (2020) regards the various meanings of the term social justice as language games, with this perspective aiding him to argue the fact that he is not averse to the criticism of the use of 'social justice' and related terminology as little more than 'buzz words', but the flexibilities that have been taken advantage of by politicians who attribute different meanings to terms with established meanings in one language game in another. Therefore,

> *It thus seems inevitable that the notion of social justice in education will be a matter of debate and discussion, whereby the different criteria or rules of the different groups and language games are advanced, asserted, and explicated in various ways, (Patrick, 2013, p. 227)*

with each party trying to justify its fixture. So what role is educational leadership expected to play in this game?

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: AN 'INTERMEDIARY' OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND/OR A 'MEDIATOR' FOR NEOLIBERAL RATIONALITIES?

Several Western countries around the world, have experienced unparalleled levels of social, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity that have resulted in increasing discussions around the need for schools to both 'embrace' student

diversity and 'manage' resulting lack of equity issues, in order to serve the common good under the guise of cultural integration and social justice. Few would therefore contest that school leadership has a central role in addressing issues of cultural diversity and equity, with education regarded as a direct social justice contributor both in the provision of equal life opportunities and in imparting students with the responsibility for the perpetration of such opportunities (Waite & Arar, 2020).

Recently, the concept of social justice leadership has emerged within the literature and policy discourse to describe the work of school leaders seeking to enhance the educational experience of all learners (Torrance & Forde, 2017b), in a bid to reduce inequalities in education systems (King & Travers, 2017). In such a context, educational leaders are regarded as vital social justice agents, with the headteacher playing a significant role in shaping the conditions for learning at the micro level (Forde & Torrance, 2017b), exerting influence both across the school as an organization, and at the individual classroom and teacher level (Torrance & Forde, 2017a). 'How socially just leaders make sense of their leadership overall is an essential part of *being* a socially just leader' (McNae, 2017, p. 268, added emphasis). Internationally, increasing emphasis has been placed on utilizing the role of school leadership to address issues of social justice and equality in terms of educational policy, theory, and professional practice (Blackmore, 2009; Bogotch, 2008). An emergent significant factor is the achievement gap between groups of high-attaining and low-attaining learners (Forde & Torrance, 2017b). Niesche and Keddie (2011) identify three productive leadership practices that work 'towards realizing the equity mandates of education policy and disrupting the narrow managerial approaches to equity that currently predominate in schools' (p. 75). These involve fostering a common vision and purpose about equity; supportive social relations between staff; and dispersed leadership (with a distinction from 'distributed' leadership). This also implies the importance of context *for* and *on* social justice leadership (Torrance & Angelle, 2019). School leadership thus acts as an 'intermediary' of social justice (communicating with the other actors while 'translating' its intentions) to serve the broader neoliberal rationalities, while also acting as a 'mediator' for the latter (in terms of acting as an entity multiplying difference) and in turn promoting the social justice network growth.

Consequently, there has been particular concern with how issues of social justice and equity are shaped by broader neoliberal rationalities, regimes, and practices, including new managerialism, high-stakes testing, and accountabilities. These have been enacted within discourses of growth, marketization, competition, choice, improvement, standardization, meritocracy, performativity, managerialism, and school autonomy. Accordingly, these powerful global

reforms have reshaped social justice priorities in schools to a very narrow focus on the 'private' goals of education (social efficiency and social mobility) at the expense of 'public' goals (democratic and citizenship goals) (Niesche & Keddie, 2016). Educational leaders have been targeted as the key players in the promotion and enactment process of social justice in education, expected to foster a just and culturally responsive school environment while increasing the achievement of all students in their attempts at school improvement (Khalifa et al., 2016) in a global setting where the neoliberal agenda has exacerbated social justice issues. Lumby and Moorosi (2022) note that the social justice notion has permeated educational leadership discourse to such an extent that it has been embedded in leaders' roles and expectations (e.g. National Standards for Leadership in Scotland, GTCS, 2012). They detect

> *a kind of unspoken collusion whereby standards are set out for school leadership to rectify inequality, ignoring the limitations of leadership in the face of deep societal inequality … [adopting] a* private matter *perspective … look[ing] inwards to schools, where leadership is to achieve social justice irrespective of the wider political and social context, cuckoo-like shouldering aside radical critiques of who is running education and, in whose interests. (pp. 237–238, original emphasis)*

Literature thus contends that 'educational leadership and social justice are, and must be, inextricably interconnected' (Bogotch & Shields, 2014, p. 10). Middlewood (2007) further explains that for educators, leadership for social justice comprises the confrontation of 'major issues, such as those of equity, diversity and inclusion, in stimulating the changes needed for the embedding of social justice' (p. vii). It is also acknowledged that the concepts of leadership and social justice are discursive constructs present in specific economic, political and social realities, as such being highly contested notions (Niesche & Keddie, 2016). Consequently, Sarid (2021) proposes four principles that are prevalent in social justice leadership discourse, that is being (1) disruptive; (2) collaborative; (3) dilemmatic/tense; and (4) emergent-contextual. Social justice leadership disrupts the status quo in its pledge to exposing and eradicating social norms, practices, and structures responsible for engendering inequity and injustice. Social justice leadership is considered highly dilemmatic and paradoxical due to the conflicting dimensions composing the notion of social justice combined with conflicting considerations of implementing social justice policies (Bogotch & Kervin, 2019), with a growing perception that 'the ends of social justice should be seen in the plural, and that these ends are not necessarily complementary: implementing one end comes at the price of other,

no less significant, ends' (Sarid, 2021, p. 11). Social justice leadership fosters collaboration and decision-making in addressing issues of power and entitlement via the promotion of democratic processes. Social justice in practice being 'messy, complex, and fraught with contradictions' (Sarid, 2021, p. 12), leaders react to everyday social needs and issues in schools without following any prescribed models. From an ANT-ish approach, we may understand this social justice leadership within the network of education reform (for the sake of equity and social justice) as an attempt at 'school change' via the mobilization of school practices and the connections and linkages made as they move.

Educational leaders with a deep understanding of social justice leadership are crucial in stemming the reproduction of disadvantage through schooling in underprivileged areas (Niesche, 2017; Smyth, 2012). In the words of McNae and Barnard (2021),

> *exposing injustices is* part of the job *for socially just educational leaders who are* required *to move from their theorizing to action through dialogically respectful but active pursuit of revealing, disrupting, and subverting policies, procedures, and practices which are exploiting, marginalizing, or recycling unjust positions of power. (p. 209, original emphasis)*

Within an increasingly globalized educational setting, school effectiveness and performance discourses dictate the various facets of social justice and how these are addressed in schools. Thus, the voices calling for 'measurement, assessment, accountability, and performance' are vociferous, seeking to dominate the attention of leadership (McNae, 2014). These discourses epitomize educational reform premised on a logic of implementation and measurement, directed at transforming pedagogy and other school structures to increase student achievement. From an ANT approach, this attracts critical questions about hegemonic reform purposes, agendas, and exclusions embodied in state-initiated reform efforts.

Is the Western Notion of the Leadership for Social Justice Concept Universally Applicable? Reversing the 'Obligatory Point of Passage' and 'Un-translating' the Social Justice Actor-Network Emanating from the Anglophone Nations?

Oplatka and Arar (2016) in turn problematize the notion of leadership for social justice as constructed in dominant Western ideologies, reaching the simple conclusion that 'traditional societies need a particular conceptualization

of leadership for social justice that is based on entrenched social norms giving unique meanings to issues of justice, respect, interpersonal relations, equality and equity in education' (p. 366). Any attempt to impose Western-based concepts of social justice and leadership on the educational systems of diverse societies is a foregone conclusion, with these concepts being too normatively remote from local interpretations of life and the 'apposite' structure of the society. Oplatka and Arar (2016) highlight plausible incongruities between the principles constituting leadership for social justice in its 'Western' meanings and rudimentary features of traditional society by focusing on four major elements that vary widely between these two dichotomous societies. These relate to: (1) decreasing achievement gaps; (2) intensifying social justice in school; (3) incorporating democratic/ethical values; (4) stimulating critical dialogues and consciousness. These contradictions are present in the dichotomies of individual versus collective orientation; ascription versus achievement; particularistic versus universalistic relationships; autocracy versus democracy; and maintenance versus innovativeness. Why are educational leaders who live and work in traditional societies constrained to follow leadership for social justice constructs embedded in Western ideologies, rather than local ones? The Western, often taken-for-granted and unproblematized concept of social justice evokes various 'ordering practices', with Western-based meanings and values functioning to have a stabilizing effect on school leadership in traditional societies. Notwithstanding, the 'different emerging ontological forms' of the same ('universal') social justice standards and values across actor-networks highlight the fact that these are not universally performed. Consequently, entanglements between prescriptive forces and actual performances spawn a 'local universality', that results from actors assembled in mutual contexts. 'Networks of prescription and negotiation' materialize from this interplay of acquiescence and defiance, with these tensions being re-performed across various network assemblages.

The universal applicability of the Western leadership for social justice concept is re-visited by Gumus et al. (2021) in their review of international research on school leadership for social justice, equity, and diversity via the identification of three clusters. Social justice leadership research focuses on (1) social justice, diversity, equity, and cultural responsiveness; (2) inclusive education; and (3) ethnicity, race, religion, and gender (presented in order of co-occurrence frequency). The distinction of this research stream is attributed to the broadening of social justice leadership research in distinct and differential nations, potentially due to intercultural collaboration between educational leadership scholars and the staid social justice tribulations emanating from the social and political upheavals in various global regions (Arar et al., 2017).

Notwithstanding, Lumby and Moorosi (2022) contest this by articulating that

> *the persisting dominance of literature from Anglophone nations evidences the asymmetrical power structures in how knowledge is produced and consumed … [with] those who do find a voice through publication contribute to equality by their presence, while simultaneously detracting from it … [thus] create[ing] a form of epistemic injustice wherein relations of power and lack of access to resources created by colonialism constrain the Global South community from making their own values understood and accepted. (pp. 240–241)*

They also question Hallinger and Kovacevic (2021) decision not to classify research on social justice leadership as a canon, disregarding its potential to be classified as a coherent school of thought. These notions of global geographical location, voice, and canon constitute 'an equality double bind whereby, like a Trojan virus, parameters limiting change are embedded in the very work that seeks to promote it' (Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021, p. 233), albeit 'an illustration of the law of unintended consequences' (p. 246). An ANT-ish outlook leads us to comprehend the mechanics of power at play, with this particular necessity for social justice in education concerning itself with the stabilization and reproduction of some interactions over others, the construction and maintenance of network centres and peripheries, and the establishment of hegemony. May this indeed be regarded as a 'persuasive' rather than 'possessive' power (Crawford, 2004), obtained through the number of entities networked and generated in a relational and distributed manner through 'ordering struggles'?

Despite international interest in social justice leadership, there is the need to explore its meaning in different contexts (Bryant et al., 2014), as well as the contested nature of leadership itself and its relationship with the discourses of social justice and equity (Niesche & Keddie, 2016). Ryan (2006) sums this up very aptly when he implies that,

> *Leadership and social justice are not natural bedfellows; nor are leadership and inclusion. The extent to which leadership meshes with social justice or inclusion depends on the way in which leadership is conceived, that is, in the way that relationships are envisioned among members of institutions, in the roles that are prescribed for individuals and groups, and in the ends to which leadership activities are directed. (p. 7)*

Gewirtz (2006) advocates a contextualized approach to social justice in education that considers the specificity of local contexts and levels of enactment impinging on the practices being implemented as 'different histories, social, and cultural configurations and different sets of constraints mean that different justice dimensions are relatively fore-grounded – or alternatively neglected – within different national contexts' (p. 80). This is reinforced by Newman (2020) in his call for the *re*contextualization rather than the *de*contextualization of social justice issues in education as, 'An approach which attempts to decontextualize social justice can be seen as an attempt to impose a particular meaning of the term onto others' (p. 228).

CONCLUSIONS

ANT gives space for a multi-sited approach analysis of the various ways and means by and through which social justice is enacted and performed in compulsory school settings, via the tracing of assemblages of both human and non-human actors/forces and the eventual establishment of roles and scripts. ANT affords fruitful questions for considering educational reform (Fenwick, 2011), with leadership for social justice hereby considered a panacea for such successful school reform processes. How does social justice work over time and place? How do different actors respond? What rhetorical and material struggles ensue, and what actually changes?

ANT examines the micro-negotiations that continuously unfold to enrol and mobilize all the human and non-human elements into common practices and understandings that begin to resemble a stabilized 'network' of social justice in compulsory schooling. ANT readings ask: How did this network come to extend itself? How did the various entities come to be combined? What connections are continuing to hold, and what is holding them in place? What changes occurred and what remained stabilized? Where did resistance emerge, and what happened?

ANT approaches generate unique analysis of educational reform by tracing the rich material trajectories of the actors being followed by the researcher. Moreover, ANT's language can open up new questions, following an approach that enables the researcher to 'discern the difficult ambivalences, messes, multiplicities and contradictions' (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 1) entrenched in numerous educational matters. Education is viewed as an assemblage, 'only becoming possible through its own enactment as a separate domain' (Fenwick & Landri, 2012, p. 2). As a result of this,

> *Socio-material studies shift the conversation from issues defined by the personal and the social to questions about these assemblages,*

> *how they move, and how they produce what may appear to be distinct objects, subjects, and events. How and why do certain combinations of things come together to exert particular effects? … How do some assemblages become stable, and what force do they wield? How can more oppressive assemblages be interrupted and weakened? (Fenwick & Landri, 2012, p. 3)*

Problematizing the notion of social justice in education as presented in the literature via ANT is meant to generate scepticism and critique among the policy makers, academics, and education practitioners who are concerned with issues of social justice and equity in schools. The issues raised in this conceptual chapter are legitimate across the international context, especially due to the increasing globalization of education policy (Ball, 2008) and the global extension of practices of policy borrowing widely established among Western nations (Lingard, 2010; Whitty et al., 2016), moreover when combined with the expansion of social justice leadership research across various global regions (Arar et al., 2017).

NOTE

1. For further details on the use of ANT in education research, kindly refer to Mifsud (2014, 2020). Only the basic information in relation to ANT concepts was included in this section due to word length constraints.

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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. *Does education reform act as a help or a hindrance for the social justice agenda?*
2. *How does the global policy climate contribute to socially just schooling?*
3. *To what extent do you consider school leadership to act as an 'intermediary' for social justice as both a schooling and society outcome?*
4. *How can Actor-Network Theory help us be critical of educational policy and leadership theories/practices in order to foster social justice and equity in schools?*

FURTHER READING

1. **Fenwick, T., & Edwards, R. (2010). *Actor-network theory and education*. Routledge.**

This book offers an introduction to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) for educators to consider in three ways. One mode is the introduction of concepts, approaches, and debates around ANT as a research approach in education. A second mode showcases educational studies that have employed ANT approaches in classrooms, workplaces, and community settings, drawn from the UK, USA, Canada, Europe, and Australia. These demonstrate how ANT can operate in highly diverse ways whether it focuses on policy critique, curriculum inquiry, engagements with digital media, change and innovation, issues of accountability,

or exploring how knowledge unfolds and becomes materialized in various settings. A third mode looks at recent 'after-ANT' inquiries which open an array of important new approaches. Across these diverse environments and uptakes, the authors trace how learning and practice emerge, show what scales are at play, and demonstrate what this means for educational possibilities.

2. **Landri (2020). *Educational leadership, management, and administration through actor-network theory*. Routledge.**

This book presents how actor-network theory (ANT) and the related vocabularies have much to offer to a critical re-imagination of the dynamics of management in education and educational leadership. It extends the growing contemporary perspective of ANT into the study of educational administration and management. This book draws on case studies focusing on new configurations of educational management and leadership. It presents new developments of ANT ('After ANT' and 'Near ANT') and clarifies how these 'sensibilities' can contribute to thinking critically and intervening in the current dynamics of education. The book proposes that ANT can offer an ecological understanding of educational leadership which is helpful in abandoning the narrow humanistic world of managerialism, considering a post-anthropocentric scenario where it is necessary to compose together new 'liveable' assemblages of humans and nonhumans.

3. **Mifsud (2020). A critical review of actor-network theory and its use in education research. In E. Idemudia (Ed.), *Optimizing social and organizational dynamics in the digital era* (pp. 135–156). IGI Global.**

This chapter, which expands on a previous publication (Mifsud, 2014), presents a critique of actor-network theory as a sociomaterial concept. Furthermore, the author problematizes the relative under-application of this 'sensibility' in education research, while simultaneously exploring its contribution as an analytical framework through its central concepts of 'actor-network', 'symmetry', 'translation', and their constituents. This chapter zooms on the concepts of networks and power relations. The author questions the prevalent notion of the 'network' metaphor promulgated by globalization discourses, setting it up against the network conception in actor-network theory, where the main principle is multiplicity. Actor network theory is analysed as a theory of the mechanics of power, concerning itself with the setting up of hegemony. This chapter is especially targeted for researchers of education reform who are as yet unfamiliar with the concepts of Actor-Network Theory and somewhat wary of the validity of sociomaterialism in the analysis of education issues.

4. **Mifsud, D. (2021). (Mis)leading for social (in)justice and (in)equity … (un)following a script? In D. Mifsud (Ed.),** ***Narratives of educational leadership: Representing research via creative analytic practices*** **(pp. 73–113). Springer.**

This chapter presents a narrative dramatization of leadership for social (in)justice from the author's own experience within a Maltese society welcoming an ever-increasing influx of migrants and a local economic reality with identified skills shortages. It is within such a de-stabilized socio-economic reality created by the arrival of migrants that this chapter seeks to explore how issues of social justice and equity are addressed through a juxtaposition of policy and practice via leadership performances within two primary schools, with a specific reference to migrant learners and students from poor social backgrounds. This particular leadership narrative is presented in a semi-fictionalized narrative dramatization made up of various characters in which the author employs the 'triple' use of narrative (Mifsud, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). The three scenes of 'The Script' enable her to draw out the absurdities, inconsistencies, and inherent contradictions where (dys)functional leadership is not necessarily unfolding as set out in the policy documents that purport social justice and equity. The findings of this small-scale case study have implications for other national systems, particularly those that are concerned with addressing issues of social justice and equity via schooling.

5. **Mifsud (2024). (Guest editor). Editorial: Exploring educational leadership and policy through Actor-Network Theory: On being ANTish in the ELMA field.** ***Journal of Educational Administration and History****, 56***(1), 1–6.**

The editorial of this guest-edited special issue highlights the main features of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and how these can be applied in the educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA) field, where this theory has been under-utilized so far. The six contributors in this special issue apply ANT to explorations of ELMA and education policy by framing 'educational problems' indifferent education settings and distinct contexts, involving a variety of human and non-human actors, in disparate ways.

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PROBLEMATIZING EQUITY IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY: AN APPLICATION OF BACCHI'S POST-STRUCTURAL ANALYTICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Achieving basic education and equitable education outcomes remains a challenge, therefore, improving equity in education has evolved as a particularly important policy priority in all OECD countries. This chapter concentrates on equity in the Maltese education system, with a particular focus on how the policyscape makes provision for achieving, improving, and maintaining equity in compulsory schooling. As an EU member state, Malta has been affected by the evolution, causes, and consequences of social, educational, and economic inequalities that have been an ardently contentious and controversial issue given the recent economic crisis in Europe. This chapter utilizes Bacchi's 'What's the problem

represented to be?' (WPR) approach to analyse national school inclusion policy in Malta as illustrative of policies mobilized to address the problem of inequality, therefore acknowledging the need for a provision of equity as a major agenda. The results of this small-scale study have theoretical and methodological implications for academics, policymakers, and practitioners in the educational policy field. This study highlights the fact that there are a number of persistent challenges for achieving equity in education, especially the immigrant-native educational gap, despite European policy makers having been very active in the educational field.

Keywords: Bacchi; equity; inclusion; Malta; OECD; post-structural policy analysis; problem representation

INTRODUCTION

> *The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that scars from unresolved societal challenges may run deeper than many have anticipated. Inequality. Economic polarisation. The loss of a sense of common good. Broken expectations for a fair future. A contributor to this growing unrest is the persistent belief that the cards we were dealt with at birth determine our future. Too few adults beat the odds their personal characteristics have fated them to: those from a disadvantaged background are less likely to participate in education, perform well, find suitable employment and pursue lifelong learning. As a result, they are less likely to develop the skills needed to succeed in our changing economy. And they are at higher risk of transmitting this disadvantage to the next generation. (Doumet, 2021, n.p.)*

The pandemic-induced school closures and the ensuing home-schooling widened the already present gap for disadvantaged students, whose experience mainly depended on the level of home support provided. This matter may be considered as an example of technology-assisted teaching and learning amplifying existing inequalities in access and quality of learning (Mifsud, 2022). Governments faced numerous challenges as they transitioned to distance learning, such as limited institutional capacity to support teachers, poor access for vulnerable populations, and lack of coherent policies and funds to support remote learning (UNESCO et al., 2021). Following substantial periods of closure, students returned with unequal levels of knowledge and skills. Some students, especially those from more underprivileged backgrounds, failed to return. Understanding and mitigating the impact of school closures, especially

in terms of learning losses is high on the agenda of education policy makers who are striving to minimize disruptions to education, particularly towards the most disadvantaged. This leads to an explicit emphasis on equity in education.

Equity 'is viewed as the extent to which individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, treatment, and outcomes' (European Commission, 2006, p. 2). In other words, equity in education and schooling is based on the premises of fairness and inclusion, which signifies that personal and/or social circumstances such as race, gender, socio-economic status, age, and geographical location, among other factors, do not pose obstacles to the accomplishment of a student's educational aptitude and the accomplishment of a modicum level of competences. Consequently, equity does not imply the provision of the same resources to students, nor them having the same outcomes (OECD, 2012). Achieving basic education and equitable education outcomes remains a challenge (OECD, 2021); therefore, improving equity in education has evolved as a particularly important policy priority in all OECD countries.

This chapter concentrates on equity in the Maltese education system, with a particular focus on how the policyscape makes provision for achieving, improving, and maintaining equity in compulsory schooling. As an EU member state, Malta has been affected by the evolution, causes, and consequences of social, educational, and economic inequalities that have been an ardently contentious and controversial issue given the recent economic crisis in Europe. In Malta, responsibility for the education system lies with the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR). Education is provided by state, church (predominantly Catholic), and independent schools. The government's education policy is underscored by two main premises: equity and quality. This commitment is evidenced by an inclusive policy to all levels of education, together with the provision of free education from early childhood education and care to tertiary education in state institutions, except for students from non-EU/EAA countries. The state subsidizes church schools, which do not charge tuition fees, and grants tax rebates to parents whose children attend independent schools.

This chapter utilizes Bacchi's (2009, 2012) WPR approach to analyse national school inclusion policy in Malta, more specifically 'A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools' and 'A National Inclusive Education Framework' (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019). These policy documents embrace the concept, values, and principles of inclusive education into the realm of responding positively to all learners' diversity, with the aim of bringing together all the stakeholders in order to create a school environment conducive to learning, thereby giving all learners the education they are entitled to. The adopted WPR policy analysis approach provides a systematic

methodology to critically question 'the taken-for-granted assumptions that lodge in government policies and policy proposals by interrogating (problematizing) the problem representations it uncovers within them' (Bacchi, 2009, p. xv), which in this case would be the notion of equity as represented in Maltese education policy and how this is expected to be conceived, translated, and interpreted by the policy actors and/or subjects in compulsory schooling.

The following section problematizes the concept of equity in education/schooling and subsequently education policy, as presented in the literature. This is followed by a presentation of the Maltese policy background in relation to equity, with a particular focus on the school population demographics due to migrant students that have been exacerbated by the recent influx of EU and non-EU/EAA migrants, and the resulting intersectionality of race, religion, culture with the socio-economic status. I discuss Bacchi's (2009, 2012) WPR approach and the rationale behind its application to analyse national school inclusion policy documents in Malta. The actual policy analyses follow, together with the discussion, limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclusions in relation to policy and practice with regards to improving equity in relation to post-pandemic schooling provision.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Equity in Education: A Necessary Pre-Condition for and/or Desirable Outcome of Schooling? What Is Equity and Why Is It Needed in Education?

The OECD builds its definition of equity on the principles of inclusion and fairness, without implying the need for similar outcomes among all students, nor the provision of the same teaching and learning resources, but considers the individual's specific needs. Equity in education is a necessity, rather than a desirable outcome for various reasons. This is mainly due to the fact that education and its subsequent impact on one's life opportunities and future contribution to society and economy being a basic human right. Hence, enhancing equity in education is a high priority in all OECD countries. While education systems with greater equity have a number of features in common related to organization and governance, access and participation, finance and funding, migrant background, digital divide, socio-economic status, special needs, and gender, no one policy or practice offers a warranty of success (OECD, 2012).

Equity has emerged as both a policy and research priority in the European Union (Hippe et al., 2016). It is one of the priority areas of the strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training (ET,

2020) (European Commission, 2016). This has mainly developed due to the acknowledgement of the controversial nature of redistributive policies; attributing differences in economic performance to unequal opportunities rather than income inequalities, leading to insights about the population subgroups who would reap the most benefits from policy interventions. Consequently, research exploring equity and inequality in education has thrived over the last decade, translating into numerous educational reforms across the EU and OECD countries. The OECD categorizes educational reforms under six broad categories, one of which is Equity (and Quality) (EQ) (OECD, 2016).

The equity issue raises further questions around social justice and the role schools have to play in this regard:

> *If school-level education … influences job prospects and income, should it be a means to address economic inequalities in society? Should education authorities strive for an equal distribution of educational opportunities, of positive educational outcomes, or of both? Moreover, should education authorities do anything to combat the phenomenon whereby students from lower socio-economic family backgrounds are, on average, less likely to achieve good results in schools? (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020, p. 27)*

While schools are crucial to ensure the provision of equitable education, they may also contribute (advertently or inadvertently) to the transformation of socio-economic inequalities into educational inequalities. Schools are embedded within the wider education system with its own particular structure, policies, practices, and traditions that ultimately have a bearing upon the degree of equity in education. Fig. 1 illustrates inter-related system-level features that influence equity in schooling according to a standardization-stratification continuum.

The degree of stratification in an education system reflects the extent of educational differentiation in terms of student groupings or geographical segregation, for example. Standardization refers to reaching nationwide benchmarks and this may take the form of standardization of input (in terms of curriculum, teacher quality, and resource allocation) and standardization of output (in terms of school leaving examinations and external school evaluation) (Checchi et al., 2016). On the stratification side of the wheel, Eurydice (2020) includes diversity of school types; school choice; school admission policies; tracking; and grade repetition. The standardization side comprises school autonomy and school accountability. Support measures for equity promotion in education include support for disadvantaged schools and low-achieving students, as well as measures to increase student learning opportunities; funding; and early childhood education and care provision.

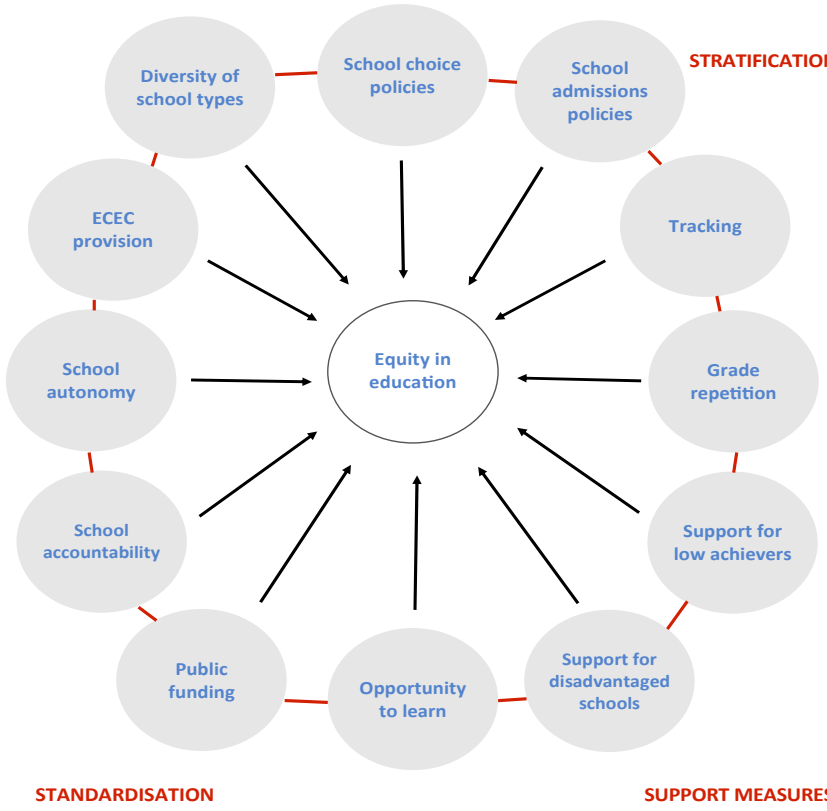

Fig. 1. Systemic Factors Potentially Influencing Equity in School Education (Adapted from Eurydice, 2020, p. 31).

Drawing on the latest international student assessment data, equity in school, in terms of both inclusion and fairness, varies widely across Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020), which is not surprising as the report includes the different structures and policies of 42 education systems across 37 countries. While highly stratified systems exhibit lower equity levels, especially at secondary level, none of the policies intending to offset systemic stratification had a statistically significant bearing on equity. This leads to another dilemma in the education equity discourse/s which is the confusion over 'inclusion' and 'equity' as principles since they are context-based, according to Ainscow (2020a), thus having a distinct meaning to different people, with local education policies failing to clarify these widely understood definitions. Lack of consensus over the 'inclusive education' concept remains (Ainscow, 2020b), despite its global understanding as a principle embracing diversity amongst all learners in its quest to eliminate social exclusion emanating from

discriminatory attitudes about race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and ability (UNESCO, 2017). Raffo and Gunter (2008) explore the equity problematic with regards to social inclusion and education, with a specific focus on economic and cultural inclusion with regards to gender, race, and ethnicity. To what extent can education bring about economic inclusion as a surrogate for social inclusion? How may institutional rules and processes culturally exclude some groups due to representation and stereotyping within school systems and discourses?

This equity problem leads to three recent phenomena that have emerged from other transversal research areas that shed light on the spatial dimension of education, thus furthering our understanding of the sources and consequences of educational inequities within Europe. These are territorial development; gender inequality; and immigration (Hippe et al., 2016). Relevant regional variations within countries exist, often these being more pronounced than between different countries in the EU. Despite women having outperformed men in educational attainment (Meschi & Scervini, 2014), disparities still exist that are attributable to cultural values and attitudes rather than lower ability (OECD, 2015). The integration of immigrants across European educational systems is a policy priority due to their very low achievement in relation to native students in the majority of European countries.

The OECD: Equity and Education Policy

The OECD has emerged as a significant universal policy actor at the forefront of 'a global education policy field' (Lingard, 2011, p. 368) while contributing to 'policy convergence' (Grek, 2009) across nations through its policy suggestions that are not meant to be binding but simply suggestive. The OECD utilizes its international assessment programmes as a means of comparing educational performance across nations, which ultimately leads to a concern with equity in education. Boyum (2014) problematizes the notion of equity as promoted by the OECD, questioning its place within the neoliberal thrust of OECD education policy and the marketization of education. Equity has detached itself from traditional ideas of social justice and guised itself as formal access to education and participation in economic markets. However, the concept of fairness is isolated from social justice as a whole, with hardly any attempt to relate fairness within the educational system to fairness within the social system at both micro and macro levels. In the words of Boyum (2014, p. 868), 'While the OECD insist strongly that coming from a disadvantaged home should not be a disadvantage in education, they do not question whether there should be disadvantaged homes at all'.

On the other hand, Savage et al. (2013) argue that the OECD has been the driving force in discerning 'equity' from previous conceptions of 'equality'. The equity concept varies across education policies in different systems, thus leading to varying policy implications. What constitutes 'fairness' or 'justice' or 'egalitarianism' is debatable. Equity may be understood in terms of 'fairness', thus implying redistributive policies, while if understood in terms of 'inclusion' and 'recognition' this would imply constructive policies, while 'equality of opportunity' leads to the 'education for all' policy movement. Equity as a concept 'often remains nebulous and ill-defined in policies' while 'inequity has remained a vexatious policy problem globally' (Savage et al., 2013, p. 161). Clarke (2014) refers to 'equity as a sublime object', leading to 'accountability with a conscience' (p. 592), ultimately declaring that 'equity dilemmas are never far from centre stage in social and political life' (p. 593). This also leads to the implication that policy discourses around equity are positioned on the presumption of inadequacy, thus rendering current equity arrangements for the welfare state as unrighteous and in dire need of transformation.

The reconstitution of education within the hegemony of contemporary neoliberal policy makes us reflect on the convergence of *economic* concerns with productivity (translated in the 'quality' focus in education policy) with the *political* concerns of democratic access, inclusion, and participation (translated in 'equity' in education policy terms) (Clarke, 2014). The 'quality' and 'equity' notion in education policy may also be problematized around concerns of *what* is to be distributed; *who* are the distributees; *how* it is to be distributed; the *manner* of distribution; with an emphasis on the *process* or *product*, while embracing *universal* or *particular* values. In fact, social justice in the political realm is a highly contested notion, with policy thinking around this notion in most western countries revolving around the three distinct philosophical traditions of liberal-humanism, market-individualism, and social democracy, with different countries highlighting distinctive aspects of these traditions (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Due to restricted state policy choices in an era of globalization, national policy mechanisms have become more interconnected within a networked, restructured state, highlighting the need to explore international issues of education and justice from comparative *and* relational terms. Policy is contestable due to its conceptual complexity and context dependability, encompassing a wider net than government policymakers and the generated policy texts. It comprises everyday practices and artefacts, moulded and performed by multiple human and non-human actors in a mesh of interdependent local and global contexts (Ball, 2012; Ball et al., 2012).

BACKGROUND

Education in Malta: Compulsory Schooling, Education Policy, and the Pursuit of Equity

The common thread running through education reforms in Malta post-independence is the widening of access to education, thus being in line with the politics of social justice.

The Maltese educational system which is largely centralized due to the size of the country has been undergoing a structured, gradual but steady change in terms of decentralization and increased school autonomy, with the main aim being that of renewal – modernizing it in line with global policy development. This unfolded via a revised national minimum curriculum published in 1999, establishing compulsory schooling as the start of a lifelong process of education. This was followed by the introduction of state school networks according to their geographical location for the provision of continuous education from 3 to 16. Subsequently, mixed-ability classes were introduced throughout the primary school years, eliminating the hitherto streamed primary classes in the final two years, followed by the phasing out of the 11+ examination – thus enabling a smoother flow from one level of education to another.

A further curriculum review in 2012 led to a framework that replaced discriminatory educational arrangements with comprehensive ones in a bid to promote progress for all learners. Additional equity and decentralization in the national system were attempted through a learning outcomes framework intending to address individual learning needs through the freedom from centrally imposed knowledge-centric syllabi. Another recent landmark in compulsory education has been the launch of a 'Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024' (MEDE, 2014a), based on the four values of equity, social justice, inclusivity, and diversity, in order to provide generations with skills and talents for employability and citizenship in the twenty-first century, thus aiming to reduce the gaps in education outcomes, reduce the high incidence of early school-leavers, and increase participation in lifelong learning.

'Education for All: Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta' (European Agency for Special Needs & Inclusive Education, 2014) is a report commissioned by the Minister for Education and Employment that examines special needs education provision in Malta. The main findings reveal an education system that reinforces an integrative approach for some learners, rather than an inclusive one for all; school level practices that do not foster inclusion; in addition to a lack of equity and full participation for all. This led to the drafting and eventual launch of 'A Policy on Inclusive Education

in Schools' and 'A National Inclusive Education Framework' (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019), that embrace the concept, values, and principles of inclusive education into the realm of responding positively to all learners' diversity. These aim to bring together all the stakeholders in order to create a school environment conducive to learning, thereby giving all learners the education they are entitled to. The majority of students attend mainstream schools, with only a small percentage attending resource centres that cater for those with severe special educational needs (SEN). Different learning provision is in place for those attending mainstream schools, namely in the form of individualized education programmes (IEPs) for SEN students who have the support of a learning support educator (LSE) on a full time or shared basis; services for students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD); complementary education programmes in primary schools, in addition to the Prince Trust, the Core Curriculum Programme (CCP), and the Alternative Learning Programme (ALP) in the secondary cycle for those students who require remedial support; as well as the ethics programme for non-Catholic students.

In the meantime, other realities have been unfolding gradually alongside the major reforms happening in the education policyscape. One such recent reform is the introduction of co-education. Although this has been common practice across the state, church, and independent sectors at primary level and in the latter sector at secondary level, it was introduced in state secondary schools in 2013 as an ongoing pilot project. Mid-year examinations in state schools were replaced by continuous formative assessment. Other novelties that were introduced in order to bring about the projected provision of an equitable quality education are the introduction of vocational education and training (VET) subjects at secondary level and a specific focus on e-learning, among others. Due to unprecedented developments within the country's economy thus leading to a new social and cultural reality, teachers have to operate within a globalized environment with an ever-increasing influx of migrants and a local economic reality with identified skills shortages. To partly address this situation and thus improve the integration of migrant children, a Third Country National Co-Ordinator was appointed to advise schools in 2013, with the setting up of the Migrant Learners' Unit at a later date. New challenges, previously non-existent, have been brought about by this situation in terms of language issues, religious beliefs, and the differing expectations of parents.

Overall, Malta occupies a joint 15th place on the EU Social Justice Index. However, when it comes to equitable education, Malta features at the bottom of the EU standings in the area of equitable education (Schraad-Tischler et al., 2017). Consequently, the European Commission has once again called on Malta

to strengthen access to education in its 2019 country-specific recommendations. This therefore points to a very serious achievement gap that is evident in erratic instruction quality, large numbers of under-achievers, school-level variance in achievement, comparatively low participation rates at post-secondary level, gender disparities in achievement, curricular experiences which are not designed to enhance equity in access to education, restricted access to day-care provision and investment in early childhood provision below EU average. Malta has kept step with EU countries in practically all EU education benchmarks. Additionally, in recent years, Malta has participated for the first time in the 'Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study' (TIMSS), 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study' (PIRLS), and 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) international studies. These confirmed that whilst our top achievers compare well with those of other countries, we have an unacceptably high level of low achievers. The EU2020 target is to have less than 15% of the student population classified as 'low achievers'.

METHODOLOGY

Utilizing Bacchi's (2009, 2012) WPR Approach to Analyse National School Inclusion Policy in the Maltese State Education System

I make a deliberate choice to use Bacchi's (2009, 2012) WPR approach as my main methodological modus operandi of policy analysis for this small-scale research mainly due to three main reasons that will be described briefly hereunder. It is inspired by Foucauldian theory, more specifically his notions of 'discourse' and 'governmentality', that allows me to draw on his 'trident' (Gillies, 2013) of scepticism, critique, and problematization while adopting a post-structuralist research analysis as a 'political practice'. Secondly, Bacchi's Foucauldian-inspired post-structural approach seems to respond to Ball's (1993) seminal work 'What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes', more specifically the aligning of 'policy as text' versus 'policy as discourse'. Thirdly, engagement with the WPR framework leads to self-problematization, and consequently self-reflexivity, due to the inclusion of oneself and one's philosophy as part of the analysis process (Bacchi, 2012). Besides resonating with my professional background and experience as simultaneous academic, educational leader/practitioner, and policy actor/subject, this carries particular implications for the intended audience of this book that spans across academics, school practitioners and policymakers.

Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) make a very strong case for a post-structural approach to policy analysis in the provision of such a methodology as a medium for interrogating the unfolding of governmentality. Additionally, it probes and problematizes taken-for-granted policy associations, namely policy itself, knowledges supporting policy and policy proposals, and conventional forms of policy analysis. While noting the absence of post-structuralism in the field of policy research and analysis, they extol its focus on contingency, heterogeneity, plurality and 'constructed' knowledges – 'An explicit challenge to the conventional view that policies *address* problems, it approaches policies as problematizations that *produce* "problems" as particular types of problems' (p. 6, added emphasis).

Ball's (1993) distinction between 'policy as text' and 'policy as discourse' emphasizes policy as both product and process; its presentation and interpretation (policy as text), as well as its framing and discourse development (policy as discourse), the latter giving rise as to

> *who can speak, when, where, and with what authority … We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us … We do not 'know' what we say, we 'are' what we say and do … we are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies. (p. 14)*

This bold approach to policy sociology is presented by Ball (2015) himself as

> *an attempt to disrupt those comforts and to make us think about how we are made-up as researchers and scholars. It was flawed and brittle and dangerous, but for me it works … as providing a space in which it is necessary to think about what I do. (p. 312)*

Following the same consciousness, Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) promote 'a post-structural sensibility', regarding 'the policy worker *cum* analyst as engaged in the practices of interrogating, criticizing, and evaluating policies, and through these practices, *unmaking* and *re-making policy*' (p. 9, added emphasis).

The WPR approach broadens Foucault's agenda as an analytic strategy, taking forward his concepts of governmentality, discourse, subjectification, and power relations, among others the notion that all policy proposals rely on problematizations that can be opened up and critiqued, creating spaces for contestation, unmaking, and remaking. The WPR methodology interrogates the particular problematizations within policies in its attempt to make visible the politics in the making of 'problems', while making the case that policies 'produce' problems as particular sorts of problems, rather than 'addressing' existing ones. WPR utilizes a 'working backwards' approach to unpack the 'problem representation' (Bacchi, 2009) by critically teasing out its conceptual underpinnings, tracing their genealogy, reflecting on their sustainable

practices, and contemplating their effects. The policy text/s are used as 'levers' in the WPR approach, merely providing a starting point for this problematization rather than an end in themselves. A WPR approach is therefore meant to identify, reconstruct, and interrogate problematizations.

The WPR framework (adapted from Bacchi, 2009) consists of a set of seven questions that instigate the researcher to scrutinize the problem representation critically:

Question 1: What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?

Question 2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem' (problem representation)?

Question 3: How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be conceptualized differently?

Question 5: What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the "problem"?

Question 6: How and where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

Step 7: Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations.

The aim of Q1 is the identification of a starting point in the analysis, which acts as a springboard to what follows in the identification of the problem representation. The researcher commences from stated solutions to exercise scepticism about their implicit problematization(s).

Q2 seeks meanings that constructed this particular problem representation within the policy itself, in order to identify possible patterns that may reveal an underlying political or governmental rationality in operation.

Q3 intends to 'disrupt any assumption that what *is* reflects what *has to be*' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 22, original emphasis), to bring to the fore alternative possibilities.

Q4 draws attention to 'silences', or unproblematized elements within the existing problem representation, thus encouraging destabilizing, critical thinking.

Q5 invites researchers to think about the 'effects' of identified problem representations as 'political implications', with a consideration for three specific 'kinds' of effects that are discursive effects, subjectification effects, and lived effects.

Q6 opens up the space for contestation, destabilization, and resistance of the current ubiquitous and imposing problem representations.

The final step in the WPR framework involves self-reflexivity in the application of the above six questions to one's own proposals and problem representations, thus subjecting our own thinking and philosophy to critical scrutiny.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

What Is the Equity Problem Represented to Be in the Maltese Educational Policy Within the Compulsory School Sector?

Outlining the Process and Parameters

This chapter analyses the notion of equity as represented in Maltese education policy, focusing on the most recent 'prescriptive texts' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 34), namely the policy documents 'A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion' [henceforth referred to as PIES] and 'A National Inclusive Education Framework' [henceforth referred to as NIEF] (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019). While the policy sets out the aims, goals, principles, and benchmarks 'to provide a planned and systemic way of how schools are to develop conducive learning environments for all learners' (p. 11), in other words, 'inclusive education', the framework is intended 'to provide a clear direction to schools on their journey towards inclusion' (p. 11) in its presentation of a route for the implementation of the policy benchmarks. These documents explicitly attribute equity as the driving force behind the implementation of the inclusion concept, both locally and internationally, while acknowledging the OECD stance on equity in an education system comprising the dual dimensions of fairness and inclusion (Schleicher, 2014). I therefore use these two policies as illustrative of policies mobilized to address the problem of inequality, therefore the need for a provision of equity, as a major agenda, fully aware of the fact that 'equity' and 'inclusion' cannot be considered as synonymous, replaceable or interchangeable.

Given the intertextual nature of policy (Ball, 1993), I am aware of the fact that these selected documents are likely to reference other national (and international) policies, legislation, strategies, and standard operating procedures that come with their specific problem representations, which by excluding would only enable a partial representation of the policy problem. These formal policy documents constitute a wider network of the larger equity policy making and implementation assemblage, but an extensive analysis was not possible due to the small-scale nature of this study and book word limit constraints. I would like to clarify that this chapter focuses on a policy analysis of equity in compulsory schooling utilizing Bacchi's WPR approach, and does not look into policy implementation for equity provision. Notwithstanding, the degree of engagement with equity-related policies is context-dependent, varying according to the available resources, institutional ethos, and school leaders' personal dispositions. Consequently, 'The readerly policies of some are the writerly policies of others, differently positioned'

(Molla & Gale, 2019, p. 872) due to the tendency of the enactment of equity provisions from positions of advantage.

Conscious of the fact that Bacchi (2009) herself acknowledges that different studies emphasize the seven questions in the WPR framework to varying degrees according to the research goals and aims, that is the stance I adopt in my analysis and discussion below, following a similar methodology to education studies adopting the WPR approach selectively (e.g. Torrance et al., 2021; Tawell & McCluskey, 2022). I interrogate the 'solutions' to 'inclusion' (aka, equity) suggested by these policy documents, the 'problem' representations, together with their underlying presuppositions, silences, and effects by aligning Bacchi's WPR Q1 to Q7 according to my study's aims. In the following section, I represent my analysis of the two policy documents and the underlying philosophy about inclusion in the Maltese state education system by discussing my replies to the WPR framework questions.

WPR Q1: What's the Problem Represented to Be in the Most Recent Policy Documents of Inclusive Education in Malta?

Initially, I familiarized myself with the selected policy documents (PIES, 2019; NIEF, 2019) via thorough readings and re-readings to scrutinize the text for 'solutions' and 'problem representations' as they emerged from the meanings, discourses, silences, and effects of the presented 'inclusion' issue in the Maltese compulsory schooling state system. The analysis focused on the first of Bacchi's questions to explore the proposed solutions by 'working backwards' to '*read off* the implied problem from the proposal' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 48, original emphasis). Table 1 contains a list of identified representations from the two policy documents presented in this chapter. Due to space constraints, I have included a single example of a proposed solution to illustrate each of the problem representations, based on the 'ten pillars/themes that will address the creation of a better inclusive learning friendly environment in schools' (PIES, p. 27), as identified in both documents and elaborated upon in NIEF (2019).

The problem represented in these policy documents is that of inclusion that does not fully serve the principles of equity and social justice, due to the selective nature of the present inclusive education system, the procedures, practices, and pedagogies of which fail to embrace diversity in all its forms and manifestations, still being very focused on students with overt SEN due to learning difficulties or physical disabilities, rather than having an education system that is genuinely accessible to all diverse students, whatever the diversity. This negative portraiture of inclusion in compulsory schooling is

Table 1. Problem Representations of the Present State of Inclusion (and Equity) Identified in PIES (2019) and NIEF (2019).[1]

Solution Examples Identified from Policy Documents	Problem Representations <u>The state of inclusion (and equity) at present</u>
1. Leaders need to respond to increasing diversity in learner characteristics and abilities, cultural backgrounds, immigration status, different socio-economic status, disabilities, and variation in learning capacity (p. 22)	School leaders are *not exercising inclusive and strategic leadership* that is effective at giving prominence to equity and improved outcomes for *all* learners
2. Schools should examine existing priorities and analyse how one can contribute to the inclusive development of the school, including the necessary accommodations and modifications (p. 24)	The school is *not fully committed* to the inclusion of all learners and respect for diversity is not reflected in the school policies, practices, and procedures
3. A whole-school inclusive environment needs to take into consideration the principles of Universal Design for Learning … the learner's voice is given value … all learners are listened to (p. 26)	The learning environment is *still not accessible to all* due to physical and curricular/pedagogical barriers – some learners' voices are silenced or not loud enough
4. Parents are made to feel welcome at school and the collaboration … is central … The school acts as a lifelong learning centre … (p. 28)	Collaboration and communication with parents, as well as community engagement *unfold at a superficial level*
5. Planning for individual learner needs is a crucial aspect of whole school policy on inclusion … The plan devised will guide educators at classroom level to meet the particular needs … through modification of the mainstream curriculum (p. 30)	Inclusive education fails to provide challenging learning with realistic targets due to *poor/'non' modification of the 'mainstream curriculum'*
6. Curriculum design for inclusion is done through delivery of scaffolded lessons that motivate learner involvement, respecting different needs, abilities, and learning preferences (p. 32)	The curriculum is *not flexible* enough to offer a range of accessible and relevant learning opportunities for all learners – learning is not success-oriented
7. Promoting the well-being of all learners and staff at school is of primary importance. This is based on a rights perspective (p. 35)	Students and staff members are *not given adequate support* to ensure their overall wellbeing through a school holistic approach
8. Inclusive education is the responsibility of all education professionals and therefore training should be a priority. Teachers should gain knowledge and understanding on diverse challenges of learners so responsibility is shared in class rather than shifted onto the LSEs (p. 38)	There is no upskilling regarding dealing with diversity at pre- or in-service teacher education. Class teachers *shift responsibility of the 'student with needs'* on the LSE who is not trained to teach, but to facilitate

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Solution Examples Identified from Policy Documents	Problem Representations <u>The state of inclusion (and equity) at present</u>
9. This framework supports and promotes preventive strategies whereby the school supports all learners through positive behaviour management … including learners who present with social and emotional behavioural difficulties (p. 40)	The *school-wide support* provided to learners is *selective and exclusionary*
10. Support structures and services are essential in supporting educators, learners, and parents. These are diverse and often involve a range of different service professionals, approaches, and working methods (p. 42)	There is *not ample co-operation and co-ordination* between support services and schools, as well as parents due to lack of awareness and/or personnel

Note: [1] Page numbers following policy excerpts in this table refer to NIEF (2019).

reinforced by the 'paradigm shift needed in thinking and action' (NIEF, 2019, p. 14) to overcome barriers that are: attitudinal, language and cultural, physical and environmental, training, systemic and organizational, and curricular. The presentation of these distinct barriers in tables, with the left-hand column listing barriers to be 'Moving From…' to the right-hand column listing a move 'Towards…' these barriers turned into opportunities, explicitly implies the presence of these barriers in the Maltese education system at large. The NIEF (2019) presents '*user friendly tools*' that will 'enable the schools to identify *areas to be improved* in their quest to have an inclusive community, celebrate positive achievements, as well as *rate their levels of inclusion* in order to *plan how wanting areas can be addressed and improved*' (p. 20, added emphasis). The NIEF (2019) 'is designed to provide a clear direction to schools on their journey towards inclusion', while 'inclusive education should cover all aspects of education', listing the various types of diverse learners it should be 'available and accessible' to (p. 11). Consequently, inclusive education is constructed as lacking, with echoes of the school effectiveness and improvement discourses, strongly present in the stated purposes of both policy documents as

> *a* comprehensive, structured *and* harmonized *guide … [for] a more* effective *and* efficient *education system. Inclusion, inclusive education and inclusive practices are fundamental for an* operative

> *and* effective *education system … it is the duty of the Government and society at large to ensure that all citizens are given equitable prospects and experiences. (PIES, 2019, p. 4, added emphasis)*

The intention behind the complementary policy documents PIES (2019) and NIEF (2019) is to '*reduce the gaps* in educational outcomes, *increase participation* of learners, *support educational achievement* of all children and young people, and *raise the student attainment levels*' (NIEF, 2019, p. 5, added emphasis). Is the spotlight on the operationalization of effectiveness and efficiency for the narrowing of outcomes and attainment gaps shining in order to dim the values of equity, fairness and (social) justice, rather than to brighten them? Which discourses come to the fore in the 'inclusive' Maltese education system?

WPR Q2: What Presuppositions or Assumptions Underlie the Problem Representations Outlined Above?

In WPR Q2, the focus moves to seek 'meanings' within the policy documents, in order to problematize the construction of these 'discourses' and identify possible patterns that signal political or governmental rationalities in operation, in other words, power relations.

Inclusive education is constructed as a continuous developmental process that is transformative and gradual for the Maltese state education system. PIES (2019) defines inclusive education as a 'philosophy, process and implementation that *should* cover all aspects of education and *should* be *available* and *accessible* to *all* learners of *all* ages, including those *facing challenges*' (p. 11, added emphasis). Schools are expected 'to transform existing pedagogical, personal and professional beliefs, attitudes and discourse' while re-configuring 'processes and practices' for an effective response to '*all* learners' needs and social realities' (p. 11, original emphasis). This inclusion discourse goes beyond the learner, to target the educators and the school system itself who can engender equity via accessible schooling only if they are willing to adjust. Principles of 'equity' and 'inclusion' are at the core of these policy documents, with a focus on celebrating the various forms of diversity as they manifest themselves in primary and secondary classrooms: cognitive and learning; multiculturalism and language; religion and belief; socio-economic; gender and sexual; as well as physical and psychological. A broad meaning of inclusive education is adopted, one that moves from a learner-centred to a system-centred approach, leading to proactivity in the

identification of barriers and obstacles, and consequently a socially just education system fostering equity.

One can therefore detect competing and contradictory discourses within the policy documents, more specifically in the problem representations of inclusion and the solutions provided. Inclusion is initially constructed as a means to serve the state needs, in the provision of 'active', 'skilled', and 'employable' citizens via efficiency and effectiveness to 'proactivism' and 'system reform' for accessibility, in other words, equity. The policy documents also touch on neoliberal discourses in their promotion as a source of empowerment and information for education providers, while placing the onus of collective 'responsibility' and 'accountability' of all students' learning on the system that incorporates all the stakeholders in the schools' 'collaborative culture'. This is expected to unfold within the becoming 'inclusive community' of the wider Maltese society – 'a society in which belongingness, equity, diversity, and rights play a major role within our education system' (PIES, 2019, p. 5).

WPR Q3: How Has This Representation of the 'Problem' Come About?

WPR Q3 explores the practices producing the problem representation, which in this case would involve mapping the preceding policy documents, contexts, and practices referred to within the texts that led to the creation and production of both PIES (2019) and NIEF (2019).

Table 2 presents the main legislation and local and global documentation that identified the gaps in inclusion in the Maltese education system, thus leading to the production of the selected policy documents under exploration.

The two policy documents under exploration draw on a number of international commitments to the provision of Education for All to which Malta is a signatory, as propagated by the United Nations, UNESCO, and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (within the auspices of the Council of the European Union). While recognizing equity as a major international force driving the inclusive educational system movement, it acknowledges the OECD's (2012) two-dimensional notion of equity comprising fairness and inclusion. The local policy documents and legislation outlined in Table 2 gradually provided the philosophy and discursive framework around which PIES (2019) and NIEF (2019) are constructed, while simultaneously 'representing' the 'problem' of a wanting inclusive state education system for which these new policy documents provide solutions.

Table 2. Policy Documents (Local and Global) Contributing to the Identification of the 'Problem' to Which PIES (2019) and NIEF (2019) Provide the 'Solution'.

Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024 (MEDE, 2014a)	Outlines the four goals to equip all learners with employability and citizenship skills
Respect for All (MEDE, 2014b)	Encompasses UNESCO's (1996) four pillars of learning: learning to know/to do/to live together/to be, with a focus on human diversity education together with values-based education with a specific focus on social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusivity.
The National Curriculum Framework (MEDE, 2012)	Among other principles, it focuses on entitlement, personal growth, diversity, and inclusivity
Education for All: Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta: External Audit Report (European Agency for Special Needs & Inclusive Education, 2014)	Presents a critique of the inclusion concept in the Maltese education system while identifying areas for development and providing recommendations for the implementation of inclusion. This ties in with recommendations made by the Agency (2009) with regards to reciprocity and entwining of quality, inclusion, access, and equity
The Education Act (Cap. 327 of the Laws of Malta)	The law binds the Directorate for Educational Services with the duty to provide quality education to all learners, irrespective of their age, gender, sex, ability, economic status, nationality, ethnicity, religion or faith, disability and/or political affiliations
The Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act (Cap. 413 of the Laws of Malta)	This law states that it is expected that schools make reasonable adjustments to accommodate students with disabilities, for the elimination of discrimination
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)	This convention, ratified by Malta in 1990, demands that the voice of the child is heard in matters affecting them, with regards to the age and maturity of the child
The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994)	This calls on governments to commit to inclusive schooling and support the development of special needs education to provide equalization of opportunity by acknowledging that difficulties experienced by pupils come about due to the current school organization and rigid teaching methods

WPR Q4: What Is Left Unproblematic? Where Are the Silences? Can the 'Problem' Be Reconceptualized?

To answer WPR Q4, I attempt to 'destabilize' the 'existing problem representation' by seeking the 'silences, or unproblematized elements' and being 'inventive' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 22) to think of different conceptualizations of inclusion and point to the dominance of presuppositions, if present.

The selected policy documents are very specific about the 'diversities' to be embraced in order to foster inclusion (thus leading to equity), presenting a 'Diversity Wheel' (PIES, 2019, p. 25) with six 'diverse needs' and then providing a list of potential learners falling under the umbrella of each 'diversity' (PIES, 2019, p. 26), claiming this transformation of schools into 'inclusive settings' to be geared 'towards a *socially just education* that aims to increase the system's ability to respond to all learners' diverse needs' (PIES, 2019, p. 25, added emphasis). This list of 'diverse' learners cannot be considered to be exhaustive of all learners, thus being exclusionary rather than serving as an 'inclusive' mechanism for the educators who are ultimately the policy actors. Examples of such missing, or missed, 'diversities' are learners hailing from 'unconventional' or 'out-of-the-norm' family situations such as those with adoptive parents; close relatives or elder siblings as guardians; single parents; members of the clergy or religious orders as primary carers, to mention a few. There is no mention of learners who are hospitalized, for example, or those suffering neglect and abuse. The exclusionary nature of this specificity is further highlighted by the absence of a mention of learners with multiple diversities, and hence the intersectionality of diversities. What is presented in the documents is a rather individualistic view of compartmentalized rather than contemporaneous diversities that may be of a permanent or temporary nature. How can this 'silo approach' foster the provision of an equitable and inclusive education system?

Not all educators are given the same prominence in the policy documents as the focus is mostly on teachers, with the onus being put on them to deliver teaching and learning suited to the needs of the learner. School leaders are mentioned when it comes to the exercise of 'inclusive and strategic leadership' and whole school development planning, while LSEs (who are assigned to statemented students on a 'one-to-one' or 'shared' basis) are only mentioned as part of the team comprising the statemented student's individual education planning. Proposed practices of collegiality, collaboration, and a whole-school approach are negated in and contradicted by the policy documents themselves in giving prominence to certain policy actors (and subjects) over others.

The framework for inclusive education is presented as a 'flexible' one that schools may adapt to their needs and the various 'diversities' present, while being able to exercise their autonomy. However, both policy documents, especially the framework (NIEF, 2019) are very rigid and didactic, presenting a list of 'diverse' learners, transformation of barriers, and inclusive best practice indicators, accompanied by a paternalistic and patronizing tone that gives the impression to the reader that the inclusive education model present in the Maltese state schools needs a complete overhaul due to its current ineffectiveness and inefficiency. Thus, the 'problem representation' of inclusion in the Maltese state school system emerges as very negative and lacking, when this may not be the case in all aspects related to inclusion and equity, and cannot be generalized across all primary and secondary state schools.

Both policy documents give too much prominence to 'disability' discourse, with a positive move towards 'diversity'; however not enough space has been allowed to discuss notions of equity and social justice and how these will be promoted via inclusion, inclusive practices and inclusive education. This absence belies the prominence given to the notions of 'Diversity', 'Rights', 'Access', and 'Equity' on the front cover of both policy documents.

WPR Q5: What 'Effects' Are Produced by This Problem Representation?

WPR Q5 invites me as researcher to consider the political implications of how the particular problems related to inclusion in the Maltese state education system are represented, with a consideration for three specific 'kinds' of effects that are discursive effects, subjectification effects, and lived effects (Bacchi, 2009).

My analysis of WPR Q4 suggests that silences and absences have discursive effects, setting boundaries, for example, around what counts as worthy of consideration when dealing with learner diversities that need to be embraced for an inclusive and equitable education system. Learners are constructed in such a way in the documents to be able to occupy the subject position of 'learners in need' due to either being 'at risk of exclusion' or emanating from 'targeted excluded groups' (PIES, 2019, p. 17). Educators, and their professional identities within the proposed inclusive education system are constructed in a manner that simultaneously aligns and subjectifies them to teaching and learning processes and procedures via a team approach, review of the national syllabi and equitable assessment methods, identification of barriers, as well as the provision of 'Disability Equality Training' for these

practices to be translated in the classroom. 'Structures' beyond the school, both intra- and inter-sectorial, construct the 'inclusive' teacher as reliant on 'professional expertise' beyond their control. These are examples of subjectification effects produced by the policy documents. The lived effects of the inclusion problem representation are not so visible in the policy documents, and further research on how equity and inclusion are unfolding in Maltese state schools is needed to explore this issue.

The identified 'unproblematizations' and 'effects' identified in WPR Q4 and Q5 point to potential areas for inclusion/equity policy development, generation, and reform, while encouraging us to think differently about how equity and inclusion can be distinctly understood, thus leading to 'diverse' solutions of the policy problem 'representations'.

WPR Q6: How and Where Has This Problem Representation Been Produced, Disseminated and Defended? How Can It Be Disrupted and Replaced?

This WPR question opens up the space for contestation, destabilization, and resistance of the current prevalent and imperious problem representations, pointing to areas that need to be further examined. Notwithstanding the fact that analysis of this WPR question was initiated in the previous two questions (Q4 and Q5) via the identified 'silences'/'absences' and 'effects', it will not be dealt with further here as I strongly believe that it merits empirical research among actors/subjects at policy reception and enactment levels for a full exploration, which goes beyond the scope of this chapter which focuses on the notion of equity as represented in Maltese education policy.

WPR Step 7: Apply This List of Questions to Your Own Problem Representations

The final step in the WPR framework involves self-reflexivity in the application of the above questions to my own proposals and problem representations, positioning my various selves within the analysis, thus subjecting my own thinking and philosophy to critical scrutiny. I acknowledge that my analysis of the notion of equity is influenced by my various selves as policy producer, receptor, subject, actor, and perpetrator due to my previous professional experience as Head of College Network in Malta, a top-level management ministerial position that involved the leadership, management, and governance of 13 primary

and secondary state schools. I consider myself to be at the triage of theory (my academic self), policy (my involvement in high-level ministerial meetings where we discussed draft versions of PIES and NIES ad nauseum), and practice (as a direct actor/observer of these two policies and their unfolding at school level). In fact, it is this leadership experience that allowed me to identify cracks and dysfunctions in social justice and equity through a juxtaposition of policy and practice, with a specific reference to migrant learners and students from poor social backgrounds (Mifsud, 2021). This small-scale empirical research led to this problematization of equity as represented in the policy documents meant to promote inclusion in the Maltese state school system. However, reflexivity and problematizing my own beliefs regarding equity and social justice, as well as my own experience of inclusion in the Maltese state schools, helped me distance my academic self from previous practitioner and policy selves to adopt a quasi-impartial stance. Nonetheless, bias is likely to remain.

Overall, Bacchi's method gave me the opportunity to adopt a methodical approach to my analysis, thus allowing me to ensure that prior assumptions could be scrutinized and limitations acknowledged.

CONCLUSIONS: RE-THINKING THE WAY FORWARD FOR EQUITY IN MALTESE EDUCATION POLICY?

In this small-scale study, I set out to explore how the policyscape makes provision for achieving, improving, and maintaining equity in compulsory state schooling in Malta, more specifically by analyzing national school inclusion policy in Malta utilizing Bacchi's WPR approach. This post-structural approach allows me to interrogate the solutions proposed to generate equity and the problem representations of inclusion in Maltese state schools via an analysis of the two policy documents (PIES, NIEF, 2019) specifically mobilized to address the problem of inequality, while highlighting the need for equity provision as a policy priority, especially as an EU member state.

The Maltese educational policy's understanding of equity embraces the OECD's (2012) definition of equity as embracing the inclusion and fairness principles, making specific references throughout both documents explicitly and implicitly. PIES (2019) and NIEF (2019) do not seem to exhibit confusion over 'inclusion' and 'equity' as principles, contrary to Ainscow's (2020a, 2020b) such claim about education equity discourse/s in general as the Government's education policy is driven by equity and quality, that is evidenced by an inclusive policy at compulsory school level. While still being very context-specific in its problem representation of the current state of inclusion

focusing on students with physical disabilities, the policy solutions provided for inclusive education to foster equity reflect UNESCO's (2017) principle of embracing diversity among all learners. This focus on the diversity discourse evidenced throughout both documents (as discussed in the preceding analysis) reflects the demographic change experienced in the wider Maltese society due to the relatively recent but quickly growing immigrant population.

The problem representations of the state of inclusion in the Maltese state education system (which thus leads to the absence of/lack of equity) reflect policy discourses centred on the presumption of inadequacy (Clarke, 2014), thus rendering current equity arrangements for the state as iniquitous and in dire need of reform. However, since it was not the scope of this chapter to explore the current state of equity in Maltese state schools or the enactment of the PIES (2019) and NIEF (2019) to explore the level of inclusion/equity unfolding in practice, further micro-level analysis is needed. As noted earlier, Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach is not concerned with identifying the policy-practice divide.

Despite WPR proving to be a labour-intensive process (as also noted by Tawell & McCluskey, 2022) and doubts raised about the usefulness of post-structural analysis, it has much to offer to the field of education policy due to its promotion of research as a political practice, encouraging problematizations and re-problematizations while generating critical reflexivity. This form of policy analysis promotes new forms of questions about 'problem' representations and production, authoritative knowledges, silences, and the subjectification and governmentality of policy actors and subjects (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). While acknowledging that a different method of policy analysis would have provided a different representation of equity in Maltese education policy, the WPR approach allowed me to problematize the representation of inclusion, question the solutions presented and consider alternatives. Other potential limitations presented by my positionality within the local education context have been addressed in my reply to WPR Q7.

The results of this small-scale study have theoretical and methodological implications for academics, policymakers, and practitioners in the educational policy field. The potential of Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach to problematize current policy problems, their construction and representation, and more importantly to think creatively about alternatives is exemplified through a worked example of policy analysis presented in this chapter. Furthermore, this study highlights the fact that there are a number of persistent challenges for achieving equity in education, especially the immigrant-native educational gap, despite European policy makers having been very active in the educational field, as evident in numerous educational reforms in the last decade (Hippe et al., 2016).

Education policies need to be re-thought to reduce inequity and inequality, while measuring policy impact and utilizing evidence-based research is also vital to policy making. In the words of Doucet and Pont (2021, n.p.), 'The start of the pandemic flipped the dynamic of policy makers and practitioners (educators) on its head' as educators sought solutions to meet the equity needs of learners while 'policy makers were playing catch-up' as governments tried to understand how to proceed with health protocols and education provision. The pandemic-induced school closures have provided a test of how education policy making is changing. What does it mean for equity and schooling???

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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. *What do you understand by equity? Why is it needed in education?*
2. *How does equity feature in the policyscape of your particular education system up to compulsory school age level?*
3. *How can Bacchi's WPR framework help you problematize particular aspects and representation of education policy problems in your current education system?*
4. *What other approaches to policy analysis would help you explore whether particular national policy solutions are meeting the equity, inclusion and social justice needs of learners?*

FURTHER READING

1. **Bacchi, C., & Goodwin, S. (2016). *Poststructural policy analysis: A guide to practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.**

This book offers a novel, refreshing, and politically engaged way to think about public policy. Instead of treating policy as simply the government's best efforts to address problems, it offers a way to question critically how policies produce 'problems' as particular sorts of problems, with important political implications. Governing, it is argued, takes place through these problematizations. According to the authors, interrogating policies and policy proposals as problematizations involves asking questions about the assumptions they rely upon, how they have been made, what their effects are, as well as how they could be unmade. To enable this form of critical analysis, this book introduces an analytic strategy, the 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) approach. It features examples of applications of the approach with topics as diverse as obesity, economic policy, migration, drug and alcohol policy, and gender equality to illustrate the growing popularity of this way of thinking and to provide clear and useful examples of post-structural policy analysis in practice. It also includes an appendix that introduces a novel method of post-structural interview analysis focused on seven closely related processes.

2. **Ball, S. J. (2006). *Education policy and social class: The selected works of Stephen J. Ball*. Routledge.**

This book provides an overview of the long-lasting contributions Stephen Ball has made to the field of educational policy analysis. This volume contains 16 key essays divided into 3 sections: perspectives on policy research; policy technologies and policy analysis; and social class and education policy. Each chapter presents innovative ways of thinking about public policy, asking probing questions about what policy is, how policy is influenced and what effects intentional and unintentional policies have. As a body of work, this collection raises issues of ethics and social justice which are often neglected in the mass of policies that now affect every aspect of our education systems.

3. **Ball, S. J. (2016). (Ed.). *Michel Foucault and education policy analysis*. Routledge.**

The work of Michel Foucault has become a major resource for educational researchers seeking to understand how education makes us what we are. In this book, a group of contributors explore how Foucault's work is used in a variety of ways to explore the 'hows' and 'whos' of education policy – its

technologies and its subjectivities, its oppressions and its freedoms. The book takes full advantage of the opportunities for creativity and flexibility that Foucault's ideas and methods offer to researchers in deploying genealogy, discourse, and subjectivation as analytic devices. This book was originally published as a special issue of the *Journal of Education Policy*.

4. **Stacey, M., & Mockler, N. (2024). (Eds.).** ***Analysing education policy: Theory and method.*** **Routledge.**

This book provides a comprehensive overview of key approaches in critical education policy research. With chapters from internationally recognized and established scholars in the field, readers have access to an authoritative account of how different questions may be approached and answered. Part 1 features chapters focused on text-based approaches to analysis, including critical discourse analysis, thinking with Foucault, indigenist policy analysis, media analysis, the analysis of promotional texts in education, and the analysis of online networks. Part 2 features chapters focused on network ethnography, actor-network theory, materiality in policy, institutional ethnography, decolonizing approaches to curriculum policy, working with children and young people, and working with education policy elites. Critical education policy analysis takes many different forms, each of which works with distinctly different questions and fulfils different purposes. This book maps current common and influential approaches to answering these questions, providing important guidance for both new and established researchers.

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4

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVING RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The importance of socially just leadership has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years as integral for tackling issues of disadvantage and inequality across education and schooling systems. However, there are still remaining questions about what these leadership practices look like in the everyday work of school leaders. This chapter draws on a research project to embed Indigenous perspectives in schools as an example of socially just leadership. The links between Indigenous communities and schools are a key focus area for improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. This project sought to bring Indigenous community members into classrooms in six schools in New South Wales, Australia. Community

members were recruited to work with teachers as co-constructors of learning activities that explicitly value and work with Indigenous perspectives. This chapter outlines the positive outcomes from this project as well as challenges faced by schools, teachers, principals, and community members as part of this culturally responsive work. The practices of community members, teachers, and principals are theorized using the notion of culturally responsive leadership. The chapter argues for an approach to leadership that is grounded in culturally responsive understandings to improve the educational outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous students and the cultural understanding and awareness of non-Indigenous students, to better promote reconciliation. This chapter provides a concrete example of powerful leadership practices that are working towards equity and social justice for their schools and communities. While the cases are specifically from the Australian context, they are relevant for a variety of schooling contexts and leadership practices.

Keywords: Culturally responsive leadership; Indigenous education; school leadership; school community relations; social justice

INTRODUCTION

> *'So, we've got to be in charge of what correctly gets put out there to the students from community perspectives, and family, individual perspectives, into the classroom, rather than being delivered by a non-Indigenous person.' (Indigenous community member)*[1]

The importance of socially just leadership has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years as integral for tackling issues of disadvantage and inequality across education and schooling systems (e.g. Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Lopez, 2016; MacDonald, 2024). However, there are remaining questions about what these leadership practices look like and consist of in the everyday work of school leaders and teachers. The above quote highlights an enduring issue for educators wishing to incorporate Indigenous[2] perspectives into schools and classrooms. Indigenous communities have typically been marginalized and excluded from having a direct voice and involvement in the teaching of Indigenous perspectives even though it has been mandated as a compulsory element in Australian Education (AITSL, 2011). Furthermore, many non-Indigenous teachers and educators feel underprepared to teach this content, knowledges, and perspectives in their classrooms (Lowe & Galstaun,

2020; Santoro, 2007). Implementing the introduction of Indigenous perspectives at scale across an education system requires culturally responsive leadership and needs examples of practices that are having positive effects on school community relations and for Indigenous students and communities.

This chapter draws on a research project designed to embed Indigenous perspectives in schools and classrooms in New South Wales, Australia, as an example of socially just leadership practices. With the links between Indigenous communities and schools being a key focus area for improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students, this project sought to bring Indigenous community members into classrooms in six primary schools. Indigenous community members were recruited to work with teachers as co-constructors of learning activities that explicitly value and work with Indigenous perspectives, to go beyond simple, stereotypical behaviour support roles that have historically been a feature of such relationships.

In this chapter, I[3] outline some positive outcomes from this project as well as the challenges faced by schools, teachers, principals, and community members as part of this culturally responsive work. The practices of community members, teachers, and principals are understood using the notion of culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2018). In doing so, I argue for an approach to leadership that is grounded in culturally responsive understandings to improve the educational outcomes and opportunities for Indigenous students and the cultural understanding and awareness of non-Indigenous students, to better promote reconciliation. This chapter provides a concrete example of powerful leadership practices that are working towards the goals of equity and social justice for their schools and communities. While the cases are specifically from the Australian context, they are relevant for a variety of schooling contexts and leadership practices.

In the first section of the chapter, I provide a background to the study through a brief examination of some of the pertinent research and literature related to leadership for social justice and equity, and then more specifically culturally responsive leadership. The notion of culturally responsive leadership is used to understand the data and frame the importance of these ideas for how to build socially justice leadership practices that are informed by understanding and mutual respect. In the next section, I explain and detail the research processes and details of the research project before moving into the main findings from the interview data which have been divided up into responses from the key participant groups: community members, teachers, and school principals. I then make sense of these findings through the notion of culturally responsive leadership and reflect on the research project as a whole and its implications for future research.

LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

It has been generally accepted that school leadership plays a central role in creating an environment where high quality teaching and learning can take place. Therefore, the emphasis on much of the research into educational leadership has been on identifying 'best practice' and the links between leadership and student outcomes. While I am cognisant of the important work that has been done in this area, and that improving student learning is a core business of schools, in terms of tackling issues of equity, these approaches have not largely focused on the complexities of leadership for social justice and equity, nor how one might overcome the challenges of leadership in disadvantaged schools and communities. For example, in the 'Gonski 2.0' review (Department of Education & Training, 2018), school leadership was promoted as a key element of improving Australia's education system but what was missing was a central focus on equity and how leadership can support equity as a goal.

Research into leadership and equity/social justice reveals that school leaders must have an explicit focus on these issues for schools to be more socially just. It is not just the responsibility of school leaders in disadvantaged areas to address these issues; it needs to be a focus for all schools (see Connell, 1993; Niesche, 2017; Salwell, 2013). This also requires an understanding and acknowledgement that schools can be sites of injustice (see Brooks, 2012) and that rather than an over-emphasis on leadership models, standards, and goals narrowly defined concepts of 'good' leadership, school leaders should focus on the purpose of leadership. Research from Niesche and Keddie (2012, 2016) has indicated that school leadership that engages with an ethics of leadership for social justice can have transformative potential for students in disadvantaged schools and communities. Principals in these case studies from Australia and England worked as advocates for their students and communities, had social justice as explicit purpose to their daily practice and school missions, worked against deficit understandings of students, practiced a range of leadership styles and approaches that served to improve equity for their schools, recognized racism and exclusion, and created solutions to alleviate poverty and disadvantage. These key aims of leadership practice are also evident in research beyond Australia (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Brooks, 2012; Normore, 2009; Theoharis, 2010).

Research into leadership that is culturally appropriate and responsive has shown the possibilities and potential to be transformative (see Horsford et al., 2011; Khalifa et al., 2016; Lopez, 2016). In the Australian context, the work as a part of Chris Sarra's Stronger and Smarter Institute (http://strongersmarter.com.au; see also Sarra, 2011) has shown the value of this work for leadership in both Indigenous education and for diverse and disadvantaged communities. This work is about challenging issues that disadvantage some groups of

students and seeking out approaches to alleviate poverty, racism, and other forms of disadvantage and inequity. The notion of the 'socially just school' (Smyth et al., 2014) is also one that fosters a range of principles through which schools can benefit and advance the outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through fostering issues around school culture, school/community relations, socially critical pedagogy, curriculum, and leadership. These ideas are focused on speaking back to deficit discourses of students, addressing disengagement from schooling, giving students voice and agency, having high expectations of students, embracing diversity, and tackling myths and stereotypes around disadvantage. These are all core areas in which school leaders can actively make a difference to students' lives.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOLING

The Australian education system's problems of inequity are perhaps most salient for Australian Indigenous people. Considering the Australian Federal Government's 2023 report on the 'Closing the Gap' policy, it is evident that the Government's intentions to reduce educational disadvantage among Indigenous students in comparison to non-Indigenous students continue to fail (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). Historically in Australia, there have been a vast array of policies, reports, and research documenting little sustainable success. It is therefore imperative that avenues are found to help Indigenous students feel a positive self-identity which will arguably improve their participation and retention in education and school outcomes (Beresford & Partington, 2003). The project on which this chapter reports aims to contribute to these outcomes.

Some of the obstacles Indigenous students experience in school which affect educational outcomes are racism and negative stereotyping of Indigenous peoples which has been portrayed in the media (Beresford & Partington, 2003) and the lack of culturally responsive schooling. This has been a consequence of discriminatory policies in Australia since colonization which have led to perceptions of schooling being a 'white man's process' (Beresford & Partington, 2003). It has been argued that academic and family support have an enormous influence on educational achievement for Indigenous students (Downey & Hart, 2000). Increasing representation of Indigenous people in teaching positions can have a profound flow on effect on the aspirations and performance of Indigenous students (Downey & Hart, 2000). It has been suggested that future teachers should endeavour to understand Aboriginal cultural protocols of their students, their students' home and family background, and seek to develop good relations with their students' families to see these results turn around (Beresford & Partington, 2003, p. 161).

There has been increasing recognition over recent years of the significance of culturally responsive curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in supporting learning outcomes for disadvantaged learners. This research emphasizes 'culturally appropriate' teaching and learning that is respectful of students' background and relevant to their experiences (Bishop, 2003; Keddie, 2012; Klenowski, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Gillborn, 2004). Valuing marginalized students' culture is seen to be particularly important in disrupting (the mainstream) exclusionary and discriminatory practices that tend to undermine these students' performance. Unfortunately, attempts at valuing marginalized cultures in schools and classrooms continue to deploy superficial and tokenistic understandings – as in one off celebrations such as multicultural days, that can lead to a further 'othering' of these students. The significance of moving beyond such superficial understandings through a more critical approach to culture is now well recognized. This approach is about educators eschewing fixed notions of culture to engage contextually with marginalized knowledge and experiences towards creating more meaningful and relevant learning encounters for marginalized students, and indeed for all students (Keddie et al., 2013; Nakata, 2007). Important recent research into Aboriginal voices (Burgess & Lowe, 2019; Moodie et al., 2021), and culturally nourishing schools and leadership (Lowe et al., 2021) is similarly aligned with these ideas.

Khalifa's culturally responsive school leadership approach offers great value here, albeit from a US perspective. Khalifa describes cultural responsiveness as a necessary component of effective school leadership (Khalifa, 2018). Khalifa writes that: 'If cultural responsiveness is to be present and sustainable in school, it must foremost and consistently be promoted by school leaders; and, culturally responsive school leadership is characterized by:

1. Being critically self-reflective
2. Developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curricula
3. Promoting inclusive, anti-oppressive school contexts
4. Engaging students' Indigenous community contexts' (Khalifa, 2018, p. 13).

These four elements will be considered in relation to the data presented in this chapter. However, first, I will describe the research background and process undertaken as a part of this project.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In light of the above research and literature, the project on which this chapter reports aimed to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of

Indigenous youth within a holistic, community-centred educational framework, in partnership with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). The project involved two core intertwined dimensions: the preparation of teachers and school leaders to undertake culturally responsive schooling practices; and the preparation of Indigenous parents, carers, and community members with the skills to work collaboratively with teachers and contribute to the decision-making within the school community of their children (Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011). These two core elements were designed to improve the engagement and achievements of the students. To do this, the project team worked towards establishing a framework of culturally sustaining pedagogies and curriculum practices along with supportive and sustainable leadership to ensure that the broader school community, including non-Indigenous children, benefit from the cultural wealth and knowledge of the local Indigenous community in ways which build mutual understanding and respect (Paris & Alim, 2014). The research activities are outlined as follows under the two main project goals.

Goal 1

To build capacity among Indigenous parents to support improved educational outcomes, enhancing both their children's academic achievement and attitudes towards schooling as well as non-Indigenous understanding and respect, by positioning them as valuable sources of knowledge important to all Australians and increasing their involvement and visibility in the school community.

- Five participating schools ran term length projects across two of the terms during 2017–2018 (and two schools for one term in 2016), involving a total of 10 Aboriginal community members and 18 teachers. The participants were involved with the relationship building and professional learning workshops.
- A total of 12 interviews were conducted with Aboriginal community members to gauge changes in attitudes and perceptions of the success across the span of the project. In addition, 19 separate consultations were undertaken with the local AECG representatives.
- A total of 15 classroom observations were undertaken and resources were gathered as examples of culturally responsive practices informed by the project. In addition, a range of extracurricular activities such as NAIDOC celebrations, Koori Parents group, and AECG meetings were attended by the research team.

Goal 2

To strengthen teachers' capacity to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners and to meet their professional obligation to be advocates for reconciliation and to teach students to understand and value Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge.

- 14 workshops and professional learning sessions were conducted across the life of the project. Activities included introductions to the project, relationship building, professional learning, reflection, and individual mentoring sessions.
- A total of 125 surveys were collected across the 3 years of the project from teachers in all 5 schools. These surveys included items with Likert scales to evaluate changes in teacher attitudes regarding meeting the AITSL standards; preparedness working with Indigenous students and teaching Indigenous perspectives; confidence with addressing anti-racist activities; and culturally responsive schooling and working with diverse learners.
- A total of 18 interviews with teachers, and 6 with school principals were undertaken across the 3 years of the project.

The data included for the purposes of this chapter include the interviews with Aboriginal community members, classroom teachers, and school principals across the life of the project. These have been selected primarily for the purposes of acknowledging the voices of the participants involved in the project. Participants have been given pseudonyms throughout for the purposes of anonymity.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A Project for More Than Just Aboriginal Kids

One of the recurring themes from the interviews with local Aboriginal community members was that of the benefits of the project for all students, not just those of Aboriginal background. For example, comments from Aboriginal community members include:

> *I want to see them value it as more than just an 'Aboriginal program', but as a whole school program. (Cheryl)*

> *You don't want to just be in the classroom, being like an aide, I guess, but this is different, because we got to deliver it rather than*

> *dealing with just the Aboriginal students like [AEO's] do. We got to do the whole classroom and provide that perspective on to all the students there. Yeah. And the teacher, too. It can only build cultural competence in them, as well. (Kimberley)*

These two comments above indicate how the community members believe the project of getting local community members into classrooms is important for the whole school and all students, not just Aboriginal students (and in fact, the teachers too). There was also pride that this role was a substantive one and not just about being a teacher's aide, which has traditionally been the role of Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs), but it is about building 'cultural' competence and delivering curriculum content and Aboriginal knowledge to teachers and students. Similar comments from other community members include:

> *I'm glad that this project's in this community of schools, because that's why I wanted to do it: because it is community, and it's important, and, like, we know all the Koori kids, and it's good to put our perspective on to the non-Aboriginal kids, and make sure they're still involved, and even thought here is an indigenous perspective in their lesson, that they need to know that they still are involved in the lesson, and hopefully the teachers can see that and we can learn something off them and they can learn something off us. (Kimberley)*

> *And you know, in the classroom, the more and more Aboriginal people you bring into the classroom, is going to make a big difference, not only just on Aboriginal kids. All kids. And it doesn't have to be a high-profile Koori person. It can be just at that low level, who's achieved. (Marion)*

Having Aboriginal community seen as valuable members of the school can have a powerful influence on Aboriginal students and for the perception of non-Aboriginal students away from stereotypical and deficit views that are more commonly found across Australian society.

Perceptions on the Role of Aboriginal Community Members

A significant theme to come through the interviews relates to the discussion of roles, that is, about the actual role the Aboriginal community member plays in the classroom and how that works with the classroom teacher. In the previous theme, the point was made that these roles are more teaching and learning

focused rather than simply behaviour-focused. However, this raises key issues about how the relationship is developed between the Aboriginal community member and the classroom teachers, how particular knowledge is valued, and the practicalities of implementing this set of arrangements. For example, the following excerpts are from Aboriginal community members about how they feel in relation to this issue:

> *The teachers already do a lot of great things, but they don't know how to think outside what they already know. They're having difficulties imagining a new type of relationship that's more than just 'a role model in the class' or an assistant, and they're struggling with what it might look like to relinquish some control. I tell them, you're doing a lot already but this will be more in-depth. It will involve different processes, maybe go across different subjects than you're used to thinking about incorporating Aboriginal perspectives. (Cheryl)*

> *It takes time to build relationships, so that people will be willing to embark on the journey. There are a lot of shades of grey – in the timing, funding, amount of work, what it might look like, who might be appropriate for the roles. It can be hard to find the appropriate community members; some might not have the skill or confidence. Some know more about culture, history than others. The types of experiences they've had in schools before is a factor. Some might be frightened of being judged by other community members. Not everyone is a good fit – AECG consultation is important. (Cheryl)*

> *Yes. So, like I said, with the curriculum in Term 1, we focused on – in J's class, in geography, so they looked at the map. The Aboriginal languages map. And they seen all the sort of boundaries and different territories that made up the country prior to, like, invasion, and show that they're still present and all the different tribes, and we talked to them about the boundaries, and a lot about, obviously, this area and the sort of cultural knowledge, like fishing and that sort of stuff, with the kids. I notice that sort of engages the Aboriginal students more, but it makes the non-Aboriginal kids a bit more curious about it, so they tend to – the Koori kids tend to listen a bit more, whereas the non-Aboriginal kids tend to ask a few more questions, and it also – but sometimes the Aboriginal students like to answer the questions, so that's always good! (Kimberley)*

> *Yeah. Well, see, as I said, the teachers' roles are there and their lesson plans are there, so I've got to step in and – I sit back at first, and then I think, OK, oh, they're going to do it that way? OK. I would have done it this way! But, yeah. And then they have their say and I have my say. Then we might come to agreement: Oh, we can do both! Or, give the children the choice. What would you like to do? This way or that way? (Marion)*

These comments indicate a range of perspectives and issues from community members from issues of 'relinquishing control' on behalf of the teacher and how it requires different process and working relationship to build Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom. There is acknowledgement that these relationships take time with the need to build trust and that getting the 'right fit' between community members and teachers is important. There was also the need to constantly negotiate the relationship depending on the topic to be covered and how students react differently to having the Aboriginal community member in the classroom, with the Aboriginal students sometimes wanting to answer the questions from non-Aboriginal students.

Teachers participating in the project also voiced their opinions on how it was for them to have community members come into their classrooms. For example:

> *It was so confronting for me, initially. I was like, how is this going to work? And now I can see the potential in it. I can see that, 'Oh, OK, it's all about my relationship with the community member', and me looking at myself as a teacher, and reshuffling how I see myself in the room, and moving myself to one side and saying, 'Come on, it's not all about you'. (Jodie)*

> *We're modelling the relationships we want to see across society, so we want to see Aboriginal people and elders, you know, being a part of education and being part of all sectors, really, and working collaboratively. (Karen)*

Clearly what is important to these teachers (and community members too) is the building of relationships and how they are going to function. In the early stages of the project, there was certainly some anxiety about this from both groups and the teachers felt they needed to critically reflect on their roles and work to accommodate and 'give up' some control to the community members to work collaboratively.

Principals also reflected on this issue in the following interview excepts:

> *They're not a teacher's aide. It's curriculum-based, what we have to learn. (Lisa)*

> *I was a bit apprehensive, I suppose, in terms of how it would work, I will be honest. I guess I thought of the work aspect for teachers, because they've mentioned, you know, the amount of time of meeting and planning, and, as a teacher, having someone come into your class can be pretty daunting. Yeah, and disruptive. But I threw it out to my staff and said, 'Who wants to be involved?' and I had a couple of people who were really keen, which was good. (Nina)*

Like the teachers, this principal above reflected on the anxiety and apprehension of how the relationship was going to work. The fact that there were some teachers immediately willing to put their hand up was reassuring to the principal as this meant that the project, that they saw merit in, might have a chance of having teachers willing to become involved. Other comments from principals include:

> *Because we've had our community members in the classrooms and actually working with the teachers, they've brought that knowledge in and shared those with the teachers and then with the kids, so it's now about building the capacity of our teachers to be able to continue with that, and particularly to continue with those authentic experiences for the kids without the guiding, you know, community member each week. (Nina)*

> *The teachers told me how well our Aboriginal students are doing, so the value added to the program looks to be very strong…So, as a school, we need to look at how we can then deliver that program across the whole broader school community, because, in all honesty, we need to do it as effectively as we're doing it for our Aboriginal kids. (David)*

It was important for the above principal that the programme 'value add' and not cause disruption to the day-to-day work and teaching going on in the school. There was also acknowledgement of the development of 'authentic' learning experiences for the students by having the community members come into the classrooms, and that the benefits also extend beyond the Aboriginal community.

Relationships with the Community

One of the most significant themes to emerge from the interview data was the relationship between the school and the local community because of the project bringing Aboriginal community members into schools and specifically, classrooms. In the following interview excerpt, one of the Aboriginal community members makes the point of saying how the local community started to become more comfortable with the idea of coming to the school in the first place – often a place many have been uncomfortable visiting:

> *Well, I think, myself, Aunty Alice, Aunty Joan, we've opened these schools up for the community to feel comfortable to come in. I know their first contact is the office, but I feel that we've changed that. They feel more comfortable in coming into the school. Some of them wouldn't even go in the office first. They'd come straight to us! (laughs). (Marion)*

> *My past experiences are different, I suppose, not having been a part of this school and knowing who they have as their local members. But now I would say it's certainly been strengthened, just being able to engage with Aunty Marion in particular, because she's really enthusiastic about bringing people together, and I suppose through her, then, I've met other people, and then that's certainly strengthened those bonds within the community. I know J and I, we go to AECG meetings…But I think, you know, I guess it's brought us together a little bit more as a community. Yeah. Definitely. (Nina)*

In the above quote, one school principal remarked that bringing in the community member has 'strengthened the bonds with the community' and 'brought the school and local community closer together'. Another principal explains:

> *The program's been really successful here. I said before we started, the key for us is getting the right person, and Aunty Joan has been a fantastic fit… She's embraced the school, she's embraced the program, and she's helped us as a school connect with our community even more than we already had been doing. (Paul)*

> *We've had a significant improvement in behaviour at this school this year. Would I put it all down to Aunty Joan being here? No. But has it helped? Yes, it has. And, do you know, it comes back to that contact with community. (Paul)*

> *We're getting members of the community saying, 'Wow, the school hasn't reached out to community for such a long time, it's so nice to have the school reconnecting with the Aboriginal community'. (Paul)*

This principal makes the point that getting the right person is key and has helped to build a closer connection with the local community. Interestingly, the principal raised the issue of improved behaviour although he is cautious to claim it is as a direct result of the project itself, but he does draw attention to the connections between school and community that are so important.

Other Benefits

In addition to the themes raised in the previous sections, there are some additional benefits that were highlighted through the interviews with participants. The following excerpts from an Aboriginal community member point out the confidence felt by the students when they saw the local elders in the classroom, in a role that was granted authority by the school:

> *It gave the students, the little ones, the students, it gave them a bit of courage when they see an elder there, in the classroom. They felt safe, and they felt a bit of confidence when they seen us there. (Alice)*

> *They [students] can see their teacher's interested, and because they did look over at her when she was moving things around when I first started, and she leaned across and they were looking at her, they must have been wondering what she was doing, and they realised she was also interested in the story, too. Their eyes were just pinned on me and my artwork, and you could see their minds blowing with the Dreamtime story. (Alice)*

The second interview excerpt above draws attention to how the teacher was also interested in the story being told by the community member and the powerful effect this had on the children in the classroom. Teachers also reflected on the issue of pride from the students:

> *Because we have quite a big Aboriginal population at the school, it's beneficial for them because they've got quite a lot of pride in their culture, and they're learning things as well, that their families may not have information to as well, because of things that might*

have happened in the past to their families. And even the non-Aboriginal families and their kids, they're all interested in learning about it. (Lisa)

There was also some sadness towards the end of the project about it coming to an end. The following quote highlights this example and how the community member explains that they would continue to do the work for free, such was the value they saw in the project. Thankfully this school was keen to see the programme continue past the specified funding period to continue the positive work that had been done:

I remember our last meetings, I remember you saying it was coming to an end, and I thought, oh, it's coming to an end. It's only one day a week. I actually said out there that I'd volunteer. I'd stay on and volunteer. So I'm staying on. I think they'll find some money for me! As I said to Marion, I'm quite happy to volunteer. It's one day a week. And he said, 'No, no. I'll look after you'. (Joan)

The following quote comes back to that issue of teachers feeling underprepared to be able to effectively teach aboriginal perspectives in their classrooms:

I felt nervous about it, because I really – like, as teachers do, we really want to do the right thing and teach it, but at the same time, well, I felt I wasn't an expert, and I didn't want to do the very tokenistic side of it. I really wanted to, you know, teach lessons that taught authentic Aboriginal perspectives. So I feel like I haven't been able to do that, really, until now. I really feel like until you've got somebody in there helping you…now I feel more confident, that's for sure. But yeah, nothing beats having someone in there. (Karen)

The issue around *authentically* teaching Aboriginal perspectives was also brought up by one of the school principals in the following quote:

Not just filling time, but actually making those experiences of the kids authentic, and teaching about their culture, which is great. (Nina)

Finally, one of the principals also made the point that over the course of the project they have noticed an improvement in behaviour and also attendance.

This time last year, we had eight suspensions. We've had one this year. Our attendance rate – with our current students we've got here, we're sitting on 95.6% attendance rate. (Paul)

SOME REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Through the above themes from the interview data, I have taken a detailed approach to emphasizing the voices of the participants whether they are Aboriginal community members, teachers, or school principals. Three implications for social justice, equity, and inclusion were identified coming out of this project: the importance of relationships, identifying strategies for shared decision-making in schooling, and demonstrating the benefits that stem from stronger school-community participation in schooling practices. The importance of relationships was understood as significant from the inception and was central to the design of the research. The learning outcome stems from negotiating the challenges of creating the time and space that enabled relationships to be established and sustained, alongside developing insights into the benefits that are associated with this when the time and space are protected/invested in. For future projects, it is important that (a) there will need to be more lead in time to establish these relationships, and (b) to plan for time and space available for this across the project.

An ambition of the project was to determine if shared school-community decision-making could impact positively on classroom practices and inclusion. While wanting to stress the limitations of what can be claimed given the scope and scale of the study, allowing the teacher–community relationship to develop organically, as in, independent of prescriptive targets or focus, was essential to observing this aim unfold. In future projects, a greater emphasis on pedagogical processes, rather than content, is to be prioritized.

A final implication for social justice and equity from the project has arisen in association with the growing profile of the study itself. Both within and beyond the participating schools, there has been momentum growing in terms of interest (and renewed trust) with people (within and beyond the participating schools) seeking to become involved in this kind of study. This is a strong endorsement that the sort of school–community relationships engendered by this project are viewed as desirable and beneficial in the contemporary schooling context for issues of equity and inclusion.

In terms of thinking through the findings of this research project in terms of culturally responsive leadership, there are several themes that are worth reflecting on. Khalifa (2018) argues that to be culturally responsive school leaders need to explicitly promote culturally responsive leadership and practices that work towards those goals. In this project, while the participating school principals were not directly involved in the actual project itself, they did unanimously (except for one principal that declined to be involved in the project) advocate (Anderson, 2009; Niesche & Keddie, 2016) and support the project both in resourcing and in its aims. It is important to remember

that the principal can act as a gatekeeper in allowing projects like this to be implemented in their schools and as such they occupy a key place within the education system for adopting culturally responsive leadership and social justice more broadly. Principals were involved in 'talking up' the project to the local community, the teachers, and parents. They also regularly attended workshops and checked in with the research team. As a result, it became apparent that principal support is essential for the success of these kinds of projects and for equity and inclusion.

The aims of the research project were very closely aligned with the key characteristics of culturally responsive leadership as identified in Khalifa's work (2018). However, there are a couple of additional issues to be considered in relation to undertaking this work. For example, while the development of relationships between teachers and the Aboriginal community members was one of the productive elements of this project. At the same time, this was also the source of some anxiety and took significant time to build. Taking this into consideration and the need for clarity of expectations for the participants proved difficult as it was largely dependent on the individuals involved hence a risk of getting 'buy in' from teachers due to this uncertainty. To be clear in the expectations is important even if there cannot be a prescribed way of doing this work and building those relationships. This is a tension for developing the kind of work that must be culturally responsive. This work needs to be generative and organic, and there can be no preset normative model, it needs to be culturally determined and negotiated. This is certainly one of the challenges in undertaking leadership for social justice and equity.

Clearly, there were a few positive elements coming out of the project as demonstrated by the interviews. However, with a project such as this there were also challenges that needed to be acknowledged and overcome for the project to be successful. Some of these include the following:

- One of the six schools chose not to participate at the discretion of the principal. Therefore, only five schools participated in the project. However, given the enthusiastic uptake and feedback from the remaining schools, this was not seen to affect the success of the project.
- The timeline of the project was extended a few times to allow further relationship building between schools, community members, and researchers. This aspect of the project design was underestimated at the start. As can be seen from the interview excerpts, this was seen as an important aspect of the project that required more time.
- Health issues affected the participation of some of the community members at different stages through the project and this required a shifting

around of community members between different schools to make up for this. This led to some uncertainty with planning and anxiety from schools.

- The project's budget was impacted by schools requesting longer duration of community members in classrooms beyond the planned six-week block. However, it was indicative of project's success that the schools wanted longer and continued engagement of community members. A further budgetary issue was related to teacher buyout/release, which was originally not included as it was anticipated to be a school-absorbed cost.
- Building leadership capacity amongst schools was difficult with the movement of both principals and teachers in and out of the schools involved. This is a part of the daily lives of schools and like the above factors need to be considered when implementing programmes such as this.

One thing that needs to be acknowledged from the research is that many school principals, teachers, and other leaders often feel underprepared for the challenges faced by many disadvantaged schools and communities in working towards social justice and equity, so there needs to be explicit guidance, preparation, and development for these school leaders. This requires acknowledgement and support from policymakers and system leaders that this is a key part of the job of socially just school leadership. I am cautious to be seen to add more work to the already overloaded school leadership terrain (as evidenced by Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2020; See et al., 2023; Department of Education & Training, 2018) but if this explicit recognition of equity and incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into schools and classrooms as a key focus area is both acknowledged and supported then school leaders are more likely to create space and time for these discussions and approaches. It also must be recognized that many school leaders are doing this kind of work already so there is existing expertise to be drawn upon to help support these principals and other school leaders. Further research needs to be conducted in these schools and with these communities to find out what is working and what can be learned from these examples of good practice forming socially just leadership.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explored the findings from a research project that had as its main aims, to build capacity among local Aboriginal community members to implement Aboriginal perspectives in five New South Wales schools, and to build teachers' capacity to meet the needs of Aboriginal students.

These aims were seeking to contribute to the improvement of educational outcomes for Indigenous students, where these outcomes have historically (and up to the present been significantly lower than those of non-Indigenous students. Research has identified the importance of culturally appropriate and responsive approaches to schooling, education, and leadership to overcome the marginalization of Indigenous students and work towards social justice and equity.

Khalifa's approach to culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016) has been specifically drawn upon to highlight how schools can engage local communities, challenge systemic and historical forms of discrimination and marginalization, and develop inclusive practices whereby local Indigenous knowledges are valued in a genuine way. This project has identified some important benefits of this culturally responsive leadership approach as well as a few challenges for those wanting to implement these approaches in their own contexts and schools. If we are to take seriously, the challenge and importance of culturally responsive work, then there needs to be ongoing research and support for research that explicitly addresses and tackles these issues for the well-being, livelihood, and educational outcomes of all our students are dependent on these approaches being understood and successfully implemented at scale across education systems. This chapter has gone some way into identifying some key issues of success and ways forward for undertaking this important work for socially just and culturally responsive school leadership.

NOTES

1. I would like to acknowledge that the research connected with this chapter was conducted on Aboriginal country, the lands of the *Bidjigal* People.

2. It should be acknowledged that there is contestation around the use of terminology. Terms such as Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) and Indigenous are recent constructions that are ongoing sites of disagreement. It is not my aim here to engage with the politics of using various terms with which to identify people and communities but more so to acknowledge this and to explain that I will use the term Indigenous in a broader sense while using Aboriginal in a more localised description of the community on which this chapter is based, that is, referring to those who participated in the research. That is because they themselves used the term Aboriginal (or *Koori*) to refer to themselves in conversations and interviews.

3. As a white, male researcher, growing upon the lands of the *Gadigal* people, and one of the two chief investigators on the research project on which this chapter has been based, I am aware that while I am positioned as a 'leader' or 'expert' in educational research, I am also a learner and still have very much to learn about Aboriginal knowledge, perspectives, and history.

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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. *What are the challenges faced by school leaders trying to implement culturally responsive practices? How might these be overcome?*
2. *How might school context impact upon culturally responsive practices?*
3. *What do policy makers need to be mindful of when designing reforms that involve culturally responsive leadership and schooling?*
4. *How might schools develop better relationship with their local communities?*
5. *What role can research play in helping educators implement culturally responsive leadership in their schools and communities?*

FURTHER READING

1. **Khalifa, M. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.**

In this book, Muhammad Khalifa argues that a fully developed account of culturally responsive leadership is essential for school leaders to address the needs of minoritized students. This requires explicit recognition of an approach that is critically reflective, sustained and the building of non-oppressive school

environments that also must engage with local community needs and contexts. The book draws on empirical practices that can be used by school leaders in their own situations and contexts but also must be done in a critically self-reflective way to adapt to the local needs of students. Khalifa, places community at the centre of what is required for culturally responsive leadership.

2. **Lopez, A. (2016).** ***Culturally responsive and socially just leadership in diverse contexts: From theory to action*****. Palgrave MacMillan.**

In this book, Ann Lopez explores what culturally responsive and socially just leadership practice looks like across a range of diverse contexts. The book is both theoretically rich and draws on the experiences and narratives of school leaders as they undertake this complex and challenging work. The aim here is to go beyond superficial or forms of 'window dressing' to achieve powerful and long-lasting change, to improve the lives of students who have been marginalized through an education system that has de-prioritized their learning and well-being for too long. The book argues that educational leaders must develop clear and coherent approaches to social justice and culturally responsive leadership and provides examples of this for educators.

3. **MacDonald, K. (2024).** ***Socially just educational leadership in unjust times*****. Springer.**

This book, while not explicitly exploring culturally responsive leadership per se, is focused on socially just leadership practices from the perspective of the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In this book, Katrina MacDonald draws on empirical research conducted in Victorian schools in Australia to show school principals across disadvantaged schools understand social justice and how this intersects with their life histories, and what this enables them to undertake in the form of practices of leadership for social justice. The intersection of these principals' habitus with their complex schools and contexts provides rich understandings of socially just leadership and its challenges.

5

CONCLUDING COMMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

Coming to social justice, for me, is always a new process. You can never see social injustices in the same way because of changing circumstances, situations, events, people, or just the fact that you are looking at it from a different space or at a different time. Hence, critique and revision are next steps in how we teach, learn, and lead. Obviously, contexts matter, but what does that mean when placed next to the hegemonic formats and habits of doing educational leadership research? Do the constructs themselves: social justice, equity, and inclusion offer pathways forward for rethinking research and practice?

Keywords: Problematic; scepticism; theory-method interactions; context; social justice

PREFACE

I am aligned with the text's author(s) that researchers and practitioners ought to maintain a certain level of scepticism with respect to the constructs of educational leadership, social justice, equity, and inclusion. What that means is that no single definition, conceptual framework, review of literature, research design and methods, set of empirical data, or, especially, no one set of findings should be viewed as a total picture, complete, and finished. Capper and Young (2014) refer to these realities in educational leadership for social justice as ironies and limitations. The constructs under discussion in this text have to be seen as *in process*. In other words, educational leadership, social justice, equity, and inclusion are all defined differently within different contexts locally, nationally, and internationally. Therefore, we ought not mis-take these theories, methods, and/or leadership practices by the words on the page as being objective, value free, neutral, or completely true. The state of the art of today's very timely concepts of social justice, equity, and inclusion are still as fragmented as ever. For this reason, I believe, the author has attempted in an unorthodox manner to re-center scepticism and problematization inside these normative ideas and hegemonic structures called educational leadership research.

Our task for this commentary, as we think alongside the author, is how we make sense of a review of the different concepts of social justice, equity, and inclusion as presented in the literature (Chapter One), a conceptual chapter on equity and inclusion in relationship to sustainable development goals (Chapter Two), a policy analysis and case study about Malta (Chapter Three), a participatory case study about indigenous research in Australia (Chapter Four). Both geographical settings, of course, are former British colonies and both remain members of the Commonwealth of nations. In other words, the two settings have a lot in common. In short, the chapters cover multiple theories, multiple conceptual frameworks, case study empirical methods, policies and laws, as well as school leadership practices.

I'll end this preface with the simple question; why me as the chosen author of this concluding chapter?

> *Coming to social justice, for me, is always a new process. You can never see social injustices in the same way because of changing circumstances, situations, events, people, or just the fact that you are looking at it from a different space or at a different time.*
>
> *And, with each review or critique, the researcher's role is to engage the reader in that situation specifically, contextually. It makes theorizing, as processes, problematic, but in a good way, forcing readers to actually see what is happening and what is not*

happening at the same time. If you as a researcher can expose something not obvious or not in the readers' consciousness, then that is the first step of the process. You want to spark a dialogue by exposing a truth that if not exposed will result in a continuation of social injustice situations.

But as a researcher, there is more to do: you have to actually demonstrate the effects of social justice, not just describe it theoretically or study it superficially.

MY READING OF THE TEXT

For me, the author came to these chapters, first as a researcher through the most recent literature on leadership for social justice, and then, as a former policymaker/administrator through her experiences in Malta. What she extracted from that literature, if I am interpreting the writing correctly, was the problematization of the constructs, social justice, equity, inclusion, as a continuous beginning again. Each study itself represents a new beginning in a specific context that results in finding partial truths which fit a theory or research design, method, all inside that one context.

Therefore, what's needed to understand the findings from different theoretical/empirical studies on educational leadership for social justice are: (1) the history of the antecedents leading up to the experiences of those injustices, (2) the different consequences which emerged, not from the descriptive words on a page, but rather from the specific actions/interventions taken, and lastly, (3) the actual experiences of the participants in the empirical study who can inform us, as researchers, whether that intervention made their lives better (or worse) than it had been previously.

And what's problematic – in a good educational way – are these processes of continuous learning from actions being taken and then the designing of next steps, hopefully in the direction of social justice, equity, and inclusion. To return to the text, the Malta and Australia case studies illustrate good tries along with new ideas for what should come next. All of these processes involve intersections across theories, conceptual frameworks, methods, and analyses. All of these processes are continuous and educational.

READING AS ENGAGEMENT

If you happen to be reading this concluding commentary before the other chapters in the text, in addition to you being a radical rule-breaker, then my advice in reading is to take a sceptical or problematic post-structural position

theoretically. That means reading the theoretical chapters not for definitions or definitive conclusions, but instead for deeper understandings of the scope of scholarly interests generated by the topics of social justice, equity, and inclusion. Take note of how many different researchers are going beyond one-dimensional approaches, going beyond single axis frameworks, and going beyond the physical doors of the school house. Then as you proceed onto the two case studies, read them as experiments, one with policy in mind, the other with indigenous methodologies, guided by participants, as illustrations of pathways towards undoing social injustices.

The ideas of social justice, equity, and inclusion and their worldwide correlates are meant to make what is happening around the world as well as within specific contexts accessible to readers. But it is still the responsibility of researchers to make the words on the page come alive – even in APA formatting. In so doing, margins on the page are filled with hastily, but thoughtfully, scribbled notes which are meant to trigger new ideas. Researchers and practitioners are on the same page in saying that they not only support improvement and change, but that both are necessary. Yet, as educators professionally, we cannot say that this is happening enough. And so again, scepticism and problematization remain the most appropriate mindset for today. Why? Old habits: our literatures are stuck in the theory-practice binary as well as the theory-method binary. New habits would promote theory and practice interacting continuously, and theories driving methods, while also methods driving theories.

CONCLUSION: MY CONTEXT, MY RULES

Let's leave Malta, Australia, and the OECD, for now, and fly with me across the Atlantic to the United States. If we land where I live today, in the state of Florida, then the laws are very clear: no diversity, no equity, and no inclusion (anti-DEI). The immediate question(s) for educational leaders in Florida is that by the time this text is published, its contents have already been banned; therefore, how can or why should educational leaders read it? The laws will not let us – meaning you being here with me in Florida – cannot engage in these so-called divisive concepts. Geographically, however, you are still on planet Earth; yet the laws, policies, regulations, and rules in Florida (and elsewhere) only allow you to engage in this text, but without breaking the law.

What would life be like living in a world without laws and policies (norms, habits, beliefs) supporting social justice, equity, and inclusion? This is the reality for millions of people around the world, and it has been for decades. As the shared values of democracy and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) wane

and populist nationalism rises, we are being forced into reconsidering educational leadership for social justice under a wide range of political, social, and economic circumstances all as barriers to these constructs.

There have always been differences in circumstances, resources, and opportunities based on where people are born and raised. As governments retreat from social justice interventions, we are left with a world where individuals can rely only on their own spheres of power as they try to climb economic and societal ladders on their own. This dystopian vision has a long pedigree of economic, philosophical, and social theories – none of which we are found in this text or, rarely debated in liberal academic journals: the moral and economic arguments of Adam Smith, the political arguments of Edmund Burke, the philosophical arguments of Frederick Hayek, the economic positions taken by Milton Friedman, the popular novels of Ayn Rand, and the journalistic commentaries of Thomas Sowell (2023). I leave you, dear readers, with my three questions:

- Can the term 'social justice' shed its socialist connotations of government interventions, and, instead, be re-interpreted developmentally as fulfilling human potential?
- Can the meaning of equity become a collective goal where the interdependence of all imperfect human beings requires us to see the need for 'special' assistance?
- Can the meaning of inclusion shed its limited association with people with disabilities, physically or mentally, and be reinterpreted as a sustainable goal for everyone, everywhere?

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INDEX

Aboriginal community members, 103–106
Aboriginal country, 113*n*1
Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), 101
Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs), 103
Aboriginal kids, 102–103
Academic achievement, 101
Accountability, 38
Actant, 30–31, 37, 40
Actor, 40
Actor-Network Theory (ANT), 16, 18, 29, 59, 60
  ANT-ish concept of 'symmetry', 40
  sensibility, 29–32
  of state translating schooling, 36–39
Alternative Learning Programme (ALP), 72
Anglophone nations, 46–49
Antagonistic practices, 42
Assemblage, 29–31, 36, 40
Assessment, 46, 99
Attainment, 28
Australia, 2, 16–17, 59, 99, 119

Bacchi, Carol, 65–66, 73–75, 77
Bias, 16, 86
Black-boxed, 31
Blame culture, 40

Church schools, 65
Classrooms
  enactments in, 7–9
  practices, 110
Co-education, 72
Collaborative leadership, 45
Commonwealth, 2, 122
Community relationships, 107–108
Compulsory schooling, 71–73
  social justice in, 3–5
Contexts, 122
Core Curriculum Programme (CCP), 72
COVID-19 pandemic, 2, 64
Critical reflexive research, 29
Critique, 18, 122
Cultural imperialism, practices of, 42
Culturally responsive leadership, 96
  leadership and schooling for social justice, 97–99
  research background, 100–102
  research findings, 102–109
  and schooling, 99–100
Culture, 3
Curriculum, 12, 104

Deprivation, 4
Dilemmatic/tense leadership, 45
Disability, 7
Disadvantaged groups, 6–7
Discourses, 73
Discriminatory government policies, 10
Disruptive leadership, 45
Distribution, 3, 14, 30, 70
Distributive justice, 4
Distributive principles, 4
Diversity, 28
Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), 124

Early childhood education and care (ECEC), 10
Economic imperatives, subordination of education to, 5–7
Economic marginalization, 4
Education, 65
  in Malta, 71–73
  policy, 71–73
  policymaking, 40
  social justice in, 3–5
  subordination of education to economic imperatives, 5–7
'Education for All: Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta', 71
Educational inequalities, 6
Educational justice, 5
Educational leaders, 44–45
Educational leadership, 29, 121–122
Educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA), 60–61
Educational outcomes, 3, 14, 28, 39–40, 101, 113
Educational policy, 5–6
Educational reform, 34
Educators, 39
Effectiveness, 8, 10, 12, 81
Egalitarianism, 70
Emergent-contextual leadership, 45
Enrolment, 31
Equality, 4, 6, 14, 29, 70
Equity, 2, 5, 121–122
  as a sublime object, 70
  background, 71–73
  as counterparts of social justice, 9–12
  in education and schooling, 65
  issues of, 29
  literature review, 66–70
  methodology, 73–75
  policy documents of inclusive education in Malta, 77–80
  presuppositions or assumptions, 80–81
  problem, 76–86
  problem representation, 81–86
  process and parameters, 76–77
  pursuit of, 71–73
  systemic factors, 68
Ethnicity, 3
European educational systems, 69
European Union (EU), 13
Exclusion, 36 (*see also* Inclusion)
Exploitation, 4
Exploitative relationships, 42

Fairness, 65
Foucauldian theory, 73
Free conduct of individuals, 37
Freedom, 37

Gender, 3, 6
Global South, 48
Globalization, 15
'Good' leadership, 98
Government, 37, 80
Governmentality, 73

Immutable mobile/s, 41
Implicit bias, 8
Improvement-focused leaders, 8
Inclusion, 2, 36, 65, 121–122
  as counterparts of social justice, 9–12
  processes, 42
Inclusive education, 10, 68, 79–80
Indigenous communities, 96–97
Indigenous education, 98
Indigenous minorities, 7
Indigenous perspectives, 96–97
Individualized education programmes (IEPs), 72
Inequality/ies, 5, 7, 12, 16, 35, 67, 88, 96
Injustice, 3–4
International student assessment data, 68
Interressement, 31, 37
Intersectionality, 7, 66, 83
Intra-institutional activism, 8

Leadership, 45 (*see also* Culturally responsive leadership)
for social justice concept, 46–49, 97–99
Learning loss, 2, 13, 64
Learning outcomes, 39, 71, 100
Learning support educator (LSE), 72
Linguistic minorities, 7

Macro/micro level forces, 36
Malta, 65, 72–73, 122–123
policy documents of inclusive education in, 77–80
Maltese education system, 65, 71
Marginalization processes, 42
Meritocracy, 6
Meritocratic elite, 5
Metric society, 5
Micro-negotiations, 49
Migrant status, 3
Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), 12
Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR), 65
Minority ethnic disadvantage, 6
Mobilization, 31, 37, 46
Modus operandi of social justice, 34–35
Mutuality, 42
Myths, 99

National Inclusive Education Framework (NIEF), 76
Neoliberal hegemony, 41
Neoliberal policy, 38
Neoliberalism, 6, 36–38
Network, 30
assemblages, 37
elements, 31
ethnography, 93
New Public Management techniques, 41
'No Poverty', 12–14
Non-Indigenous students, 97, 99, 113

Obligatory point of passage, 31, 37, 46
OECD policy, 5, 66, 69–70
Ordering struggles, 31, 39, 48
Out-of-school children, 11

Pandemic, 64
Performance-driven policy script, 39–43
Policy as discourse, 74
Policy as text, 74
Policy discourses, 42
Policy documents of inclusive education in Malta, 77–80
Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (PIES), 76
Policy sociology, 74
Post-structural policy analysis, 92
Post-structural sensibility, 74
Post-structuralist research analysis, 73
Poverty, 3
Prince Trust, 72
Problem representation, 81–86
Problematic, 123
Problematization, 37
Productivity, 6, 70
Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 39–40, 73
assessment regime, 41
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), 73
Public funding, 10
Public good in education, 15
Punctualization, 31, 39

Quality, 65
Quality Education, 12–14

Racism, 98–99
Re-regulation, 38
Reading as engagement, 123–124
Recognition, 42
Recognitive justice, 4
Redistribution/recognition, 36

Reflexivity, 9, 36, 86
Reforms, 30, 72
Relationships, 5, 42, 48, 97, 110–111
Religious minorities, 7
Representation, 4
Representative justice, 4
Respect, 42
Rurality, 3

Sameness/difference, 36
Scepticism, 121
School leaders, 7, 98
  preparation and development, 112
  school leaders/principals, 8
Schooling, 29, 32–36, 99–100
  for social justice, 97–99
Schools
  accountability, 10, 67
  autonomy, 10, 34, 67
  closures, 2, 64
  community relations, 96
  effectiveness discourses, 39–43
  enactments in, 7–9
  leadership, 28, 43–49, 97–98
  school-level education, 67
  school/community attitudes, 10
  school/community relations, 99
  success, 39–43
SDG 1, 2, 13, 17
SDG 4, 2, 13, 17
Self-reflexivity, 85
Sexual orientation, 3
Shared decision-making, 110
Social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), 72
Social class, 39
Social justice, 2, 5, 28, 97, 121–122
  contributions to theory, policy, and practice, 14–17
  discourses in education, 30–32
  in education and compulsory schooling, 3–5
  equity and inclusion as counterparts of, 9–12
  issues of, 29
  leadership and schooling for, 97–99
  in practice, 7–9
  and schooling, 32–36
  theoretical/empirical studies on educational leadership for, 123
Social recognition, 4
'Social', the, 3
Socially just leadership, 96
Socially just school, 98–99
Socioeconomic disadvantage, 6
Sociomaterialism, 60
Spaces of negotiation, 35
Spaces of prescription, 35
Special educational needs (SEN), 72
Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), 8
Standardization, 67
Standards, 6, 41, 45, 98
Stereotypes, 99
Stratification, 10, 67–68
Student diversity, 39–43
Student learning, 98
  and participation, 11
Sustainable development goals (SDGs), 12–14
Symmetry, 30–31, 40, 60
Systemic oppression, 4

Theory-method interactions, 124
Three-dimensional theory, 4
Translation, 29, 31, 37–38, 41, 60
Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), 73

Under-theorization of social justice, 42
UNESCO, 10, 15, 81

Vocational education and training (VET), 72

Western ideologies, 46–47
Western leadership for social justice concept, 47
What's the problem represented to be? (WPR), 16, 18
  approach, 74–75, 92
  policy analysis approach, 65