Leading for Equality in a Changing Europe
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Europe is changing

In many parts of Europe the context in which school leaders must work is changing dramatically: change is both large scale and speedy. Financial insecurity is rising as global economic trends favour Asian and South American nations while much of Europe faces increasing austerity and uncertainty. Resulting youth unemployment is at disquieting levels, particularly in Eastern Europe, and around 50 per cent in Spain and Greece (Eurostat 2012). Migration is increasing rapidly. The proportion of children in school 'who are foreign-born or have foreign-born parents now exceeds 10% in Germany, Belgium, Austria, France, the Netherlands and Sweden, and is above 20% in Switzerland... and Luxembourg' (Nusche, 2009: 5). These changes are overlaid on the perennial challenges schools face in meeting the needs of children from very diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. As Brown (2004: 79) states 'the evidence is clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis'. Schools have grappled with achieving equality for along time, but as the issues Europe faces become more testing, so schools are faced with intensifying difficulties in offering an equitable education to all. System level choices, for example about different categories of school, the method of distributing funding and the terms and conditions of teachers' recruitment and employment, are all critical in shaping equality (Nusche, 2009). This paper, however, does not focus on these system-level factors but on school-level issues; that is, how school leaders can embed equality within their school.

Defining equality

Deciding what equality means and what it would look like in practice is one of the challenges. Equality is one of the most contested concepts in education, repeatedly debated along with related terms such as equity, social justice, fairness, equal opportunities (Morrison, 2009). Many people link achieving equality with offering the same treatment to all. However, over time it has become clear that equality is not about providing the same educational experiences for all, or even about achieving the same outcomes for all groups irrespective of their characteristics (Lumby with Coleman, 2007). Individuals and families do not necessarily value similar life trajectories, and in particular, not all valorise the kind of academic pathway into a professional job sought by many from a socio-economically advantaged background. Counter-intuitively, rather than equality meaning same treatment, equality may be better understood as 'giving all children an equal chance to be equipped to live a life they value' (Lumby, 2013: 19), which implies giving each child what is needed from their perspective, and this will not be the same in all cases. What each family and individual values is culturally nuanced and, although children and young people should not be bounded by the family and community culture in which they grow up, neither should the aspirations and values of their community be disdained or rejected as deviant from or lesser than those of other groups. As Fitzgerald (2009: 157) asserts, 'Social justice is an impossibility if it rests on notions of deficit'.

Leading for equality matters fundamentally to us all. There is considerable evidence that giving some children fewer chances than others to live a life they value rebounds on the whole of society, including those who are apparent recipients of a relatively privileged education (Connell, 1995; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Equality is a necessary foundation for the social and physical health of the entire community and not an add on relevant only to those born into a stigmatised group or an economically poor family.

Approaches to leading for equality

Synthesising the literature of leading for equality, there are three major approaches that leaders may adopt. The approaches were first highlighted by Fraser (1995) and have since been developed by others (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003; Gewirtz, 1998):

- *Redistribution*: ensuring that available resources are reshaped to enable those who have less physical or social capital, or have greater need, receive sufficient additional help to enable them to make choices and be enabled to take part in society in ways that they value.

- *Recognition*: recognising difference, insisting on respect for different values and cultures, ensuring that those likely to encounter negative responses or discrimination are particularly supported.

- *Participation*: ensuring that children are equipped to take their place as citizens, to have a voice, to challenge societal assumptions and practice, the better to shape the future.

The three approaches outlined above are not mutually exclusive. Together they translate to an agenda for action. There are many examples from throughout the world of school leaders taking action related to redistribution, recognition and participation. For example, in England, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2012) documents a range of redistribution actions in schools, including using additional funding provided by the government to give one-to-one tuition and small group teaching to learners who need extra help. Shah (2006) describes a range of recognition actions for leaders in UK schools to achieve greater recognition of the lives and needs of Muslim students in the UK. Flecha (2011: 8) writes of participation work with migrants and Romani children in Spain which provided 'the tools both to transform injustice and to gain access to socio-economic benefits'.

Maintaining inequality

Despite many examples of school leaders acting to achieve greater equality for learners, there are also examples of indifference and active maintenance of existing inequalities. In Spain a different interpretation of redistribution is apparent when a local administration decided immigrant students must be 'redistributed' to other schools 'when the percentage of immigrant students in a given centre passed 15%, based on the belief that a larger percentage of immigrants in schools would impede adequate learning for the others and thus lead to school failure and violence' (Flecha, 2011: 10). Belief that a particular percentage of immigrants in a school is disadvantageous is not supported by empirical evidence (Song, 2011). Concern such as the example in Spain seems to relate more to fears

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of harming the education of advantaged learners rather than prioritising the needs of those who may be in poverty and using a second language for instruction: not concern for greater equality, but for protecting advantage from erosion.

A second example is the use of tracking, that is, organising children into classes according to perceptions of their ability. Leaders persist in using tracking despite considerable international evidence that it exacerbates disadvantage and does not particularly help the advantaged (Ammermüller, 2005; Gamoran, 2001; Flecha, 2011; Schneeweis, 2006). Additionally, individual or group classes for those with perceived lesser attainment or ability are often staffed by the least qualified and experienced teachers. Consequently children may experience a double disadvantage, placed in classes which engage with a less challenging curriculum and taught by less expert teachers.

Learners whose first language is not the language of instruction in their school are sometimes seen as a problem. Their language education is often viewed as the responsibility of specialist staff rather than an integral part of the remit of all teachers (Karsten, 2006; Nusche, 2009). Under such circumstances, the provision of specialist language staff may disadvantage rather than help children (Nusche, 2009). In the examples given, whether explicitly stated or not, the primary concern is maintenance of the standards of education for the advantaged. The choices made reflect teacher and parent preferences, where some children are perceived as different to a norm and so in deficit, rather than potentially advantaged by being bilingual.

Attitudes to equality

This paper opened by describing structural changes in Europe. Many would argue that there are cultural changes also, austerity driving a focus on protecting self-interest. If this is the case, the rhetorical commitment to equality in education which threads through most European policy documents, school missions and educators' discourse cannot be assumed to reflect a determination to enact such assertions. On the contrary, Kohl (2001: npn) writes:

> One problem is that many people – children as well as adults – do not believe that justice is worth fighting for. One cannot assume an idea or cause will be embraced merely because it is just, fair, or compassionate. Contemporary society values self-interest and personal gain over compassion and the communal good.

Evidence supports Kohl, in that children themselves may resist attention being given, as they see it, to the less able or less well behaved (Lumby & Morrison, 2009). There is also overwhelming evidence that leaders and teachers, though often sincerely convinced of their commitment to equality, prioritise other aims, such as maintaining their subject, the school's prestige, their own daily professional survival. Since Waller (1932), research has repeatedly recognised the 'grammar and deep structure' (Pajak, 2012: 1187) of schools that, rather than move towards greater equality, supports a continuation of what is (Delpit, 2006; Gamoran, 2001; Reay, 2001; Shields & Mohan, 2008). Consequently, leaders require considerable preparatory and ongoing development in order to attempt to dismantle inequalities in education.

Embedding equality in schools

The impression is sometimes given that we know too little about how to embed equality in schools. This is not the case. There is considerable guidance about how to lead to be more inclusive (Henze et al., 2002; Rusch & Douglass Horsford, 2008; Shields & Mohan, 2008). Failing to achieve equality in schools relates not so much to a lack of technical know-how, but to issues of ethics and priorities. Leaders who attempt to shift school priorities and practices in fundamental ways usually encounter a modicum of support and a good deal of resistance from teachers and from parents. Teachers may argue, for example, that dismantling tracking jeopardises teaching their subject well, or any subject well (Oakes et al., 2000). Leaders who recruit learners seen by others as problematic risk parents' response to avoid their school. Flight from schools with a high percentage of immigrant learners has been noted in Denmark (Bloem & Diaz, 2007), and Sweden (Rangvid, 2007), amongst other countries. Above all, leaders face a belief that some children are not educable or only educable with great difficulty. The children of immigrant families or of minority ethnic groups are more likely to be seen as having special needs than are other groups (Field et al., 2007; Nusche, 2009) reflecting deeply embedded prejudices that link being perceived as different with being less able (Lumby with Coleman, 2007). In short, leaders face unjust discriminatory convictions that underpin many teachers' and parents' judgements about what is right and possible in education.

Leaders themselves are not immune from such beliefs. Those who, for example, give entry preference to learners with higher attainment (Björklund et al., 2004), or who allocate the most inexperienced teachers to classes of those perceived as lower ability, are enacting inequality. In the light of overwhelming evidence that leaders, teachers and school communities do not act in the best interests of all learners, that they may embody inequality, the preparation and development of leaders has the aim of heightening awareness of how inequality is maintained and how it might be countered.

Preparation and development programmes

Leaders themselves and those who design programmes to educate them are often resistant to making such an aim central. Henze et al. (2002: 4) found that only lip service is paid to preparation for leading diverse schools and that 'leaders had not been prepared with tools to analyse racial or ethnic conflict, or with specific strategies for building positive interethnic communities'. Similarly, Marshall (2004: 5) suggests that:

> In the push toward credentialing, many faculties and curricula trip lightly on the ways in which education policies are framed without a critical, contextual, or historical understanding of social inequities, equity concerns, or desires for social justice.

Many others reviewing their national system to prepare leaders have made the same point (Brundrett & Anderson de Cuevas, 2007; Shields & Mohan, 2008). Repeatedly, research has found that those who lead programmes feel that they do not have the time or skills or sometimes the necessity to address equality issues explicitly as a priority in leader preparation programmes and that leaders themselves see the issues as taken-for-granted, and not demanding specific attention (Lopez, 2003; Rusch, 2004). Strategies and practice related to poverty, gender, ethnicity, immigrant language or sexuality are often aggregated

within a general rhetorical commitment to equality. Programme leaders and school leaders collude to accept token gestures towards equipping senior and middle leaders. This is only possible because, though they may protest to the contrary, the majority do not wish it to be otherwise. The premise for progress is therefore that leaders and those who prepare them should genuinely wish to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills that would allow them to tackle inequalities head on and to withstand the resistance they are likely to encounter in their school community. Policy makers also need to enable freedoms so that organisational level choices about resource distribution, curricula and pedagogy can be fitted to the needs of the whole school community.

Looking for guidance

Leaders might look to learn about meeting the social, curricular and pedagogic challenges from a number of perspectives.

Understanding oneself
An initial focus might be to look more objectively and critically at oneself, scrutinising those characteristics as taken-for-granted and used as an unconscious norm; for example, whiteness and its implications are rarely the subject of interest in the way that black principals expect their colour to be; whiteness is pertinent in all schools, but particularly in the many with black and Asian heritage learners (Lumby & Heystek, 2012). Additionally, leaders are accultured into particular assumptions that they may view as being universal truths, although they are not (Hopkins, 2013). For example, beliefs about capacity to learn and how far it relates to innate ability or to effort and beliefs about the impact of families on early learning are culturally shaped. Very different assumptions about such issues are held in different cultures and correspondingly promote or inhibit learning. Unpacking one's own culture and its assumptions about people and about learning may move leaders out of their unconscious habitual thinking and behaviours, raising awareness of how they are shaped by gender, ethnicity, class and societal culture. If the leader is more aware of how his or her thoughts and actions reflect a specific location in a particular society, a deeper understanding of learners and particularly of those deemed 'other' in the school, may be possible.

Understanding the experience of disadvantaged groups
Leaders might also be supported to better understand the experience of minority groups within their school, whether characterised by ethnicity, gender, religion, language or a range of other factors. They might also focus on groups disadvantaged by poverty, and plan to act upon what is learned. There is no shortage of materials. Norte (1999) offers five key categories to frame an action agenda to organise a school for positive interethnic equality. Shah (2006) provides an explicit agenda for leaders who have Muslim children in their school. Cook-Sather et al. (2010), and Nagda and Gurin (2007) offer techniques to facilitate dialogue to confront perceptions of difference within school. These are merely examples of the rich literature offering frameworks, processes and materials to address particular needs and to properly equip leaders. Rather than some learners being seen as in deficit, preparation and development programmes might characterise the leader and school as lacking, in that leaders do not adequately understand their own limitations and the experience of all their learners and need to equip themselves with better knowledge and ideas for action.

Challenging curricula and pedagogy

A third focus might be, to use Flecha's (2011: 8) phrase 'both a *curriculum of access* and a *curriculum of dissent*'. Again there is help for understanding how methods might be used to challenge the embedded grammar of teaching and move to a more inclusive approach. Hayes et al. (2009) studied high poverty schools and devised a programme of working with researchers and teachers to change habitual teaching practices unsuccessful with many students. Furman (2012) highlights the developing toolbox for pedagogic development in relation to equality, pointing the way to researchers who offer equality audit tools, cultural competency assessments, community outreach ideas and a range of other methods to develop leaders and teachers to achieve more inclusive schools. Given the will to learn how to create greater equality, there is much material to use in support. The issue is not technical knowledge of how to act, but the will to do so.

Leading for equality

This paper suggests that Europe faces something of a crisis. The economic and societal pressures are likely to intensify negative attitudes towards those deemed different, for example immigrants (Collett, 2013), or the poor (Jones, 2012). In this context, schools will come under pressure to ensure those currently advantaged suffer no detriment, and that provision of those seen as in some way in deficit is tackled in discrete ways, for example, ability sorted classes for those deemed of lower attainment, or specialist language teachers to deal with language issues, exclusion of those children who behave in ways that are deemed unacceptable, or careful quotas maintained for the entry of the proportion of those learners perceived as problematic. Typically, in educational leadership and management it is policy makers or family/society factors that are cited as maintaining inequality, and staff in schools depicted as constrained by the context within which they work. This is a misleading assumption. Schools and school staff also play a part in creating, maintaining or increasing inequality.

It has become a cliché that leadership is above all a moral task (Begley, 2003). A changing Europe has made this more so than ever. Policy makers, leaders and teachers share a discourse with a commitment to equality, and yet educational inequality persists. The causes are of course multiple and complex and not all under the control of school leaders, but the latter have the opportunity to minimise or exacerbate inequality. It is their determination to do so and the degree to which they prioritise this aim that is the foundation of action. Should leaders, those who prepare them and teachers genuinely wish to change things, there is much research and practice guidance available to help.

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