

# Understanding social justice leadership: An international exploration of the perspectives of two school leaders in Costa Rica and England

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## Abstract

This article is an examination of two social justice leaders, one in Costa Rica and one in England. It is part of the International Study of Leadership Development Network, a multi-nation study of social justice and educational leadership. A brief discussion of the philosophy of social justice and an examination of the macro and micro context in each of the countries set the stage to understand the social perspective of the two school leaders. Interviews were conducted to construct a narrative to illuminate their views of social justice. A comparison of the leaders found more similarities than differences even though the settings in each country were quite different. They both felt that it was important to challenge inequities in society and demand that the government provide for all citizens; they emphasized respect for students; and, to some extent, they grounded their beliefs in faith. These narratives can be valuable for both practitioners and researchers to learn from the conceptions of social justice and the challenges of these leaders. Illuminating the agency of a school leader in one national context may stir the possibility of emancipation in another context.

## Keywords

International, leadership, principal, school director, social justice

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore briefly a philosophy of social justice and examine the role of context in the enactment of social justice leadership. It is part of the International Study of Leadership Development Network (ISLDN). We look at two schools, one in Costa Rica and the other in England, and attempt to understand these schools on three levels. First, the school exists in a macro socio-cultural context. Second, the micro context of the school and community is examined. Third, the school directors' views of social justice are presented.

We wanted to understand education in each country as it related to the beliefs of two school directors who were attempting to promote social justice. Comparison of the work of two leaders in quite different countries provided an opportunity to gain a better understanding of each. These descriptions form a narrative of the voices of the school directors, not necessarily to specify actions, but to provide

a statement of beliefs and perceptions that will inform school directors striving for social justice in diverse contexts.

## Philosophy of social justice

Cribb and Gewirtz (2003) defined three types of social justice that run throughout our sampling of the literature. Participative justice refers to the right of people to participate in decisions. Cultural justice has to do with respect and recognition of people as members of a particular group. Distributive justice relates to overcoming social and economic inequalities.

Woods (2005) endorsed this list and added developmental justice, which refers to developing a person's full potential.

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Murillo and Reyes (2011) offered a similar conception of social justice and added the redistribution of liberties: people are free to act and carry out their wishes to varying degrees according to the privileges that they have. They also used the term “recognition,” which is similar to Cribb and Gerwitz’s (2003) term “cultural justice.” It addresses the respect given to everyone in a society and the formation of just relationships. Murillo and Reyes’s final term is “representation,” which is similar to Cribb and Gerwitz’s notion of participative justice. It concerns the extent to which people participate in society and make decisions that affect their lives.

These conceptions of social justice raise several issues for schools. Bolivar (2012) discussed the need to balance equal treatment of individuals with the need for special treatment of those who have less. On the one hand, social justice is about applying values equally. Values are socially constructed and contextualized in their meaning. Therefore, a society or community that is socially just applies its values in the same way to everyone. It does not have one set of rules for one set of people and another set of rules for another. Everyone is treated equally. On the other hand, some students need extra resources to succeed, and social justice values require attention to these students.

In funding schools, for example, there is a need to provide equal resources to all schools within a jurisdiction no matter the wealth of the constituents, and, at the same time, Bolivar would argue that extra resources should be provided for students who come from an impoverished background and need additional help to learn. The concern is for neglected students and those who have been punished by a system of haves and have-nots. Rawls’s (1999) theory of justice being about fairness implies that it is not right to accept in schools the unfairness of a child’s situation determined by birth or accommodation. The education system has the responsibility to distribute resources and opportunity to counter any unfairness.

The biggest barrier to social justice is how people have learned to think. Rosenthal and Jacobson’s (1968) use of the notion of self-fulfilling prophecy in their research on the Pygmalion effect in schools is at the root of the conceptualization of what a social justice leader achieves. There is a danger of a false ceiling of achievement brought about by the low expectations that educators impose on those they have a responsibility to educate! A contributing element to this phenomenon is the performativity environment imposed by policy. Social injustice can happen when the wrong metrics are used to measure and judge achievement. A social justice approach is alert to instances when schooling does not emancipate through building a learner’s power to learn, and when it constrains them in a cycle of underachievement, unfairness.

Advocates for both social justice and performativity as carried out in the accountability environment might both agree on the need to overcome low expectations, but a key difference is that performativity advocates tend to take a deficit perspective and prescribe what needs to be changed in the student’s culture, while a social justice perspective respects the culture and builds upon it.

A social justice leader fights against the disposition in societies of intolerance toward those who lack equality in

the distribution of fairness. They are active in unlearning intolerance and challenging assumptions, so that they might be called “warriors for social justice” (Roma and Roseman, 2005; Zajda et al., 2006).

Any discussion of a social justice leader must take into account the context of the school, the particular local challenges that the community faces, and the larger history and political context of the country. In the next section, we describe a school in Costa Rica and a school in England, along with the educational background of each country. We call this a micro and macro framework.

## Micro and macro framework

The ISLDN research team has collaborated on the construction of a framework (see Figure 1) (Barnett and Stevenson, 2012). The micro context is composed of the school community and the school-specific context. The macro context is composed of socio-cultural dimensions and the socio-political discourses of the nation in which the school is located.

## The macro context in Costa Rica

Since 2003, the National Council of Presidents (*El Consejo Nacional de Rectores*) has taken on the task of providing input for the design of a state policy in education with a long-term horizon. The first task was to perform an assessment that would identify the major developments, problems, and challenges of education in the country. The assessment has continued to involve the entire society with an examination of public opinion every two years.

In 2005, the *State of Education* was published, with major indicators of formal and informal education, higher education, and relevant aspects of science and technology. While a national policy on education is yet to be designed, important recommendations have addressed the most critical issues identified. The *State of Education* lists the main challenges of education in Costa Rica as achieving universal pre-school and secondary education, improving the quality of the educational system, reducing failure and improving efficiency, focusing on critical moments of transitions across grade levels, and expanding investment in education from 4.8% to 6% of gross national product (GNP).

## The micro context in Costa Rica

The example school has an enrollment of 697 students, who come from densely populated neighborhoods. The drop-out rate of the school—which, in Costa Rica, is referred to as the exclusion-rate of the system—is below the average for the country, which is 10.7%. There are families with middle-class incomes, but the majority of the population comes from households in extreme poverty, which are households whose income is below the amount needed to cover basic needs. There is significant commercial activity from artists and craftsmen in the area. In 2010, the unemployment rate was 6.9%, compared with the national rate of 7.3%.

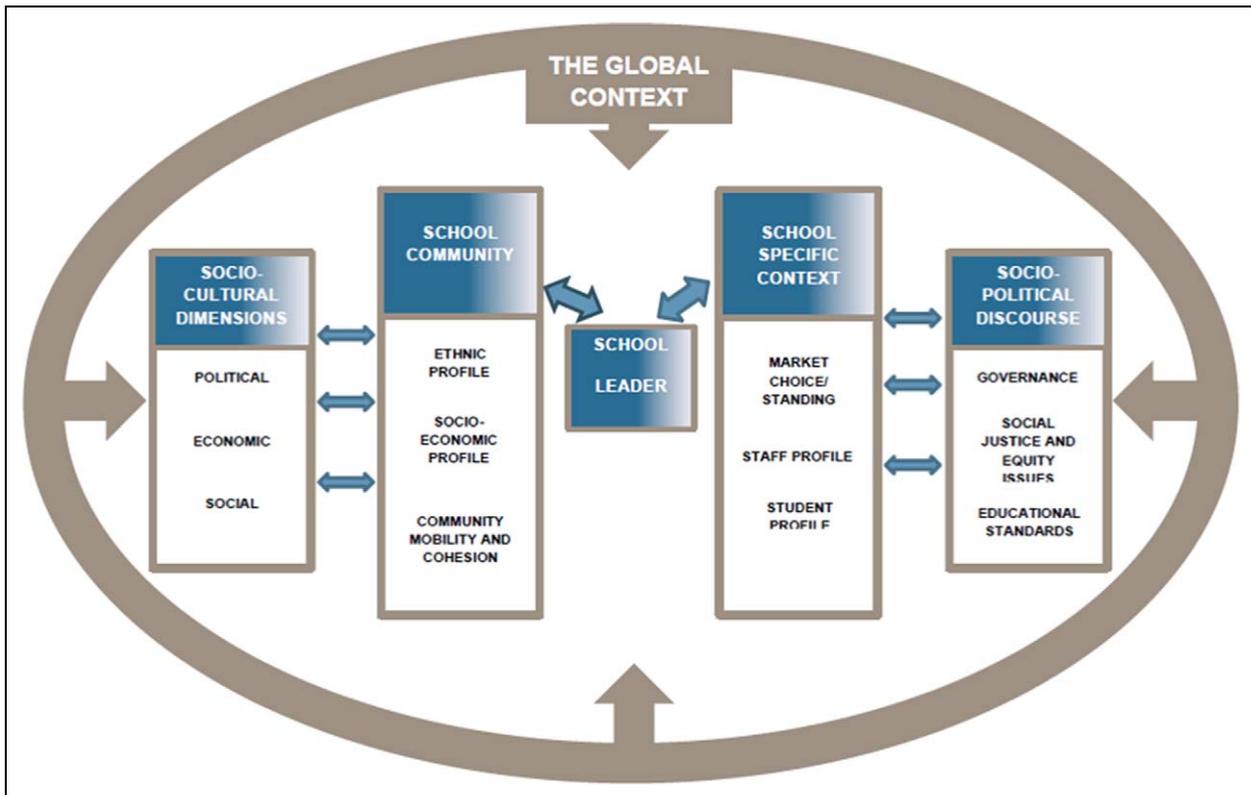


Figure 1. Framework for micro-macro examination of school context.

The main objective of the school is to provide English-speaking skills for students from 12 to 18 years old to find better employment and gain university admission in Costa Rica. The emphasis on English-language learning occurs in the context of courses such as cooking and computers and more hours in conversational English for grades 10 and 11. The school is not yet bilingual, but it was ranked 134 out of 654 schools across the country in the assessments made by the Ministry of Public Education of Costa Rica (MEP) based on academic standing.

According to Costa Rican educational legislation, people aspiring to enroll in a school must live near it. However, in the case of schools and colleges, such as our example school, that have a special program, this regulation is not taken into account. The high school can enroll anyone who wishes to attend, provided that parents can ensure transportation to the place where the center is located. In recent years, the school has registered students from other counties and provinces, as well as young people from the same neighborhood.

Local families have resisted the possibility of having people from other communities enter the center. Some say that people outside of the area have bad habits, and they fear that they can cause negative changes in the community; some students are in extreme poverty and receive school meals and financial aid offered by the state.

### The macro context in England

The socio-political discourse around education in England is connected with the politics of the state sector. The debate is about how provision of public services should be

governed and to what extent it is reasonable for a service, such as schools, to be run by private enterprises but funded from taxes collected by government. The government pays private enterprises to run their schools. It is like a government outsourcing education provision.

The business model is influencing how schools are led, and this direction started in the 1980s with the emergence of Locally Managed Schools (Higham et al., 2009). The influence of market and corporate ideology has loomed large in the discourse (Ball, 2008, 2012), and, as a result, England has a complex and diverse education sector with many types of schools with varying structures of governance and ownership.

The New Public Management (Gunter and Fitzgerald, 2013) has led to the development of school leaders as chief executive officers, leading publically financed independent schools. This is particularly evident in the creation of Academy Schools and Free Schools in England (Gunter, 2011). These include schools that were previously part of the local government authority structures but are now owned by private people. It is possible that they are part of a family of schools (Hargreaves, 2010), which may be a chain of schools linked to one that has been deemed high-performing. It has been a strategy of school improvement in England to redesign the system so that outstanding schools are linked with poorer-performing schools.

### Micro context in England

The micro context of the example school is that it has become an academy and is part of a chain of schools. It was

forced into academy status because it was a failing school: the national inspection body deemed that too many students were underachieving and so, instead of remaining within local government authority control, it came under the control of the academy chain. The principal joined the school at the time of its becoming an academy; the previous principal having moved on.

The school serves a community that is economically disadvantaged. The population of the school has a significantly higher number of students who are on free school meals than is the case nationally, which is an indicator of the level of poverty within the home. The multi-ethnic nature of the school is low in comparison with many schools in England, but numbers of minority ethnic students are higher at this school than others in the local geographical area. The demographic in the urban area in which the school is situated is predominantly white and the proportion on low or no wages is significantly higher than the national average. The school roll has declined in recent years, and as income is dependent upon numbers on the roll, the challenge to increase recruitment of students places additional burdens on the school.

A difficulty for the school is how it is perceived by the local community, and, paradoxically, the school needs to be both inclusive and popular in order to recruit a sufficient intake of students while, at the same time, needing to improve its examination results in order to exceed national government floor targets. These are targets below which schools should not fall, with those that do being at risk of their existing governance being taken over by a different board of governors. In the new privatizing landscape of schools in England, this switching from one form of governance arrangements to another is how the state deems that it will achieve value for money for the taxpayer and improve standards in schools across the whole system.

## Selection of and interviews with social justice leaders

The selection of social justice leaders was especially problematic for the ISLDN research team. In other international studies, successful schools could be identified by test scores or achievement awards. There is no equivalent set of indicators for social justice. We asked officials in the school system to identify a socially just leader as one who:

- invites participation of teachers, students, and parents;
- respects the diversity of the student population;
- strives to overcome inequities in student backgrounds; and
- offers a vision to enhance the development of each student.

A school director from each country was identified and interviewed. There was no attempt to confirm the atmosphere of the school or the actions of the director. We were only interested in the director's perceptions. Researchers asked that directors confirm that they would identify themselves as social justice leaders and indicate their willingness to participate. The international research

team developed an interview protocol. An interview of about 90 minutes was conducted and the intent of the data analysis was to identify patterns or themes (Merriam, 2009).

## Social justice leader Costa Rica

The interviewee became director of the school in the previous year. He has a PhD and 14 years of experience in education. He was trained as a Jesuit priest and said that his religious experience has influenced his commitment as an educator. The director believes that there are principles of solidarity, cooperation, and respect for dignity and human rights, which the state must guarantee. The participation of citizens in decision-making is essential. There is no social justice if there is no active participation of the people. There is an obligation of the state and citizens to build an economic system that does not foster social disadvantage. The state has a responsibility to impart real education and quality.

The director felt that graduates should be the focus of schools and everything should be related to the satisfaction of their needs to make them feel comfortable and happy and to persuade them of the benefit of study. The work may sometimes look boring, but it is necessary. He maintained communication and active listening and argued that there is always time to discuss any problem a student wants to discuss. His intent was to make them feel that they are important.

Another factor to consider is the student's family and parents. He was devising new ways to link them to the school. There was also important work to do with teams of teachers, some of whom may not have shared the same principles of social justice.

The director mentioned practical actions that he had taken to form student governments, so that they participate in decision-making and understand that they have rights. Students are chosen by popular election to serve as representatives in the student government. Another action was to strengthen sports, especially football, which they love. There are contests to paint and beautify the halls of the high school. There are also efforts to develop artistic and musical areas and to organize video forums. These activities were intended to give students a sense of ownership of the school and see it as a place where they can develop their talents. The key is to treat students as individuals and to consider their emotions, ignoring past mistakes and not judging a person by appearance or where they come from.

There are many social and economic problems that affect the school and that challenge work with students. There is extreme poverty in some areas and families that are dislocated because of fires, floods, and inability to pay rent. There are large differences between students, with some having the latest model of cell phone and others not having enough to eat.

The director said that an important aspect to keep in mind is that each human being has emotions and a life story. Affection and respect for all people can be encouraged by dialogue and constant improvement.

## Social justice leader in England

The director of the English example school said that what makes her a social justice leader is that her school teaches the students that other schools do not want to teach. Her motivation to work for these deprived learners is that “they deserve better.” She has been director for two years at the school and it is her second headship.

The school is a sponsored academy serving a challenging urban area in southern England. The school is improving but is still considered to be failing. This director led another school before she took over this school two years ago. She described being a social justice leader when she said, “I educate the youngsters other schools do not want—my school protects other schools from the challenge these students present and the low base of their starting point . . . . A social justice leader is about inclusion.”

She described social justice as a process of breaking entrenched differences in society: “It is about giving people permission to be who they want to be . . . to be as good as anyone else.” Identifying the challenges in her work she said: “The barrier for me is measurements of outcomes [that] do not recognize the scale of difficulty and the lack of acceptance of equivalent achievement.” Furthermore, she made the powerfully significant statement that: “It is only adult perceptions that make children’s achievements unequal.”

She recognized that expectations have to be high for everyone, but accountability needs to be realistic (about the context): “I cannot spend my money just on teachers, I have to spend it on social support, enforcement officers, personal tutors and the like . . . . The social injustice is that this is not understood.”

On what supported her most in coping with the challenges of being a social justice leader, she said: “Like-minded people are the greatest help.” She then made an intriguing comment: “I think a lot of social justice leaders do it from a faith viewpoint.” She clarified that this was not a position that championed the place of faith schools, but a reflection about the motivation of an individual to take on the challenges of social justice leadership.

She offered an image of herself as the students’ parent, which perhaps resonates with her thoughts about faith. She said:

I came at being a social justice leader as I did as a Mum . . . .  
I run the school as I run my family . . . . I believe in the young people . . . they come first . . . . They are not scared of me . . . they are scared of me disapproving of what they have done.

However, she differentiated her disposition toward the staff, clearly stating: “I am not a Mum to the adults . . . . I am a hard-nosed professional.”

## Comparison of the directors in Costa Rica and England

The school directors worked in very different situations, but each expressed a similar philosophy about social justice

in at least three areas: first, they said that it was important to challenge inequities in society and to demand that the government provide for all citizens; second, they emphasized respect for individual students; and, third, to some extent, they grounded their beliefs in faith.

The English director spoke of social justice as a way to break entrenched differences in society. The Costa Rican director referred to social justice as the obligation of the state and citizens to build an economic system to overcome social disadvantages. The English director saw herself as a Mum who would run the school like a family, and give students permission to be who they wanted to be. The Costa Rican director wanted to maintain communication and active listening so that students would be free to discuss problems and develop a sense of importance.

While they worked in societies that are quite different, neither director felt supported by the central government. The English director said: “Learning to be a social justice leader is [to] take the risk of professional suicide.”

The director in Costa Rica understood that the socio-cultural situation of the country created a challenge to establishing social justice. He said: “The context of these families is troublesome.” The school itself is located in a marginalized area, which leads students to feel like outsiders in their own country. He understood that he had to deal with issues that are present in many parts of Costa Rica: poverty, unstable families, migration, and delinquency. He found little to no support from the MEP and considered the system as punitive instead of supportive.

## Conclusion

Our reflections at this stage of the ISLDN project following this international comparison lead us to believe that the purpose of our research is to illuminate the narratives of school leaders. The value of doing this sort of research is for school directors to learn from examples of the challenges faced by other social justice leaders.

It is the job of the researcher, therefore, to capture and disseminate examples of the connection between school leaders working in their micro and macro context. We found more similarities than differences. Thus, illuminating the agency of a school leader in one national context may stir the possibility of emancipation in another context.

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