

# Constructing School Leadership Practice in Situations of Violence: Comparisons, Explorations and Possibilities for a Social Justice Leadership Lens

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## Abstract

*There is an increasing recognition that effective leadership is vital if schools are to be successful in providing good learning opportunities for students. Consequently, social constructs—including those related to school administration, leadership, and management—are important in helping school principals understand, frame, and describe administrative issues related to bullying. Using the lens of social justice educational leadership, through this paper I seek to explore how school management discursive practices in Kenya impact school principals' understanding of their roles in bullying resolution. A secondary aim is to contribute to scholarship in the area of social justice school leadership by drawing on the findings of a study conducted in Ontario, Canada on how school administrators' ways of knowing, valuing, and relating to issues of social justice influenced their understanding of administrative roles in bullying resolution. Using a comparative and critical lens, this article reports findings from a qualitative study and outlines possibilities for using a social justice leadership lens when constructing administrative practice action in the resolution of bullying in schools. Study findings further indicate that how school principals constructed their role was influenced by expectations related to administrative practice competencies, knowledge, values, and actions.*

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## **Introduction**

There is an increasing recognition that effective leadership is vital if schools are to be successful in providing good learning opportunities for students (Bush, Kiggundu & Moorosi, 2011). Consequently, social constructs or ideas and assumptions put together through social practice,—including those related to school administration, leadership, and management—are important in helping school principals understand, frame, and describe administrative issues (Oyugi, 2010). Using the lens of social justice educational leadership, this article explores discursive practices related to school management in Kenya by first, outlining broad issues related to how school administration is conceptualized in an environment characterized by schools unrest and where a gap exists between the preparation the school leaders receive against the myriad of issues they have to deal with on a daily basis. Second, drawing from the findings of a study titled “The Impact of Social Constructs on Administrator Understanding of Social Justice” conducted in Ontario Canada, on how school administrators’ ways of knowing, valuing, and relating to administrative practice issues influenced their understanding of social justice, this article uses a comparative and critical lens to identify possibilities for using a social justice leadership lens in the resolution of bullying in schools.

## **Contextualizing School Leadership Practice**

Educational leadership encompasses many roles and functions, such as ensuring that education delivers on its promises to all students equally (Foster, 1989; Fullan, 2003). Similarly, school administrators play a significant role in the implementation of education goals, management of resources, learning in schools, and in ensuring student success (Jwan & Ongodo, 2011; Ong’ondo & Jwan, 2010; Sang, 2010). In the recent past, educational leadership and management issues have been the focus of intense debate in Kenya in relation to violence in schools. In this literature base, one cluster of studies focuses on the intersection between school management and student behaviours

(Kiprop & Chepkilot, 2011; Kiumi, Bosire & Sang, 2009). Another cluster focuses on preparedness of school principals to address issues of violence and school management. In this cluster, authors are clear in their assertion that the requisite Bachelors of Education degree qualification for school principalship “does not adequately prepare” incumbents for their roles as school principals (Jwan & Ongodo, 2011, p. 410). Perhaps then, Kenyan school principals operate in an environment where a gap exists between the knowledge base that informs their practice and the realities they face in the field.

Although there is limited research linking school violence and leadership (Neal, 2007), an aspect of educational reality gleaned from current literature indicates a focus on technical and rationale aspects of management in constructing administrative practice. Within this literature base, educational institutions are depicted as technical rational systems (Starratt, 2004) and therefore, leadership practices emphasize achievement of pre-determined educational goals as well as formal leadership structures and rules to enhance efficiency. In the Kenyan educational context, for example, emphasis is placed on accountability tied to school performance in national examinations or on creating environments where students excel in national examinations (Kiprop & Chepkilot, 2011). Similarly, emphasis is placed on enhancing disciplined behaviour in schools so that students excel in their educational endeavour (Kiumi, Bosire & Sang, 2009). However, in situations where the formal rules that govern behaviour have failed to create conditions of equal social relationships, technical and rational approaches to school leadership can fail to address complex educational issues, such as those embedded in bullying. As a result, one must look to other understandings of leadership and take a critical approach, and in particular where “traditional kind of leadership” is incongruent with the “practical challenges that principals face in schools” (Jwan & Ongodo, 2011, p. 409-410). Concurring, Starratt (2004) posits:

Issues that school leaders face tend to be presented and interpreted primarily as technical problems resolvable by technical, rational solutions. Yet, the human, civic and moral challenges nested in many of these problems are nothing but technical or rational. (p. 4)

Arguably, perhaps the crux of the matter when it comes to dealing with educational leadership issues, such as those presented by bullying, is that they may require adopting a social justice leadership lens, which allows for a critical orientation to leadership as opposed to other approaches to educational leadership that predominantly focus on efficiency and attainment of organizational goals to the exclusion of other educational issues.

Within the Kenyan context, studies indicate that school unrests are common. Notable reasons for school unrests include an existing culture of impunity, lack of preparation programs for school leaders, autocratic school administration, and pressures related to academic excellence, among others (Sang, 2010). Focusing on the culture of impunity as an example, when issues of bullying and violence are viewed as discipline issues, even though discipline has very little to do with atrocities such as rape, arson, murder, and physical assault, then strategies implemented by school principals to reinforce normative student behaviours such as “suspension, detention, manual labour, corporal punishment” and so forth, (Ajowi & Simatwa, 2010, p. 267) can be seen to perpetuate a culture of impunity because they fail to problematize the context within which the violence is occurring. In other words, while the actions of school principals are seen as rational and aligned to existing school policies and procedures, they represent approaches that may not be useful in instances of irrationality, subjectivity and illogical choices made by individuals, such as in the case of bullying. Second, as rational technical approaches to management, these actions do not disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions related to school leadership, might not be tailored to individuals and individual school contexts, and may fail to restore equal social relations.

What do I mean when I talk of social justice leadership in schools? Various notable scholars have attempted to define social justice and social justice leadership. These definitions range from social justice understandings and by extension, leadership understandings centered on disrupting and subverting social arrangements that marginalize individuals (Gerwitz, 1998); understandings that underscore “inherent human rights of equality, equity and fairness” (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002, p. 162); understandings related to equal distribution of resources, responsibilities, and opportunities arising from social cooperation (Barry, 1989; Miller, 1999; Rawls, 1971); understandings of social justice concerned with the “*principles and norms of social organizations and relationships necessary to achieve, and act upon, equal consideration of all people in their commonalities and difference*” (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2003, p. 18); understandings that advocate politics of difference (Young, 1990); recognition and distribution (Fraser & Honneth, 2003); and view social justice as a social construction, with no fixed or predictable meanings prior to engaging in educational leadership practices (Bogotch, 2002). Within these definitions, social justice leadership appears to be grounded in the daily realities of school issues. Implicitly, marginalizing issues, such as those embedded in bullying are central to school administrative practice and directly impact how social justice leadership is constructed.

## Methodology

The study used an exploratory qualitative research methodology to explore the impact of social constructs on administrator understanding of social justice and to initiate conversations that encourage school administrators to analyze how they negotiated and reconfigured dominant social justice knowledge regimes in their daily practice. The theoretical framework for this study was situated within critical approaches to discourse (as espoused by Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Foucault, 1969/1972; Freire, 1970/1990)

and the discursive nature of experience and relationships (as espoused by Fine & Weis, 2004; Fraser, 1989; Young, 1990). Within these broad concepts, the study draws from models of social justice which incorporate both recognition and distribution paradigms (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) and uses deconstruction (Derrida, 1972, 1976) as a strategy for considering the values that pervade education and for asking critical questions about how social constructs influence administrative practice.

Existing literature and social justice theoretical frameworks were used as guideposts to generate study questions. Specifically, administrators were asked to explore and discuss a critical incident related to bullying. Open-ended interview questions were used to probe administrator action(s), the impact of actions taken, values and assumptions that undergird choice of action, and relationship(s) to broader social justice issues. The use of open-ended questions and a critical incident served as the starting point for understanding the context of administrative practice and provided an opportunity for reflection on actions taken when addressing complex issues such as those related to bullying and social justice.

According to Creswell (2005), the purpose of qualitative research is to present multiple perspectives of individuals in order to represent the complexity of the world. Specifically, Creswell indicates, *“qualitative research is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of the participants, asks broad general questions, collects data consisting largely of text from participants, describes and analyzes those words for themes”* (p. 39). Thus, exploratory qualitative research, as a method of inquiry, excels at bringing about an understanding of a complex issue and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research because of a detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events and their relationships (Creswell, 2005).

Study data was gathered through individual interviews with 3 high school administrators in the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, Canada. The interviews were 60 minutes in length. Participation was restricted to school administrators because of their role in delivering education's intended benefits to all students equally and in enforcing school policies. The sample size was deemed adequate since:

It is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases. This is because the overall ability of the researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site. (Creswell, 2005, p. 207)

According to Creswell's (2005) Procedural Criteria (p. 274), open-ended questions provide an avenue to understand the action of school administrators in their own words.

Interview data was subjected to inductive thematic analysis. An inductive thematic analysis refers to a data analysis process that goes from detailed data to general codes and themes (Tesch, 1990) and involved the identification and analysis of themes and patterns of similarity (Creswell, 2005). To organize the data further, I developed a matrix, adapted from Mayring's (2000) Step Model of Deductive and Inductive Category Development and Creswell's Qualitative Process of Data Analysis (2005, p. 231). The matrix was based on a list of categories and units of analysis consistent with Mayring's (2000) recommendations for an *a priori* coding scheme. The criterion for the coding scheme was derived from the literature review, research questions, and deconstruction processes for isolating assumptions embedded in the data.

This process of analyzing data using deconstruction involved looking for words with multiple meanings, such as victim; words that identified ideological positions; words that conveyed privileged or unprivileged status; words that conveyed specific social

constructs; and words that conveyed understanding of social justice. The analytic process also paid close attention to aspects of language that conveyed administrator practice in relation to normative values, personal sense of meaning, and social meanings attached to actions; administrator orientations or attitudes in relation to norms of social relations; and words used when referring to the various actors in critical incident or when referring to broader issues of social justice.

Finally, the study was conducted in accordance with requirements for ethical research with human participants, as established by the Brock University Ethics Review Board. Following these requirements, the study protected the anonymity of research sites and participants by assigning numbers and by developing a composite picture of the group during data analysis. Participants were advised that they could choose not to answer any questions they felt would put them at risk, did not have to participate because they were referred by a colleague, and could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative repercussions. Finally, findings were reported accurately and were reflective of participants' points of view, data and the study findings were reported honestly without altering the findings to satisfy any interest groups, while it gave due credit for material quoted from other studies.

## **Study Findings**

Study results confirm that school administrators play a central role in the management of educational institutions and in ensuring that students realize their learning goals. Overall, how administrators constructed their role was influenced by expectations related to administrative practice competencies, knowledge, values, and actions. For example, privileged administrative practice constructs emphasized specialized functions as instructional leaders and as officers of the organization charged with enforcing policies, maintaining order and discipline, and ensuring good school-



community relations. As instructional leaders, administrators spoke of supporting teachers and cultivating relationships with the various stakeholders. In other roles as officers of the organization, administrators spoke of taking action in order to ensure that the school environment was conducive to learning. For example, administrators spoke of taking action to ensure that school expectations regarding student behaviour were conveyed to students and parents, as well as taking appropriate action to reinforce accepted behaviour and compliance with school rules. Specifically, this involved working with the parents of students accused of bullying and ensuring that rules were followed or that students were held responsible to the same behaviour expectations as the rest of society.

Constructs related to power and authority as officers of the institution also situated administrative practice in the centre of knowledge and expertise. For example, in the bullying cases, administrators presented themselves as the primary individuals charged by the school board with rescuing students experiencing bullying, reinforcing social norms, supporting teachers and parents, and ensuring compliance with school rules. This expectation involved not only conveying related policies, procedures, expectations, and consequences, but also taking action to correct deviant student actions. Two administrators also indicated that they viewed their role as one of being both the judge and jury, meaning that they were uniquely positioned to encourage and reinforce normative behaviours in students, teachers, and parents.

Administrative constructs were also embedded in both formal and informal expectations around individual behaviours, traits, values, and skills sets needed to manage educational institutions. For example, respondent argued that a good administrator needed to:

Possess investigative skills in order to ensure their responses were not biased or ill-informed; have a thorough knowledge of the Education Act and its associated legislation; conflict mediation skills; strong people skills, the ability to develop genuine relationships, be trustworthy and respected; be patient; have good verbal communication skills; and possess the ability to see the good in all individuals. (Respondent)

Because bullying and social justice were key issues in the study, how administrators constructed the various people involved in the bullying and how they constructed administrative roles within a social justice lens were important. These constructs were gleaned from a cross-case analysis of the bullying incidents and explanations of administrative issues. In the resolution of bullying, study results indicate that various social justice theoretical frameworks informed school administrator actions. For example, bullying was presented primarily as negative and unacceptable behaviour manifested as noncompliance with established school norms by students. Within this regard, bullying was explained by administrators as acts of physical and verbal aggression directed towards other students by an individual student or a group of students. In terms of social justice, administrators used distributive justice lens, as articulated in *Theory of Justice* by John Rawls (1971) to convey their intent to secure the kind of social relations that enabled those experiencing bullying to enjoy greater equality within existing social arrangements.

In choosing this theoretical lens, constructs that influenced administrator actions assumed common things such as universal acceptance of norms of social relations. Specifically, in bullying resolution, justice as equity or fairness constructs assumed that the Code of Conduct, educational policies, and operating procedures were universally accepted as reference norms. Other institutional instruments were believed to be socially just and deemed to have expressed sufficient ways of addressing and defining conflicting claims

of justice for students experiencing bullying. At the same time, values around fairness, a desire to maintain cordial relationships, expectations of students as law-abiding citizens, expectations around administrator actions perceived as being without compromise, and expectations associated with the school board's Zero Tolerance Policy influenced administrator choice of action. These concepts are explored in the following section.

### **Comparisons, Explorations and Possibilities of Social Justice Leadership**

Expectations and assumptions around principals' role as officers of the organization influence how administrators construct their identity and administrative practice. At the same time, issues of bullying provide opportunities for administrators to ensure that their actions result in different life chances for individuals experiencing bullying and are socially just. However, given the contextual differences, the possibilities for social justice leadership advanced in the article are tentative and must be evaluated for applicability in diverse educational settings.

Despite contextual differences, the issue of violence in schools, which includes bullying, is increasingly recognized as a social justice problem (Mercy & O'Carroll, 1988). As an entry point into discussions of social justice leadership, actions taken to resolve bullying reinforces social (in)equality. Drawing on Cyba's (2006) definition of social inequality as "socially generated and stable restrictions of social groups" (p. 69) and her views that social inequality represents an unequal access to life chances, one can argue that socially generated perceptions of individuals and groups are woven into why students bully and how school principals resolve bullying. In this sense, three dimensions of inequality related to bullying are of importance: First, inequality tied to bullying resolution wherein school principals may be unable or unwilling to impartially apply school rules, where they inconsistently apply school rules, and where they treat individuals or

groups differently without any compelling reason. Second, inequalities tied to experience of bullying where students, who are accused of bullying, as part of a group bound by norms of schooling, do not desire or act upon accepted norms of social relations by bullying others. Third, inequality tied to the possibility that individuals who experience bullying have internalized various identities or where their experiences “shape their realities and perceptions, forcing them to carve out identities” (Fine & Weis, 2004, p. 17) in relation to discursive practices that stratify. Thus, in the resolution of bullying, a possibility for social justice leadership begins with school principal perception that bullying is not only offensive to the dignity of individuals but that it also has serious implications on the realization of just social arrangements.

School principals require the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes to cope with a wide range of demands placed on them as school leaders (Ngesu & Ndege, 2010). Dealing with issues of bullying can be seen as one of those demands that educational leaders are not adequately prepared to address, even though there are many set standards or codes of behaviour to which learners must adhere to, or uphold in order to successfully achieve the objectives of schooling (Okumbe 1998; as cited by Kiprop & Chepkilyot, 2011). Furthermore, given that deviant affiliations within social groups are one among other social determinants of bullying (Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007), that family violence can be a factor in bullying behaviour through the modeling of aggression and the establishment of pro-aggressive norms (Baldry, 2003; Baur et al., 2006), and that adolescents model their friends’ behaviors, including aggressive behaviors (Bandura, 2002), social justice leadership not only provide students who experience bullying with an opportunity to benefit from the process of schooling and to realize equal social relations, but also sanction behaviour and reinforce norms, values and equal social relations in society at large. The point herein, actions taken by school principals address not only the individual issues of bullying but also address other societal issues that contribute to bullying and injustice.

A social justice leadership construct expands school principals' role beyond technical and rational constructions of practice and ensures that educational leadership entails both a moral responsibility related to outcomes that ensure students get the intended benefits of their education, including different life chances. In practical terms, it means an educational leadership derived from moral action goes beyond socializing students to adult roles and organizational efficiency goals in order to (a) make a difference in the lives of students; (b) reduce the gaps between high and low performing students; and (c) reduce gaps in perception in the community (see Fullan, 2003). Specifically, if educational leaders interpreted social justice as equity; fairness; and equitable distribution, action, and results (Oyugi, 2010), a primary concern in resolution of issues of injustice is the importance of being perceived as fair and that clear linkages exist between social justice and their individualized concepts of administrative practice.

Justice as equity (Rawls, 1971) construct implies that administrators rely on a common institutional framework and focus on the development of social relations, where individuals contribute to a common good, and where institutional conditions, aims, wants, and norms result in just and equitable societies. Accordingly, justice as equity relates to individual intent to reinforce "social and altruistic motivation" (Rawls, 1971, p. 281) and to ensure just outcomes. Justice as fairness is also grounded on assumptions that individuals have the same needs to social goods and affirms equal treatment and protection all students.

Other concepts of social justice are also influenced bullying resolution. For example, the application of the difference principle (Young, 1990) was important for conveying concern for students considered least advantaged by prescribing what would be acceptable inequality based on what the individual was able to do and to be.

Accordingly, this construct was influenced by approaches that interrogate social processes, institutional structures, and cultural politics that disadvantage individuals (Young, 1990) and represents a “critical approach to social justice” (Ryan & Rottman, 2007, p. 11) because it concerns itself with social practices that prescribe equal behaviour norms despite individual capabilities. A key consideration is that for some students, such as those with autism, sentiments regarding norms of social relations are not sufficiently formed and so they could not be expected to follow the school code of conduct to the letter. Consequently, as a social justice concept influenced by recognition and retributive models (Young, 1990; Sen, 1980), it enables school leaders to disrupt normative narratives that disregard how individuals understand and interpret social situations and extends the Rawlsian theory of justice to its associational aspects in order to alter norms of social relationships.

The idea of constructing school leadership within a social justice framework is therefore contrary to the current practice of school leadership in Kenya. In particular social justice leadership is contrary to leadership approaches that advocate for the development of competent managers and emphasize knowledge, skills and management (Ngesu and Ndege, 2010), which are understood as primarily focused on rational and technical aspects of educational leadership. Instead, the idea of social justice leadership is intended to advance the possibility of school leadership that is anchored on diverse leadership concepts and is adaptable to the messy, complicated and changing issues in educational institutions, including ability to address marginalizing issues, tenets of democracy, and injustice embedded in bullying. Furthermore, given the lack of adequate preparation for educational leaders, such leadership concepts must be taught or encouraged. At the same time, it cannot be assumed that students will develop moral and ethical values including those related to concepts of equal social relations in a vacuum, particularly if the education enterprise does not emphasize moral and ethical values in the curriculum, and

educational leaders do not act as role models or present democratic concepts as normative and worthwhile endeavours.

## **Conclusion**

Even in different educational contexts, expectations and assumptions around discipline, shared values, and school principals' role as an officer of the organization influence how school principals construct their roles. Implicitly, constructs related to the principal's role as an officer of the organization are useful for highlighting strategies to address educational problems. It follows, that even in bullying resolution, administrative practice is considerably tempered by institutional structures that define possibilities and limit actions. Similarly, administrator use of institutionally sanctioned strategies in resolving bullying is useful for highlighting assumptions of roles, responsibilities, and skill sets needed to be effective as officers of the institution.

Similarly, social justice leadership is relevant to administrative practice in general, including the resolution of social injustice embedded in bullying. A social justice leadership lens also enables school principals to take actions that disrupt unequal power relations in schools. Thus, social justice knowledge is especially important if educators were to envision other possibilities, in cases where technical and rational approaches to leadership are inadequate. Specifically, the use of a social justice leadership lens re-focuses administrative practice beyond individualized aspects of administrative practice that are tied to performance; commitment to organizational efficiency; and awareness of permitted actions and knowledge. Arguably, if educational leaders apply a democratic/ inclusive approach, teachers and parents are likely to play a proactive role in nurturing learners' behaviour towards the desired direction (Kiumi, Bosire & Sang, 2009) while at the same time making a difference in the community (Fullan, 2003). With a social justice lens, school principals also engender relations of equal social relations in their daily actions, even though it is understood that both school leadership

and social justice constructs are embedded in discourses which are historically and culturally constituted (McInerney, 2004).

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