

# Transformative Leadership for Social Justice: Perceptions and Experiences of South African Township Secondary School Principals

Patrick Mafora

*University of South Africa, Department of Educational Leadership and Management,  
P. O. Box 392, Muckleneuk, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa 0003  
E-mail: pmafora@unisa.ac.za*

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**ABSTRACT** This paper reports selected findings of a bigger qualitative case study of five township secondary schools in Soweto, South Africa. The discussion is restricted to the research question: What are township secondary school principals' perceptions and experiences of transformative leadership for social justice? Data were collected from purposively sampled principals through in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Data analysis, which yielded themes and categories, was based on Tesch's steps for open coding. Findings suggest that respondents have a narrow conception of transformative leadership for social justice. While they exemplify some social justice practices, they also engage in practices that border on being unjust. Some challenges which principals face are outlined. The paper argues that the social justice climate in schools can improve if principals' leadership can be enhanced through continuous development and if they can be held accountable for social justice issues as they are held accountable for their routine administrative responsibilities.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, education systems face calls for school improvement and reform in line with their contextual challenges and developments. Following the new political dispensation in South Africa, one of the first major educational reforms was in the area of school governance and management. The *South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996* (hereafter SASA), which is the major policy framework for school education (K-12), advocates for the democratic transformation of society and the participation of learners, parents, and educators as partners of the State in education. This transformation was meant to help overcome the devastation of apartheid, and provide a system that builds democracy, human dignity, equality and social justice (Department of Education 2001). This emphasis on democratic values and broadened participation resonates with the view that democracy and education that is democratic, offers all legitimate stakeholders opportunities to participate (Cohen 1971; Shields 2004). Such participation must translate into broader democratic changes that benefit the school, its learners and the community. School principals should give effect to this democratic transformation mandate as they are accountable for the day to day management of schools. They are also ex-officio members of School Govern-

ing Bodies (SGBs) that should formulate democratic policies that advance social justice in schools. In terms of SASA school principals are specifically required to render all necessary assistance to SGBs in the performance of their functions (RSA 1996). It is therefore reasonable to hold principals accountable for the state of transformation and social justice in the schools they lead and manage.

Notwithstanding this *de jure*, democratisation of schools recent studies report undemocratic practices in both the governance and day to day management of schools (Adams and Waghid 2005; Mafora 2012a; Mncube 2008). In this regard, Brown (2006) contends that there has been a slow rate of social, political and educational change such that disparities in township and former Model C schools in suburbs are still discernible. These differences create the perception that standards in former Model C schools are higher than those in township schools (Brown 2006) and that the environment in former Model C schools is more socially secure and conducive to effective teaching and learning. These differences also suggest that there might be some challenges with regard to the transformation of township secondary schools. Given the centrality of principals to school governance and management, and the associated developments in schools, it was con-

sidered pertinent to investigate their perceptions and experiences of transformation and social justice. The research question which is the focus of this article is: *how do principals perceive and experience transformative leadership for social justice in township secondary schools?* It is hoped that this study could help identify those values, attitudes and practices that are upheld by principals and account for the state of transformative leadership for social justice in township schools. The study is also expected to shed light on factors that could be militating against effective transformative leadership for social justice in selected schools.

### **Theoretical Framework on Transformative Leadership and Social Justice**

As society's socialisation agencies, schools tend to mirror social and power relations that exist in the larger society (Applebaum 2003). They are characterised by cultural politics that serve to reproduce and perpetuate some inequities, and to confirm and legitimate some cultures while others are marginalised (Quartz et al. in Shields 2010). This view supports Freire's (1990) contention that education systems produce and reproduce oppression. This is untenable in societies that purport to be democratic as it flouts social justice principles. In concurrence, Hytten (2006) argues that democratic societies are ideally just and should be characterised by democratic life where equity, social justice and solidarity are pursued. In line with the simplistic view of social justice as the opposite of injustice (Chubbuck 2010; Lee and McKerrow 2005), organisational structures, processes and relationships in socially just schools should be experienced differently from how they are experienced in unjust schools. Social justice must not just be an espoused ideal, but must constitute the experience that permeates people's interpersonal relationships. Goldfarb and Gilbert in Theoharis (2007) opine that social justice is the exercise of altering institutional and organisational arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality and fairness in social, economic, educational and personal dimensions. Theoharis (2007) further adds that social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy. These notions of social justice suggest that ac-

tive steps must be taken to change power relations that impact negatively on human rights and marginalise some people. In this regard, Carlise et al. (2006) opine that a socially just school promotes inclusion and equity, holds high expectations for all learners, develops reciprocal community relationships, and has a direct social justice education and intervention.

Social justice is said to be inextricably linked with educational leadership (Bogotch 2002; Normore and Jean-Marie 2008). It is, therefore, logical to expect educational leaders to show commitment to, and ground their practices on, social justice. Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) argue that leaders can entrench social justice in schools if they are critically pluralist and democratic, transformative, moral and ethical, caring, and spiritually or culturally responsive. Shields (2004) also advocates for transformative educational leaders who engage in moral dialogue that facilitates the development of strong relationships, eliminates pathologising silences, challenges existing beliefs and practices, and grounds educational leadership in social justice. The essence of transformative leadership is thus to bring about positive change in the social and material condition within schools and their broader communities. As transformative leaders principals must interrogate and change conditions of inequity, oppression and marginalisation in their schools, and create conditions that will promote and nurture democracy and social justice. Participants in school activities must experience the environment as socially just in terms of its processes, relations and programmes (Bogotch 2000). As leaders with a quest to transform schools for social justice principals must, among others:

- ♦ be open, sensitive and authentic in the treatment of teachers (Hoy and Tarter 2004);
- ♦ alter inequities related to the abuse of social power (Chiu and Walker 2007; Place et al. 2010);
- ♦ create a climate that fosters a sense of belonging to all school community members (Theoharis 2010);
- ♦ be exemplary (Theoharis 2007, 2010);
- ♦ raise student achievement (Place et al 2010; Theoharis 2007);
- ♦ prioritise the elimination of marginalising conditions like race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation (Bogotch 2000; Theoharis 2007, 2010);

- ♦ fosters teacher commitment to social justice (Cambron-McCabe and McCathy 2005); and
- ♦ question institutional culture and assumptions that drive school policies and practices (Cambron-McCabe and McCathy 2005; Dantley and Tillman 2006).

Schools that have not transformed to socially just entities emphasise the supremacy of one culture over others resulting in those students with *the other* life experiences being, routinely excluded from learning activities because their language and interactional skills are viewed as different to those required (Ryan 2006). Such schools are characterised by racist words, hate speech and, social oppression which inflict psychological harm and restrict people's freedom (Applebaum 2003). According to Brown (2006), failure to transform schools into just entities exposes individuals to inequity which carries detrimental consequences, regardless of context. A key manifestation of injustice in such schools is the unequal allocation of resources which engenders resentment, student low self-esteem, discipline problems and, fosters teacher bias (Brown 2006). Socially just schools, on the other hand, are experienced differently. They become better educational environments with raised student achievement, improved structures, enhanced staff capacity and strengthened school culture and community (Theoharis 2007). In addition, a greater number of marginalised families participate in school activities (Aydin and Karaman-Kepeneci 2008).

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative multi-site case study in order to understand transformative leadership for social justice from the perspective of participants (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). For the purpose of this paper, drawn from a bigger study on democracy and shared decision-making, the applicable research question is: *how do principals perceive and experience transformative leadership for social justice in township secondary schools?* The focus on perceptions is informed by the view that with regard to social justice objective judgment is not the issue. Rather, it is perceptions of justice which become justice (Hoy and Tarter 2004), and perceptions of injustice become strong predictions of social protest (Kelloway

et al. 2007; Klandermans 1997). This research question was answered by revisiting secondary data from an earlier study on democracy and shared decision-making and conducting follow-up one-on-one interviews. The secondary data were verbatim transcripts of audio recorded interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and held over a single one-on-one session with each principal. The benefits of using secondary data in qualitative studies are that it facilitates wider use of data from rare or inaccessible respondents and helps generate new knowledge or support existing theories (Corti and Thompson 1998; Heaton 1998). In this study, it gave preliminary insights into principals' views regarding transformative leadership for social justice and served as the basis for follow-up interviews.

Five secondary schools were selected purposively from one township in Soweto which is part of Johannesburg West-D12 Education district. Three schools are located in the original township with municipal housing while two schools are situated in an informal settlement. The latter are generally associated with basic livelihood challenges like poor access to basic sanitation and water supply, solid waste accumulation, safety and security risks, and health hazards (NGO Pulse 2010). These schools were sampled because their socio-economic milieu was considered a possible catalyst for high levels of political consciousness and activism that may have some influence on perceptions about democracy and related social justice issues in schools. This paper is restricted to data collected from principals. They were included in the sample because they are accountable for the day to day management of schools and are ex-officio members of School Governing Bodies (SGBs). These roles place principals at the centre of the initiative to transform and democratise schools. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Gauteng Provincial Department of Education. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study if they found reason to do so. An undertaking was made to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. To this end, only codenames like PS1 for Principal for School 1 are used in the discussion of findings. For data analysis themes and categories were generated from the transcripts following Tesch's steps for open coding (Creswell 2008). Broadly this entailed:

- ♦ reading all transcripts to get a sense of the whole;
- ♦ reading through each respondent's transcript to get a sense of the underlying meaning;
- ♦ developing a list of topics from all transcripts and clustering them on the basis of commonality into major topics, unique topics and leftovers;
- ♦ checking the list of topics against the data, abbreviating the topics and assigning codes to appropriate segments of the text;
- ♦ converting the most descriptive wording for the topics into categories and grouping cognate categories; and,
- ♦ assembling data that belongs to each category and performing preliminary analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings emerging from data analysis suggest that while principals want to be considered as agents of social justice, their ideas and practices seem to contradict the social justice agenda. This data, which illustrates how principals with such apparent good intentions fail to push for social justice in their schools, is presented under the following three themes below: (mis)conceptions about transformative leadership for social justice; exemplifying transformative leadership for social justice; and, systemic barriers to social justice efforts.

### **(Mis)conceptions About Transformative Leadership for Social Justice**

Findings suggest that the majority of principals have a limited understanding of transformative leadership for social justice. They do not fully understand what it entails as a role, and that it may not be separated from their responsibility as school principals (Bogotch 2002; Normore and Jean Marie 2008). Consistent with Marshall and Ward's (2004) view that educational leaders are more comfortable with viewing themselves as managers instead of leaders who address issues of equity and marginalisation, only one of the five respondents (PS3) considered his role as "*creating and sustaining a democratic culture in the school*". The rest of the principals defined their role mainly in terms of routine administrative tasks. They emphasised ensuring compliance with existing policies, rather

than a critical reflection on, and questioning of, such policies (Shield 2004). Their responses, in the main, suggest that they understand transformative leadership for social justice only in terms of national policy directives like the inclusion of different stakeholders in shared decision-making structures. It is not understood in terms of the equity and inclusivity changes and improvements which they as principals should initiate, lead, and sustain to ensure that the school community experiences the school environment as socially just in terms of its policies, processes and procedures (Bogotch 2002). This is consistent with Normore and Jean-Marie's (2008) observation that too often school principals are involved in social justice practices without necessarily being aware that they are.

The majority of principals incorrectly imply that if instances of injustice are not reported to them then such cases either do not exist or are so trivial that they can be ignored. They also seem to believe that injustice is not inherently wrong. Rather, its seriousness and wrongfulness appears to be perceived as dependant on the malicious intentions of the alleged violator, not the hurt of the victim. These principals also hold a common view that it is permissible to "*joke about*" marginalising dimensions like people's gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. This is inconsistent with Place et al's (2010) finding of principals seeking to use their power to protect students. In this regard, two telling comments were:

PS5: *You can only act if there is a complaint about injustice. You cannot just want to take action against anyone if no one complains because you may find they all take it as a joke. It is a known fact that some people are over sensitive and do not take jokes, but you cannot punish people if they did not mean harm... I can't imagine a school without a few pranksters...*

PS1: *So far we have not dealt with cases of injustice or abuse. I do not think we have them here or [it] is only minor cases that are solved by the parties themselves behind my back. Nothing was ever reported to me. If we get a report, yes, the DC [disciplinary committee] will deal with the perpetrator accordingly, if the matter is serious.*

All the respondents professed their commitment to democratic values and their support for the promotion of democracy in schools. Their

responses, however, suggest that instead of questioning existing policies, beliefs and practices (Place et al. 2010; Shields 2004), they tend to entrench undemocratic practices in the name of doing things the way they are traditionally done at the school, or what they think benefits the school. This militates against both transformation and social justice. Findings also suggest that the majority of principals think that by virtue of their position of authority and power, they can impose limitations on the right of others to social justice, or that certain forms and instances of injustice can be tolerated and condoned. One principal remarked:

PS4: *We cannot allow people with hidden agenda to be disruptive and question everything in our meetings. Teachers like to do that. If you allow them to speak they confuse parents and cause divisions... Parents agree with me that it saves time and is good for the school to exclude troublemakers from some discussions. They recently expelled one parent from a meeting and almost beat him up for repeatedly making unsubstantiated accusations of maladministration against me...*

This suggests that instead of using their superior knowledge to help transform schools into democratic entities permeated by social justice, some principals influence parents to promote their undemocratic practices. Such manipulation is facilitated by parents' limited understanding of democratic processes and procedures.

### **Exemplifying Transformative Leadership for Social Justice**

Notwithstanding limited understanding of what constitutes transformative leadership for social justice, and confirmation of unjust practices, the majority of respondents also described their leadership practices that suggest it is not all doom and gloom regarding social justice in township secondary schools. Consistent with Theoharis's (2010) findings all the principals expressed an awareness of the plight of marginalised students in their schools and their quest to improve their circumstances. This, however, falls short of Place et al.'s (2010) findings, as their intervention was restricted to the school rather than being extended to the broader community as expected (Carlise, Jackson and George 2006;

Shields 2004; Theoharis 2007). One principal commented:

PS2: *Our school has many child-headed families who live on social grants. We exempt them from paying school fees and we include them in our feeding scheme... We try to treat them like all other children regarding other school requirements like school uniform, attendance, and we expect high performance standards from them as well. With our limited resources we can, unfortunately, do nothing about their home situation.*

The responses of all the surveyed principals suggest that they are aware of the importance of "being democratic and adopting an open door policy" when dealing with staff and parents. The majority of principals report giving parents and teachers a say in the running of their schools. It is ironic though that, while SASA prescribes the participation of learners in shared decision-making, none of the principals referred to extending participation to them. Other studies (Mabovula 2009; Magadla 2007) also revealed attempts to sideline learners in shared decision-making. It is also interesting to note that the majority of principals attribute all perceived imperfections regarding transformation and social justice in schools to parents and teachers, not their leadership. A noteworthy comment was:

PS5: *Parents from all backgrounds are welcome at all times in our school and they play a part in drawing policies. We take time to explain systems and procedures if they do not understand, like when they try to be involved in professional matters in the school. The problem is that they do not always understand even when you explain in African languages, especially when they are being influenced by teachers to see things in a certain way. You can explain and explain, in the end a decision must be made and this falls on the principal.*

When describing their personal qualities which account for their effectiveness as principals, the majority of respondents described those qualities commonly believed to enhance social justice like discipline, care, *ubuntu*, and courage (Ryan 2010; Theoharis 2010; Normore and Jean-Marie 2007).

### **Systemic Barriers to Social Justice Efforts**

Consistent with Theoharis's (2010) findings, all the principals surveyed maintain that there

are systemic barriers that militate against their transformative leadership for social justice. These ranged from their personal circumstances, ingrained school culture, heavy workloads and lack of support from the Department of Basic Education. A noteworthy point is that while the majority suggested these barriers were external to themselves, one principal located these within himself. He conceded that he had limited knowledge of social justice issues because of lack of relevant training. This self over-rating by the majority of principals is inconsistent with Theoharis's (2010) finding that principals who pursue social justice constantly question their adequacy, skills, and abilities to do the job. It suggests that it may take longer for the social justice climate in the affected schools to improve as these principals think they do not need capacity building for leadership for social justice. This is inconsistent with the view that school principals are generally inadequately trained for social justice work (Cambron-McCabe and McCathy 2005; Theoharis 2010). Confirming his limitations, one principal remarked:

PS3: *Yes, I won't be surprised if my school thinks I am not completely transforming or that I don't know about social justice. Remember, I was only trained as a teacher and promoted to be a principal. I did not receive special training on these matters. I learn as I go along. Besides, as a principal I concentrate more on what I am judged on: effective management and good results. So, yes it is possible that sometimes I can be seen as harsh, insensitive, and biased especially from people who also want to push their own interests...*

Interview data point to all the surveyed principals having concerns about their workload and the associated bureaucracy which reportedly "leaves [them] little or no time for other responsibilities." These principals report being overwhelmed by administrative tasks and having to meet submission deadlines given at short notice, such that they do not have time to attend to social justice issues. This is consistent with other findings (Theoharis 2010), and it suggests that social justice issues are seen as dispensable add-ons to principals' administrative responsibilities. While social justice issues like discrimination on the basis of gender, language, and sexual orientation are reportedly mentioned in school rules and policies, no dedicated school officials are appointed to monitor compliance or

for overseeing related advocacy processes. Two of the surveyed principals lamented the fact that they received no support for their social justice initiatives from the Department of Basic Education. Consistent with findings that those principals who attempt social justice work are labeled negatively (Bogotch 2002; Dantley 2002), these principals claim to be continuously scolded and reminded to prioritise their core functions as principals. They also reported that it takes too long for schools to be provided with support service professionals to help with social justice work, if the requests are not completely ignored. A comment from one principal was:

PS4: *Recently, one boy was attacked by other learners because he is reportedly gay. We dealt with this matter as an ordinary discipline case, which it is not, and punished the perpetrators. We struggled to get counseling and debriefing for both the victim and aggressors from the district [office]. As I speak, that learner is no longer regular at school because the name calling and gestures did not stop. We do not get help from social workers and other professionals directly, they must be sent by the district [office]...*

The majority of surveyed principals seem unable to effectively change the oppressive school culture or question its underlying assumptions (Cambron-McCabe and McCathy 2005). Some practices of teachers, students and parents that undermine social justice principles seem to be ignored or condoned covertly. Principals' inaction is attributable to either a school culture that has become deeply entrenched or their reluctance to be unpopular in the school community. PS2 commented thus:

*It is not like we are doing nothing. Some things just continue behind our backs because they have always been done that way. Our SMT [School Management Team] addressed the use of corporal punishment several times, but it still continues and is supported by some parents ... Learners tease and say hurtful things to one another about almost anything, their clothes, parents, language, sexual orientation, you name it. We cannot be everywhere trying to stop it. We punish learners when it is reported. Teachers who abuse their position through affairs with learners or corporal punishment are dealt with by the courts and SACE [South African Council for Educators] not the SMT.*

It was reported by all respondents that a minority of teachers in their schools embrace some

traditions that undermine social justice efforts. These include the verbal abuse of learners, the use corporal punishment, unfair discrimination against some learners and preferential treatment of others. When interacting with learners, these teachers reportedly ignore students' personal circumstances like their assumed sexual orientation and socio-economic background that are used as bases for marginalisation in schools. Ironically, the majority of surveyed principals were themselves perceived by teachers and learners to be fond of inequitable practices like class and language-based discrimination (Mafora 2012b). This suggests that the culture of discriminatory and inequitable practices is ingrained in the surveyed schools and members of the school community only appreciate its wrongfulness when it is perceived in others and not themselves. This perception of principals as being unjust in some ways, and not exemplary (Theoharis 2007), is a plausible explanation why it is not easy for them to become social justice advocates or reprimand other school community members whose practices are deemed to be socially unjust.

Three of the surveyed principals consider the difference between the knowledge and experience of teachers and parents as a factor contributing to perceptions of injustice in their schools. These principals claim that when they help parents, "to make decisions that are in the best interest of [their] schools", teachers accuse them of manipulating decisions and marginalising parents. The predicament of principals was expressed thus:

PS1: ...*When parents cannot decide on a matter, or they push towards wrong decisions, as the principal I help them make the right decision or decide with the [SGB] chairman for the good of the school. Teachers will then oppose the decision saying it is undemocratic and question all other decisions. But they never help parents make correct decisions. They just want to push for wrong decisions that favour them. During [appointment] interviews for example, they always try to influence parents to appoint their union colleagues, even when there are better candidates. So, as the principal and [teacher] union member, I try to push for fairness and the appointment of good teachers, but the parents do not see it that way because of the influence of teachers and the unions. It is difficult...*

It remains debatable whether principals use such a deficient view of parents to genuinely enhance social justice in schools or to subtly justify unequal power relations and reaffirm their personal choices.

## CONCLUSION

This article examined principals' perceptions and experiences of transformative leadership for social justice in township secondary schools. Findings indicate that principals perceive themselves as managers of schools not agents for equity and social justice. They have a limited conception of what constitutes social justice and are involved in social justice practices as a disposable add-on to their management functions, or without being aware that they are involved. This does not extend beyond the school boundaries or official working hours. This limited involvement is unacceptable given that school leadership and social justice are said to be inextricably linked. The view of this study is that school leaders can only take a lead in addressing the inequities and marginalising conditions within schools and their broader communities if they understand social justice as their moral, civic and education policy mandate. Such an understanding can help enhance and sustain their commitment to social justice work in the face of barriers and challenges they reportedly face. If their limited conception of social justice continues, on the other hand, principals will continue to engage in practices that flout social justice principles in the belief that they are acting in the best interest of schools. Such practices undermine school effectiveness as they engender resistance, resentment, student low self-esteem, discipline problems, and teacher bias. Notwithstanding some barriers, misconceptions and unjust practices of school principals, the social justice situation in township schools is not hopeless and can be improved.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In South Africa completion of a school leadership programme is not a requirement for appointment to the position of principal. It would, therefore, be helpful if social justice issues could be incorporated in the pre-service teacher education curriculum and the continuous professional development of principals. A critical com-

ponent of such a development programme should be critical self reflection in order to challenge principals to problematise social justice issues in the context of their schools and practices. Social justice should inform and underpin all policies formulated by the SGB and implemented by the SMT. As an operational task, transformative leadership for social justice should be a shared responsibility of the entire SMT, the principal only assuming final accountability. To ensure that social justice is not merely an espoused value, it should be built into the performance management system as a key performance area (KPA) applicable to all school personnel. School principals should have clear standards of fairness and implement them consistently in the school. The commitment of the entire school management team to social justice should be encouraged through the formulation and adoption of charters on social justice. These should also apply to and bind district office personnel. Findings point to a need for a study of strategies that principals use to deal with social justice barriers in their schools. It may provide some insight into why some schools transform into just entities easier than others, and provide the basis for improving social justice leadership in schools perceived as characteristically unjust and not transforming.

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