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System leadership in Australian and Swedish education: What's social justice got to do with it?

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ABSTRACT

Since the start of the 21st century, education in Australia and Sweden have seen system level reform efforts change and shape both nations' schools. In an endeavour to improve the educational outcomes of students, both countries have enacted neoliberal policies that aimed to decentralise education and provide increased autonomy for school leaders. The real-world consequences of these policies have restricted school leader autonomy and academic performance has declined while the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students has continually grown. When excellence trumps equity as the primary driver of education at the system level, it creates a disadvantage cycle which sees the development of societal status hierarchies and unjust participatory parity for particular social groups. In the current time of COVID-19, when these disadvantages are exacerbated, it is timely to evaluate educational leadership at the system level in terms of its ability to positively affect social justice issues. Social justice leadership at a system level holds the potential to unite schools in competition and empower them to help overcome the unjust reality faced by disadvantaged students. So, the focus of this piece is to provide commentary on whether system leadership can enhance education's potential in realising a more socially just society.

Education in Australia and Sweden

At first glance, it may seem that Australia and Sweden are an odd couple for the purposes of comparing and contrasting education systems. But they do share commonalities. Structurally, both nations have dual public and private systems (Department of Education, 2021; Hennerdal et al., 2020; Varjo et al., 2018) and are guided by a national curriculum which is underpinned by the ideals of excellence and equity (Australian Curriculum, n.d.; Education Council, 2019; Skolverket, 2018;

Utbildningsdepartementet, 2010). Demographically, both Australia and Sweden face significant challenges in educating their disadvantaged students and standardised test data have both countries demonstrating an increasing gap in educational attainment and excellence between disadvantaged and advantaged students since the start of the 21st century (Lamb et al., 2020; OECD, 2018; Pareliussen et al., 2019; Perry, 2018; Thomson, 2020).

Also, since 2000, education in Australia and Sweden have seen system level reform efforts change and shape both nations' schools based on neoliberal ideology (Blackmore, 2009; Gobby et al., 2018; Holloway & Keddie, 2020; Keddie, 2017; Sahlberg, 2016). Educational reforms, such as school 'autonomy', parental 'choice' and decentralisation, were purported to improve educational outcomes for students overall, yet empirical evidence shows that in both Australia and Sweden academic excellence was not achieved for all students (OECD, 2019). In fact, education steeped in decades of neoliberal 'reforms' has resulted in great social stratification, school residualisation (Blackmore, 2009; Holloway & Keddie, 2020) and arguably an exacerbation of social injustices across Australia and Sweden's education systems (Holloway & Keddie, 2020; Keddie, 2017; Musset, 2012).

Education for social justice at the systems level

When the pursuit of academic excellence trumps equity as the primary driver of education at the system level, it creates a disadvantage cycle which sees the development of societal status hierarchies and unjust participation in social life for particular social groups (Arar & Oplatka, 2016; Gümüş et al., 2021; Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

Schooling holds the potential for the development of a more socially just society (Papa, 2020; Shaked, 2019). Fraser's (2009) seminal work in the area of social justice is underpinned by the notion of 'participatory parity' where justice relies on social arrangements that afford each individual equal participation in social life. She has proposed a model to understand justice issues as economic, cultural, and political. Fraser's (2009) perspective is that the maldistribution of material resources creates class inequity which can lead to economic injustices; 'institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value' (p. 16) can result in status inequality or misrecognition of particular social groups; and by not allowing equal political voice for all social groups, misrepresentation can occur. Each of these injustices can preclude particular social groups from having participatory parity in social life.

Given the importance education has in enabling participatory parity and aiding the development of a more socially just society (Forde & Torrance, 2017; Gümüş et al., 2021; Papa, 2020; Shaked, 2019), it is important that the system is effective and fosters cohesion between schools, departments and governments (Miller et al., 2019). In the current time of COVID-19, when educational disadvantages are exacerbated (Gümüş et al., 2021; Sonnemann & Goss, 2020), it is timely to evaluate educational leadership at the system level in terms of its ability to positively affect social justice issues.

For the purposes of this paper, system level leadership in education will refer to staff who have powerful decision-making roles at a district, state/province, sector or national level. Leaders in these domains have broad scope to make decisions across a large swathe of schools and over all administration and management issues (Hopkins, 2009; Pont et al., 2008; Rorrer et al., 2008). From this perspective, system level leaders have powerful agentic capabilities to generate change by influencing the strategic direction and mission of schooling (Butler, 2014; Clarke & Wildy, 2011; Leithwood, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin, 2016; Rorrer et al., 2008). However, research data have shown that system-wide change is a rarity and reforms aimed at narrowing achievements gaps have been largely unsuccessful (Fullen, 1998; Leithwood, 2010).

Therefore, if education leaders focus on social justice at a system level, do they have the *potential* to dissolve the barriers between schools in competition, enable connections within systems and empower schools to overcome the unjust reality faced by disadvantaged students? If

the answer is yes, then we ask *how* can system leadership in Australia and Sweden enhance the potential that education holds in providing 'equal life opportunities to all children … [and teach] them to be responsible for creating a more equitable and fair world' (Gümüş et al., 2021, p. 81)?

Challenges and opportunities during COVID-19

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted schooling around the world and it has had a particular impact on the learning of those who are already disadvantaged (Fullen, 2020; Harris, 2020; Montacute, 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020a, 2020b; Sahlberg, 2020a; Schleicher, 2020; Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). Schools in Australia and Sweden have been, and continue to be, disrupted by social distancing protocols, school closures, alterations of school holidays and the transition to online and distance learning (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020; Heffernan et al., 2021; Leask & Hooker, 2020; Sacks et al., 2020; Sonnemann & Goss, 2020).

In the face of the disruptions and changes enforced on schools and system leaders, which jeopardise both excellence and equity, we have become curious to know whether the time is now precipitous for even more change? Are the times such that system leadership must necessarily address educational disadvantage for a (hopefully) post-COVID world? What Australia and Sweden's system leaders are doing now about the issues of student disadvantage during COVID-19 is informative of what will likely come. Rorrer et al.'s (2008) research offers hopeful advice in that they found that while systems have traditionally 'institutionalized inequity' they are 'also capable of disrupting and even displacing … institutionalized structures and practices that perpetuate inequity in school achievement' (p. 328). If systems leaders are not doing enough now, then how can system leadership be better supported to decrease educational disadvantage and empower individuals with participatory parity in Australia and Sweden?

Suggestions for improved social justice education in Australia and Sweden

COVID-19 has shone an unsparing light on the many wicked challenges system leaders need to face in better preparing school systems for a future of continuing crises (Striepe & Cunningham, 2021). In this section of our commentary, we consider how leadership could become more oriented to wider issues of social justice when the current settings amply reward those who can lead their most advantaged followers to success in competitive terms. What will system leaders need to focus their time and resources on to embed schools in notions of ethics, aesthetics, and social justice?

Fraser's (2009) model of social justice highlights economic injustices as a result of the maldistribution of resources. The important role schools play in the provision of essential services to those in need has been highlighted by the pandemic and school closures offered a stark reminder of the importance of the physical space they provide. Beyond the 'childminding' benefit, which prevents economic loss to families and enables essential workers to carry out their jobs (Leask & Hooker, 2020), schools provide essential social services and are a place for education and social development (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020a; Starr, 2020; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). Furthermore, an unjust reality was faced by students whose families were unable to provide basic resources and support throughout school closures (Lamb et al., 2020). From this perspective, the work of system leaders striving to create a more just education system must include the protection of face-to-face education. And as suggested by Willyard (2021), it is important that they coordinate with public health officials to ensure this is done safely amid the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 variants.

As the world came to terms with the use of various video conferencing applications, schools were no different. To facilitate and support distance learning, schools turned to and relied upon various technologies. This saw the digital divide between advantaged and disadvantaged learners

impact their ability to participate in their education (Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Lamb et al., 2020; Sahlberg, 2020b). As these technologies continue to influence the work of educators, system leaders need to ensure that education is not restrictive to those without the material resources to access it. System leaders could play an important role in the development of a national approach to ensure everyone has access to the required technologies that can support schooling (Hargreaves, 2020). Furthermore, system leaders should focus on the development and provision of free, open sourced technologies to ensure that education is not dependent on the development of resources by private companies (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020).

As we mentioned previously, schooling is a valuable resource in the development of a more socially just society, therefore, it is important to address the exacerbation of educational disadvantage brought on by the pandemic. System leaders must turn their focus to the provision of extra support that will be necessary to help students catch up and be re-introduced to school (Hargreaves, 2020). In addition, there is no doubt that many young people and their families will have dealt with illness and financial difficulties. Therefore, to aid the reintroduction to school and missed learning, student support will need to prioritise wellbeing (Hargreaves, 2020; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020; Netolicky, 2020; Sahlberg, 2020b; Starr, 2020).

For Fraser (2009), enabling participatory parity is central to social justice. To surmount current injustices, it is necessary to address the impediments which are entrenched in our societies that prevent some people from having participatory parity. This includes efforts to change a system that has seen the increased widening of the achievement gap throughout the pandemic. The disruptions caused by the pandemic have seen educators demonstrate high levels of professionalism, innovation and flexibility. As a result, system leaders should afford educators more autonomy to lead the shift from accountability and competition to collaboration and cohesion with educational stakeholders (Hargreaves, 2020).

Another challenge faced by humanity as we navigate the pandemic has been isolation. This has emerged as a result of the necessary locking down of international, national and regional borders; and measures such as quarantining, social distancing and working from home. Ironically, it is through this isolation that our interdependence and the need for solidarity arises. This divided reality threatens the enablement of participatory parity (Fraser, 2009). The International Commission on the Futures of Education (2020) call for a reflection on the societal injustices which have emerged and been highlighted by isolation. The Commission suggests that system leaders must embrace our common humanity, commit to a global solidarity, and refuse to accept the current inequality. The Commission also calls for a 'commitment to education as a common good that is based in inclusion and solidarity, and supports individual and collective flourishing' (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020, p. 10). From this humanistic perspective, it is evident that a collective mentality could be leveraged to address pandemic-induced educational regression and the longstanding issue of educational disadvantage that act as institutionalised obstacles in achieving participatory parity.

To conclude, despite equity being a key outcome of Australia and Sweden's education systems, educational disadvantage has been an increasingly worsening situation. The result of this reality is such that particular social groups are not afforded equal social participation. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified this issue and caused a disruption which has led to the questioning of how education can better serve those of disadvantage and contribute towards the development of a more socially just society. Therefore, it is timely that we seek to understand how system leaders can empower schools to overcome the unjust reality faced by disadvantaged students by adopting principles aligned with the notion of social justice.

Acknowledgements

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