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## School Leaders' Perceptions and Practices of Social Justice in Education. A Case Study

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*Postrzeganie i praktyka sprawiedliwości społecznej w edukacji  
przez liderów szkolnych. Studium przypadku*

**Abstract:** School leadership seems to play an important role in promoting social justice goals in education, particularly in relation to students from historically disadvantaged and marginalized groups. This study is based on research concerning the perceptions and views of principals of secondary (level of) education in Thessaloniki (Greece) regarding social justice. Our research strategy was Case Study and our main technique was Semi-Structured Interview. Data were analysed with the Thematic Analysis. According to the results, the principals in our study perceived social justice as providing equal opportunities, equal participation, and inclusiveness of all students in the school. The participants in our research appreciate that with the assistance of all members of the school community, there are opportunities to implement social justice in schools. Finally, principals in our research believe that training is needed, as well as changes in administrative and educational practices that promote social justice.

**Keywords:** school leadership; social justice; marginalization; educational opportunities

**Abstrakt:** Przywództwo szkolne wydaje się odgrywać ważną rolę w promowaniu celów sprawiedliwości społecznej w edukacji, szczególnie w odniesieniu do uczniów z grup historycznie defaworyzowanych i marginalizowanych. Niniejsze studium opiera się na badaniach dotyczących percepcji i poglądów dyrektorów szkół średnich w Salonikach (Grecja) na temat sprawiedliwości społecznej. Naszą strategią badawczą było studium przypadku, a główną techniką wywiad częściowo ustrukturyzowany. Przetwarzanie danych zostało przeprowadzone przy użyciu analizy tematycznej. Zgodnie z wynikami, dyrektorzy w naszym badaniu postrzegali sprawiedliwość społeczną jako zapewnienie

równych szans, równego uczestnictwa i integracji wszystkich uczniów w szkole. Uczestnicy naszego badania doceniają fakt, że z pomocą wszystkich członków społeczności szkolnej istnieją możliwości wdrożenia sprawiedliwości społecznej w szkołach. Wreszcie, dyrektorzy szkół biorących udział w naszym badaniu uważają, że potrzebne są szkolenia, a także zmiany w praktykach administracyjnych i edukacyjnych, które promują sprawiedliwość społeczną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przywództwo szkolne; sprawiedliwość społeczna; marginalizacja; możliwości edukacyjne

## INTRODUCTION

Students from poor families, as well as from families with different national, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds, are at risk – to a greater extent than their peers – of school failure, and consequently marginalization and social exclusion (Zachos, 2007). Traditional school, with its curriculum and teachers' practices, does not seem to favor children from these groups (Zachos, 2023). Education, especially when it focuses more on deficits than on potential (Rollock et al., 2014), leads children from the above-mentioned social groups to a sense of alienation from school, a feeling that they do not belong to its community, as well as that they do not need formal education (Tarabini et al., 2018). Conversely, when children feel that they are welcomed by the school, that they are equal members of the school community, and that their reality is reflected in the (school) curriculum, then they tend to be more engaged in learning and perform better (Shields, 2004). This is why various educational movements and approaches (progressive education, anti-racist/multicultural/intercultural education, education for social justice, etc.) propose changes so that the school embraces all its students.

Theorists and researchers do not agree on the definition of the term social justice. In the educational theory, social justice is a concept that is underdeveloped (Furman, 2012), since there is no content that fits in every situation, every marginalized group or individual in the same way (McKenzie et al., 2008). As a result, social justice is an “umbrella” term, i.e. a term that is open to many different interpretations.

Equality, inequality, equal opportunity, affirmative action and more recently diversity are terms included in many theoretical and research papers and books related to social justice (Blackmore, 2009), as are the concepts of inclusion and activism (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Social justice in education, in many cases concerns students social groups that are not in the centres of power and face various forms of oppression (Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2008). Social justice in education also concerns the inequalities that exist in the educational opportunities and outcomes for children from different backgrounds (Furman, 2012). Eliminating marginalization in schools (Theoharis, 2007), establishing inclusive practices, and developing critical consciousness (Sleeter & Grant, 2007) are key objectives of an education for social justice.

Every theoretical approach and proposal are tested in the field. Thus, proposals for changes in education are judged in schools, where teachers play a special role. Teachers who advocate social justice explicitly recognize the need to address inequalities, for exam-

ple those related to social class, gender, and ethnicity (Connell, 1992; Macrine et al., 2009). These teachers create democratic environments that foster students' active participation in their education, as well as the cultivation of their critical thinking (Hackman, 2005).

### School leadership and social justice

Leadership is an important factor for schools to achieve their goals, especially those schools with a significant number of students from different groups (Ali et al., 2011; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Reyes & Wagstaff, 2005). This is evident from the many books and articles published, as well as from the conferences organised on the critical role of school leadership (Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2021). We emphasize that by different and diverse we mean students who come from a low social class, from a different – than the majority – ethnic, cultural, religious, or linguistic group, or who have different sexual orientation and abilities/ disabilities.

Leadership for social justice has three goals (McKenzie et al., 2008): First, to improve the achievement of all students. Second, to prepare all students to become critical citizens and third, with students to attend and work in heterogeneous and inclusive environments.

In order to achieve the above goals, school leaders who support social justice must first understand the ways in which exclusion and marginalization take place (Brooks & Miles, 2008), as well as recognize the difficulties that group members may experience (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; McKenzie et al., 2008). In other words, they need to recognize and understand how economic and political power practices are regulated that favors some individuals and some groups at the expense of others. When they do this, they will be able to imagine, find, and carve out new possibilities (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002).

Critical reflection is another element that characterizes leaders who support social justice in schools (Brown, 2004; Dantley, 2005; Furman, 2012). Being critical allows them to become aware of the perceptions, values, and biases they have “inherited” from their communities, from their schools, as well as from the way they were brought up in order to revise them and reorient their actions.

Social justice leadership is an active leadership (Tillman et al., 2006) that attempts to raise awareness among all members of the school community (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Marshall & Oliva, 2006) and to promote issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in every possible way (Lumby & Coleman, 2007). Therefore, those who practice it, should be altruistic and support equality (McKenzie et al., 2008). They also must be inspired by democratic ideas and put them into practice and have the courage and strength to work hard in order to develop inclusive climate and practices in their schools (Cooper, 2009; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002).

School leaders who pursue social justice work for an open, inclusive, and democratic school, a school that aims to cultivate critical thinking in its students. Social

justice school leaders try to create learning environments that meet the needs of all students (Frattura & Capper, 2007), regardless (we repeat here to emphasize) of the social class, nationality, ethnicity, cultural, religious, or linguistic group from which they originate, their sexual orientation, and their abilities/disabilities. To achieve this goal, social justice school leaders promote a culturally responsive and inclusive school environment, a culturally responsive curricula and engage students and parents (Khalifa Gooden & Davis, 2016). As teachers may not be aware of the need for social justice and may have different points in their own personal and interpersonal orientations, social justice leaders take care of the training of the school staff (Voulgarides & Jean-Pierre, 2023). They also promote democratization in decision-making, dialogue, as well as the development of critical and creative thinking and critical consciousness among their students and all members of the school community (Ryan, 2006).

The actions taken by leaders who support social justice include finding resources, which they then distribute in a way that provides opportunities for the members of traditionally undervalued, oppressed and excluded groups (Brooks et al., 2007). Another good practice followed by leaders who support social justice is in-depth collaboration with the parents and guardians of their students, as well as with the local community. We emphasize that their relationships with all members of the school community are based on authentic communication, a collaborative spirit, and solidarity (Zachos, 2024a).

Effective leaders can create a “space” in which personal and professional values can be maintained (Gold, 2003; Moore et al., 2002) and developed, so that members of the school community do not passively accept social inequalities and injustices and to embrace the values of equality and social justice (Zachos, 2024b).

Exceptional school leaders are those who set the goal of social justice for their school and can uphold its moral and educational values, even when this requires them to oppose government policies (Gold, 2003; Moore et al., 2002). That is why they should have the power to resist, disagree, rebel, have opposing views and be committed to transforming oppressive and exploitative social relations in and out of schools (Rapp, 2002).

Social justice-oriented leaders do not overlook, but they fight the problems associated with poverty and the different national, ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic environments of their students. For example, in the United States of America, schools attended by children from (the aforementioned) groups have fewer resources, fewer well-qualified teachers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Social justice school leaders fighting to find the financial resources they need. They also strongly oppose segregation. Student’s segregation in schools of the United States has reappeared, this time on the basis of academic achievement (Berkovich, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

Other problems that social justice leaders face stem from increased administrative demands, which increases the “technical” part of their role (Furman, 2012). Lack of time and constant legislative reforms can create a sense of frustration among school

leaders, to shake their belief that they can achieve their goals and lead some of them to burnout (Theoharis, 2007).

As it concerns the question of whether and to what extent state control leaves room for autonomy to school leaders, our answer is that it depends on the place and the historical period, i.e. on the case. A general trend observed over the last thirty years in Western (at least) societies is that market – economy (or neoliberal policies) seems to leave little room for leadership in schools, and has turned leadership to management (Hatcher, 2005; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003).

### The research

The aim of our research was to explore the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of secondary school principals in Thessaloniki (Greece) regarding issues related to social justice. More specifically, our research sought to explore: First, how the principals who took part in our research define the concept of social justice in education. Second, the ways in which the principals in our research attempt to transform curriculum, culture, and pedagogical practices to benefit historically disadvantaged students; and third, the factors that work negatively toward achieving social justice-related goals. Our main research questions were:

1. How school leaders perceive social justice in education?
2. What is the role of school leaders in ensuring social justice in the school?
3. What practices do school leaders use to promote social justice in their schools?
4. What are the difficulties, resistances and challenges that school leaders face in trying to promote social justice in their schools?

Case study was our research strategy, that is particularly useful when the aim of the research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of specific individuals belonging to a defined system (Creswell, 2002). This defined system was in our case secondary school leaders of the educational region of Thessaloniki. Our main research technique was semi-structured interview, a technique that enables participants and researchers to expand (open up, comment, interpret, etc.) to issues beyond those who were predefined.

### Participants

Our research was conducted between January and March 2022. Twenty-two secondary school leaders in Eastern Thessaloniki took part in our research. Twelve of those were men and ten (10) women. Fourteen of them were serving in Gymnasio (a secondary school attended by students aged 12 to 15) and the remaining 8 in Lykeio (a secondary school attended by students aged 16 to 18).

Most of our school leaders were over 56 years old (17), four were between 45 and 55 years old and only one belonged to the 35–45 age group. As regards their overall

service to education, most of them (13) had between 26 and 35 years of service, 7 others had between 21 and 25 years of service, one had more than 36 and another one between 6 and 15 years of service. In terms of their service as school leaders (principals), most of them (6) had between 1 and 5 years of service, 8 others had between 6 and 10 years and 5 others had between 11 and 15 years of service.

Regarding their educational qualification, which in Greece is a decisive factor in the selection of a teacher for the position of superintendent or school principal, 6 of them have a doctoral degree, 5 have two master's degrees, 14 have one master's degree and six have a second university degree, from a different school than the one required for their appointment in public education. Finally, as regards their training on issues related to social justice, 20 of our principals responded positively and 2 negatively. The tables below present more analytically the demographic data.

Table 1. Gender of school leaders

–	Number of teachers	Percentage
men	12	54.5%
women	10	45.5%

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 2. Category of the school in which school leaders serve

–	Number of teachers	Percentage
High school	14	63.6%
Lyceum	8	36.4%

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 3. School leaders' age

Age	Number of teachers	Percentage
35–45	1	4.5%
46–55	4	18.2%
56 <	17	77.3%

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 4. Overall service of school leaders to education

Years in the profession	Number of teachers	Percentage
1–5	0	0%
6–15	1	4.5%
16–20	0	0%
21–25	7	31.8%
26–35	13	59.1%
36 <	1	4.5%

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 5. Years of service as school leaders

–	Number of teachers	Percentage
1–5	9	40.9%
6–10	8	36.4%
11–15	5	22.7%

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 6. Educational level (certified studies they have completed)

–	Number of teachers	Percentage
second university school	6	27.3%
one master's degree (MSc)	14	63.6%
two master's degree (MSc)	5	22.7%
doctorate (PhD)	6	27.3%

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 7. Education/training on social justice issues

–	Number of teachers	Percentage
yes	20	90.9%
no	2	9.1%

Source: Authors' own study.

Nine interviews were conducted in person, twelve by videoconference and one by telephone. All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by the researchers, who also made the analysis of the data using Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic identification, organization and understanding of meanings that recur with regularity (patterns) within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis puts the researchers in a process of reflection and “dialogue” with their data. During the analysis, the focus is on the data that is relevant to the topic being studied and which answers the research questions.

The final stage of our analysis resulted in four themes, which we present below. We emphasize that in the presentation of our themes, we follow the qualitative model, which focuses on detailed descriptions and not in comparisons with the results of similar previous research. Besides, these comparisons correspond to the quantification of the research results and the attempt to extract rules, laws and trends within the quantitative research model. Qualitative research model does not claim generalizability of their results, nor do they claim to derive laws of universal validity. Instead, they give us rich descriptions from which we can form a picture of social phenomena. Therefore, when we present our themes, we make some statements concerning the tendencies of the individuals who took part in our research, but we put the emphasis on highlighting the discourse of those who took part.

An appendix is available at the end of the thesis regarding the transcription symbols used for the interviews.

## THEMES

### **School leaders' perceptions of social justice and educational exclusion**

Our research participants believe that social justice means equal opportunities for all people, but also democracy and freedom:

P2: I would define social justice as... respect for the personality and the participation of all in the economic, political and social life of the country regardless of nationality, race, origin, language, gender, etc.

P20: It is the equal access of all people to education, culture, work, to respect from others. This is what I consider social justice.

The participants in our study believe that social justice in the field of education means equal learning opportunities, as well as equal treatment of all students by educators:

P11: Social justice in school refers to providing adequate opportunities for all pupils, regardless of their particular characteristics, to fulfill their potential and achieve the best possible outcomes. I believe it is important to limit adverse external factors, such as "social background", that cause inequalities and place barriers to pupils' education and development based on their personal merit.

P12: The school can promote the integration of foreigners, children with different gender identities, from low socio-economic backgrounds. This should be the goal of education. The main axis should be equality and equal opportunities.

According to the principals in our research, social justice in education primarily aims to address injustices and inequalities, school dropout and school exclusion:

P14: Inequality or injustice manifests itself in exclusions, in social exclusions. In other words, with the otherness that leads to exclusions... Exclusion from the actions of the school context. But it has to do with value frames of the social environment. That is, mainly of teachers, parents but also the school district. There is no one particular form of exclusion, there are many manifestations of it.

P22: Exclusion in a more extreme form in the sense of school drop-out, i.e. dropping out of school, especially by Roma, who rarely complete compulsory education.



## School leaders' perceptions of their role in ensuring social justice at school

The participants in our research assert that a school leader advocates for social justice when he or she is guided by the principles of:

P2: I think that personal perceptions play a more important role, but also moral standing. A moral person cannot accept social injustice (...) but I think it is more a matter of personal perceptions. I don't think that studies have an influence. Just because someone finishes a school doesn't make them a better person, it doesn't make them socially just. There are cases of educated people who resort to racism and such ideologies.

P15: First of all the ideology, the democratic ideology, the moral principles, i.e. what principles he follows in his personal life. Studies don't count as much as worldview, philosophy and the way one thinks.

In terms of the characteristics of a leader who supports social justice, these are:

P7: He must be fair, objective, and not authoritarian. He should choose a participatory way in exercising leadership. In collaboration with the teachers' association, maintain good relationships and to be fair both to colleagues and students. (...) Therefore, and by his character (...) to be democratic, fair, participative, respectful of both students and teachers and to inspire a vision of education and social justice in teachers. This is the socially just principal.

P5: Above all, he must be impartial and fair... But first of all you must be acceptable and respected, fair then.

P10: First, don't discriminate. This is their role and their mission (...) to see children the same and especially to encourage weak students. The principal must have sensitivity towards students and colleagues, but also vision. Have a specific educational policy and pedagogical objectives. Social inequality exists because there are no basic, good principles from home and school.

## School leaders' perceptions of barriers and/or challenges to social justice

Educational policy and the obstacles it may place in the way of leadership towards social justice are of concern to the principals who took part in our research:

P14: The principal is not the one who will formulate the rules, but will help to overcome other issues. Promoting social justice is an institutional task (Ministry of Education, directorates). The principal is an executive, he has many responsibilities. However, since his attitude shapes the school's culture, indirectly but clearly, he can help the school to acquire even an informal

social justice. First of all, the issue is institutional and must be shaped from above, by the administration, by the institutions...

P18: The role of the school is to mitigate social inequality in whatever ways it can (...) either through material support or with moral support. The material support does not depend on the school but on other external bodies, such as the Ministry of Education because that is where the funding comes from. But the moral support, I believe that the school can give it in order to mitigate some situations.

A second issue is the lack of infrastructure, staff and equipment:

P7: There are a lot of difficulties (...) it would be useful to have an integration department, but we don't have the capacity to do that, we don't have classrooms. There are problems existing in many schools...most public schools do not have the infrastructure to offer equal educational opportunities to pupils' cases. There are no qualified staff (...) most of us learned by experience. Very few received a pedagogical training (...) there are cases where a psychologist with special studies is needed. Some children even need to be monitored by a psychiatrist. Plenty of times we improvise to solve many of the above discussed issues.

A third barrier and challenge for the leaders who took part in our research are the negative beliefs and prejudices of some educators, students and parents regarding "different" individuals:

P14: As a principal, I must cope with challenges. In particular, prejudices, ideologies of teachers, students, parents, and even the education administration because they too formulate guidelines. These are all things that principal must overcome if he wants to be socially just according to his own value system always.

P17: Based on the character of the students, as formed within the family environment, there are often prejudices and even delinquent behaviors associated with classmates of different cultural/religious backgrounds. These situations act as a barrier to advancing the work of achieving social justice.

Some of the participants consider the presence of children from marginalized or excluded groups at school as an obstacle or challenge:

P4: For example, Roma integration is a difficult task. There are absences from these children, they are children who are constantly moving, working and at a young age... their parents' thinking is not on the educational process. So, there is a difficulty there, keeping them in the classroom, convincing them to enter this process so that they can integrate and socialize, be accepted by their classmates, create a composition with the others and form a sample as

homogeneous as possible with common characteristics and common behaviors. This is very difficult.

The principals in our research also regarded changes to the school's Curriculum as a challenge, aiming to make it more flexible. Another highlighted necessity involved the training of the teaching staff:

P7: There are a number of things that need to change in both educational planning and the administrative functioning of schools to better serve social justice and of course the school must have the right staff. I think it is necessary for every school to have its psychologist. There are no psychologists in schools... There is still a need for ongoing training of teachers on such social justice issues.

P8: Changes are needed in the curricula. Of course this is not an in-school problem, it is found in all schools... sometimes curricula are so off-putting for children. It decreases their interest. We need to keep up with modern social needs, take out some courses and add new ones that have to do with psychology, human relations and that promote team spirit, cooperation and mutual aid. In other words, knowledge should not be attached to sterile things. A reform is definitely needed. The curricula are not interesting.

P18: Changes are needed in the curriculum because for most subjects the curriculum is outdated. I believe this has to do with addressing social justice issues. Also, there is a need to raise the awareness of those involved in the educational process about justice issues (...) it can be done through training seminars, because they also contribute alongside the personality that each person has.

### **School leaders' perceptions and attitudes towards practices that promote social justice**

The principals who participated in our research believe that implementing practices for addressing incidents of injustice, as well as corresponding preventive measures, are considered necessary steps towards achieving social justice in schools:

P2: First of all, it's all about teachers' awareness, informing, raising students' awareness of social justice issues, developing empathy with some experiential activities. All these help very proactively. We are a school (...) we do not act in repressive way, but in a preventive and pedagogical way.

P6: I would suggest experiential activities in school, so that students become aware of what social justice, human rights, acceptance of diversity means. Also, see "difference" as an asset and not as a deficit. A second step is the use of art for reinforcement e.g. group work to enhance cooperation. A third step in school – family collaboration.

P22: In collaboration with the school teachers, of course, when we see children with learning difficulties we encourage them to participate and provide them with help on a more personal level to boost their self-image and confidence.

The participants in our research believe that principals who are inspired by social justice ideas should prioritize issues concerning students who have experienced difficulties and marginalization, such as:

P9: What we do is assign roles to the children. We liaise with the family and make sure – if necessary – that help is provided by a social worker. We hold meetings with the PTA. If there is a supportive environment of pupils and parents, many things can be resolved. Usually after these actions, something is born.

P21: In the lessons we do activities where children are divided into groups without social differentiation. These also happen in accordance with the legislation. Also, cultural, environmental, health education career programs are carried out in our schools. These are not done to combat exclusion, but on second reading they achieve it.

## CONCLUSIONS

School leaders who participated in our research acknowledge that in the modern Greek school students come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. However, they feel they do not have the autonomy to make the necessary changes to act more effectively towards social justice. The stress of everyday life and pressure on schools from parents and politicians to ensure that students pass university entrance exams are a deterrent to making changes towards social justice. In other words, school leaders who support social justice cannot promote a curriculum that connects their students' experiences to new knowledge, engages children in research, critical and creative thinking, decision-making, and challenging established ideas. Instead, they are forced to focus their teaching efforts on memorization, so that their students can pass university exams. Furthermore, it seems that teachers lack the appropriate knowledge and skills to cope with modern educational needs (changes in the way children grow up, changes in the way children can nowadays approach knowledge and information, etc.), a fact due to their basic studies that do not have a pedagogical orientation, as well as to the lack of training. However, the school is a living organism and an institution with a great impact on the younger generation. School leaders who support social justice, despite the difficulties they face, can create and sustain democratic and inclusive schools, schools that will help create a better society.

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## APPENDIX

### Code of Transcription Symbols

(...)	pause in speech
...	omission of interviewee's speech
_____	emphasis on word or phrase

Source: Authors' own study.