BLACK EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

IN ONTARIO ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Despite espousing values of non-discrimination, the current educational system in Ontario upholds principles and practices that covertly support institutionalized oppression while affirming and legitimizing privilege and entitlement for students, teachers, and administrators who emulate the cultural capital of the dominant Western culture. This research, a systematic literature review, explores ways in which Black leaders have enacted social justice education in Ontario elementary schools from 1970 to 2017. Using six academic databases, peer reviewed journals, the media, academic and professional, I conducted a close reading and textual analysis to critique Social Justice Leadership discourses. My assessment is that barriers still exist that impede Black students' progress. More research is needed for meaningful social change.

Keywords: *social justice education, black educational leaders, advocates, marginalization, black students, narratives*

Informed by personal experience working in four elementary schools in a Southern Ontario school board for the past 18 years, I hypothesized that the actions and leadership styles of principals, vice principals, and administrators have done very little to break down barriers for marginalized youth or to transform educational leadership practices into emancipatory practices that would give voice to disadvantaged, under-privileged, or powerless students, or to minority teachers such as myself. This research aims to explore this hypothesis by way of a literature review, followed by a close reading and a discourse analysis of selected texts.

Focusing on current theory and practices, I look at the ways in which Black school administrators (principals, vice principals, and superintendents) negotiate spaces to unearth, disrupt, and subvert organizational barriers such as, traditional norms and daily values, certain forms of knowledge, ways of speaking, types of personal

disposition that confer status, or ways of relating to the world that perpetuate inequity in Ontario schools. How do they enact social justice education programs related to learning and the current school system (Horsford, 2012; Theoharis, 2009) when they encounter resistance inside and outside of schools, at the school board level, and in the greater school community, and how do they overcome resistance that impinges upon their advocacy practices and vision (Jacobson & Cypres, 2012)? In exploring these questions, I hope to understand organizational barriers faced by Black school leaders in the Toronto area as they try to enact social justice through leadership.

From a racial, cultural, and ideological viewpoint, I assume for this research that Black school leaders are sensitive to racism, have a better understanding of racism in the school system than White leaders, and may be more aware of the impact racism has on the success of marginalized children, and therefore may be better able to facilitate changes that lead to improved student achievement.

Research Question

The distinctive lens through which I analyze Black leadership in education, especially implementation of social justice in Ontario, is informed by my practice as a teacher and the following research question: What is the state of the art in Black educational leadership in Ontario elementary schools?

Critical Social Theoretical Frameworks

In the process of this educational literature review I will intersect with critical social theory discourses and critical race theory discourse. My discussion is informed by critical social theories that recognize that power, privilege, bias, and hegemony are prevalent in education (Brown, 2004). Critical theories make it easier to understand the importance of social justice in education because privilege of the dominant includes "silencing and dehumanizing" others (Brown, 2004, p. 78). Thus, when a Black administrator's leadership style is informed by critical social theory, specifically critical race theory, the administrator is constantly able to rethink strategies that build capacity among teachers and students (Brown, 2004).

The concept of social justice is closely connected to critical race theory because social justice deals with issues related to oppression, equity and inclusiveness, and it has as its vision the removal of hurdles to "equal opportunity, equal rights and human liberty" (Davis & Harrison, 2013, p.22).

Critical Race Theory

I use critical race theory to examine educational leadership scholarship (Lopez and Young, 2005; Lynn, M., & Bridges III, T., 2009), and to examine the impact of Black leadership on race and racism in schools. Though critical race theory, I investigate any sign of, display or expression of racism, surreptitious or obvious (Grogan &Crow, 2005),

in teaching and schooling for social justice that Black leadership has, or might mitigate. According to Lynn and Bridges, (Tillman, 2009), critical race theory provides the conceptual models needed to understand the way society treats race and racism, and the theory with which one understands how the critical consciousness of the oppressed engages the oppressed to address their dilemmas (Brown, 2004).

When the experiences of minority peoples are viewed through a critical race theory lens, it is easy to analyze privilege, marginalization, and oppression in relation to equity, race, and racism. Black leaders, because of their own cultural and educational experiences, are often motivated to "[r]ecreate and reconstruct institutional spaces in schools to ensure that marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity where they can participate in the instruction process" (Ladson Billings, 2014, p. 76).

The notion of social justice that I am addressing in this literature review is articulated by Rawls and Maxine Greene (Majhnovich, Rust and Zajda, 2006). Greene (2006) says that the conception of social justice is reflected in the ideas of critical theorists such as Apple, Carnoy, Giroux, Levin, and Torres (Majhnovich, Rust and Zajda, 2006, pg.12). Greene posits that educators must be equity minded and must employ their micropolitical skills to implement a social justice agenda. Further, increasing students' knowledge to raise critical consciousness is necessary in eradicating conditions of injustice and oppression in schools over time.

Considering the increasing diversity in schools today, school leaders must be strongly committed to social justice in their leadership practices so as to address the social injustices that confront minority students. Jacobson and Cypres (2012) demonstrated the close relationship between critical race theory and social justice, saying that to prevent injustice and to improve the quality of life for those who are marginalized and oppressed in the school community, it is fundamental for school leaders to challenge the status quo which reflects the moral values and school practices of dominant groups.

On the same subject, Curry Stephenson Malott (2010) says that injustice should not be overlooked. He emphasizes the importance of the role educational leaders play in establishing social justice for students. By intervening in ways that disrupt the status quo, they can provide an emancipatory curriculum through which students can construct knowledge to transform their world instead of being marginalized by it.

Brown (2004) argues that students in such an environment will be encouraged to think beyond current theoretical and conceptual confines, and that schools will experience a paradigm shift towards equitable, inclusive pedagogy. Black school administrators are well positioned to tackle injustice by challenging ingrained power and privilege (Shields, 2010), which in turn will allow minority students to achieve their full potential, and to detect actions that perpetuate inequity and limit Black students' achievement levels (Theoharis, 2007).

Examined Documents

My close reading and discourse analysis considers literature related to the production of Black knowledge. I will use the following sources: a study commissioned by the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators (ONABSE), *The Black Community in Peel Region: An Exploratory Study*, a Toronto Star report on the racism of Black teachers on the job (Brown, 2015), a Huffington Post report on racism directed at Black teachers and the Black Experience Project called *This Is What It's Like*, (2015), Lauri Johnson's (2016) *Boundary Spanners and Advocacy Leaders: Black Educators and Race Equality Work in Toronto and London: 1968-1995*, and Annette Henry's (2017) *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Canada: Reflections Regarding Black Students?*

Since these sources consistently describe first-hand experiences of Black people in Canada, specifically in Toronto, Ontario, and often report school experiences that disregarded Black voices, Black cultural celebrations, and Black social identities, they support my view that there is a need to study social justice practices by Black leaders who are willing to tackle race, culture, and ethnicity (Brooks, 2012) to better the lives of Black teachers and students.

Methods

I began by conducting a search of the following academic databases, ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and Academic Search Premier, for literature related to Black educational leadership, perspectives of Black leaders, and Black leaders whose actions support social justice by improving inequity, poverty, and marginalization in Ontario elementary schools. The search terms yielded a dearth of peer-reviewed literature. There was little research about such leaders, their experiences and narratives, or their impact on social justice issues such as racism, poverty, and oppression that allows for the marginalization of minority people. Considering the growing number of Black school leaders in Ontario, the scarcity of studies examining Black educational leadership related to social justice is problematic.

The search did uncover a study conducted on school leadership by George Theoharis (2007) that showed that school leaders who advocate for social justice help initiate and implement change in their schools. These claims are supported by Bogotch and Shilelds (2010) who also suggested that social justice leadership practices are needed to address matters related to equity, poverty, and oppression in school communities, and to alleviate unequal power relations.

Another study by educational theorist Joyce King (2005) showed that the lack of information on Black school leaders' perspectives regarding enacting social justice is not a reflection of their abilities, but rather an example of society's marginalization of this group. Her research calls into question whose knowledge is worth listening to and whose knowledge is important to research on leadership. She argues that

transformative practices are needed in social justice education to dismantle hegemonic structures that impede the production of Black knowledge. Based on their research exploring African-centered schooling in Canada, Dei and Kemp (2013) also challenged the existing systems of knowledge by asking the following questions: Whose feedback is accepted or rejected? Who feels empowered to act critically? Who is seen as having a chip on their shoulder should they advocate for change? These questions are not only essential to answer, but the questions themselves expose the difficulties related to inequitable practices in the production of Black knowledge.

In the ONASBE report, 99% of the Black administrators interviewed stated that they strongly believed that having a diverse workforce, which included Black educators, would strengthen schools' ability to educate students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and validate students' identities (Turner Consulting Group, 2015). Given the imbalances in knowledge, experiences, and opportunities for Black and White students, it follows that the role of Black school leaders is pivotal in providing tangible support to the marginalized in decision-making processes. It is also important for improving the current context of Black students and teachers who have had a long history of marginalization (F. Brown, 2005; K. Brown, 2005; L. Tillman, 2008).

The Black Experience Project (2014) summarily notes that education is the vehicle that can help members of the Black community transcend existing situations to attain any level of success. The ONASBE report similarly found that education has been consistently very important to Black parents who have been very persistent in their efforts to help their children get access to education, as far back as 1852 when Black parents had to submit petitions to courts in Lower Canada to allow their children to get an education (Turner Consulting Group, 2015). More than a century later, Black educators' activism (in Toronto) during the 1970s and 1980s spurred the creation of commissions to address the institutionalized racism in schools that hindered the progress of Black students (Johnson, 2016). Yet, a 2006 census conducted by Statistics Canada (2008) revealed that there is still a huge gap between educational attainment in the Black community and the rest of the Canadian population (The Black Experience Project, 2014, p. 12). Annette Henry confirms the existence of such a gap and further notes that "Schooling can contribute to the objectification and invalidation of Black children" (2017, p. 2) and that the latter are intentionally tracked and ushered into dead end programs.

Carl James (1996) also reported that in 1982, Black Grade 8 Caribbean students were extremely marginalized, streamed, and purposively placed in non-academic subjects. While these students reported that education was very important to them, all were placed in special education classes. James suggests that this was done to ensure that the students ended up in dead end jobs.

Social Justice Leadership

Bettez and Hytten (2011) contend that any reference to social justice draws on a multiplicity of discourses, which overlap and are sometimes interconnected. Bettez and Hytten argued that such discourses include: democratic education, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and multiculturalism, to name a few. This literature review focused on the entrenched inequities in the Canadian school context (Henry, 2017) where Black administrators can effect change by instilling and implementing equity in schools through teaching and learning a different mindset (Zsebik, 2010)—one that discusses race, class, and social inequities, and by discussing values that promote social justice practices. From Bettez and Hytten's (2011) viewpoint, a leadership perspective necessary to advocate for change and implement social justice learning include being "spiritually and culturally responsive" (Bettez & Hytten, 2011, p. 13).

According to Bettez and Hytten, this responsiveness helps to provide the context and benchmarks for assessing social justice educational climates, practices, and policies. Based on experiences in my school board, my view is that the current school environment does not support a shared vision of working towards social justice. Feldman and Tyson (2014) noted that "The persistent challenges at the core of school leadership continue to be problems of equity, equality and social justice … [and] that school leaders continue to be woefully unprepared to negotiate these problems" (p. 1106).

Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) add to the discussion, saying that culturally responsive leadership is needed to implement social justice in schools. Capper et al. (2006) say that leaders seeking to implement social justice need to be critically conscious and must have social justice pedagogy skills to lead students and staff.

Having already argued that school leaders need to make education and the school environment relevant to a diverse student population (Zsebik, 2010), I now argue that this is needed to heighten learning outcomes in minority Black students and economically disadvantaged students. Further, I argue that Black educational leaders and theorists can and must adopt social justice leadership practices to create school systems that address poverty and challenge injustice. In creating access and opportunity (Theoharis, 2009) for Black students who have suffered disadvantages through historical systemic bias, they must necessarily participate in the design and implementation of equity statements, policies, and classroom practices at various levels, including districts, boards, and schools. They must to do so regardless of any resistance and push-backs.

In other words, social justice leadership involves leaders who have a strong moral purpose and the critical consciousness to confront, interrupt, interrogate, and challenge the unjust practices that are evident in their schools by being on board committees and by collaborating with community partners (Johnson 2016). Social

justice educational leadership involves leaders who are committed to and are passionate about making a difference, who can empathize with oppression, and who will transform school practices to bring about change in the face of resistance.

Black Educational Leadership in Canada

According to Linda Tillman (2008), a theorist in the United States, Black educational practices are well honed. While this might suggest that Black leadership practices have been successful, Black leaders' narratives are needed because they provide evidence that can substantiate and pinpoint Black knowledge claims (Gunter & Raffo, 2008). It is my opinion that documented narratives would have described how Blacks negotiate the political, social, and cultural spaces they encountered. I cannot help thinking that the narratives of Black leaders will provide a legacy to guide the efforts of future Black leaders in educational leadership. The narratives are a means of social equality. Ultimately, they will give legitimacy and a voice to a group of people who were marginalized and oppressed by society.

Lauri Johnson's (2016) report on the development of Black cultural capital between 1970 and 1980 notes that the first Black educational leader in Toronto was responsible for Student and Community Equity (p. 104). Johnson noted that while this leader "provided support for the development of Black focused curriculum and the Afrocentric School in Toronto," his methods were considered an importation of "South African Style Apartheid to Toronto" (p. 106). In contrast, Johnson (2016) specifically discussed a male Black principal in the 1990s who was "caught in the cross fire for hiring Black teachers at his school" (p. 105). These two Black leaders' respective views on their advocacy work and activism while enacting social justice would have, if documented, inspired the social justice scholarship.

Finally, while the ONASBE report (Turner Consulting Group, 2015) indicated that Mary Anne Shadd and Mary Bibb opened and operated successful schools in Windsor, Ontario, they were never referred to as school leaders. Hopson et al. (2010) lamented the lack of intersectionality of Black educational leadership practices with mainstream educational leadership, even though a variety of literature on Black educational leadership existed in the United States. The authors argued that the integration of African-centered educational leadership practices within educational leadership literature is inevitable.

Through the leadership styles or models that Black administrators embrace, they can ascertain that high levels of cultural proficiency are directed towards the learning and cultural capital of Black students (Bush, 2011). Henry (2017) reported that in a study of a Toronto school in the 1980s-1990s which consisted of 80% black students, five African Canadian teachers were able to create a pedagogy that made Black students experience success within the educational system (p. 6). Consequently, Black administrators can channel theoretical and practical ideologies to challenge

"institutionalized cultural and personal oppression" (Brown, 2004, p. 89) and to actively participate in social change.

Shields (2010) suggested establishing a guiding framework to ensure that Black leaders' practices are always entrenched in a social justice focus. This framework includes interrogating and decolonizing all decisions to determine "Who is being included or excluded? Whose reality is represented and who's marginalized? Who is excluded from what and by whom?" (p. 123). When Black leaders can meaningfully engage with these questions, they will be able to implement their social justice agenda. Annette Henry (2017) contends that African Canadian Black researchers and teachers still work against the same systemic inequities that have confronted them for the past 20 years. Furman (2012), Johnson and Campbell-Stephenson (2014), and Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian (2006) added that all leaders for social justice must have a critical consciousness, an ability to facilitate productive dialogue and implement democratic and inclusionary practices to assess curriculum, and focused social justice knowledge and skills to ensure that students learn in inclusive classrooms and that challenge the colonial discourses that have historically silenced and inferiorized Black students.

Strategies that the Leaders Employ to Sustain Social Justice Work

The principals Lauri Johnson (2016) interviewed conveyed resistance to their efforts from within the school, the community, and the district. They had to contend with staff members whose attitudes were resistant to their work. The leaders faced resistance from and within the districts from unsupportive central staff and office administrators, as well as a lack of resources, bureaucracy, federal regulations, and colleagues. Black leaders faced resistance from people who had power over them and from bureaucrats who said things could not be done. They were always being undermined. The literature demonstrates that the most harmful resistance faced by Black leaders in Toronto was in 1995 when Mike Harris became Premier of Ontario. He dismantled the anti-racist and equity initiatives that Black leaders worked very hard to establish (Johnson, 2016).

Harris even imposed very expensive fees for the use of the schools that were used for evening and Saturday morning classes and tutorials as well as meeting spaces (Johnson, 2016). This resistance to their efforts was a hard blow because regulations placed on the use of the schools caused the programs to be closed. Resistance also came through the unprepared leadership programs at universities (Theohari, 2007). Social Justice was not taught in leadership programs for principals or teachers. The constant struggles, being beaten down repeatedly, and the persistent discouragement also affected the Black leaders, who had learned to develop resilience and determination in their quest to slash streaming, the unresponsiveness of the public schools in Toronto, lack of Black teachers, the marginalization of students and parents, and oppression in schooling to implement social justice leadership practices.

Conclusion

This literature review identified various Black leaders' approaches to and perspectives of social justice education in Canada. The Black leaders confronted the status quo and disrupted the barriers to social justice and education for Black students through the creation of a multicultural curriculum. The curriculum, as well as the various equity initiatives, produced access and opportunity for all stakeholders. The Black leaders improved the core learning context for all students by hiring Black teachers and offering night classes and tutoring students about their culture and the multicultural curriculum. The leaders generated a climate of belonging through collaborating with the parents in the Black community and by teaching them how to confront and challenge the school system for the right to educate their children in a bias-free environment. Although these leaders were confronted with various contexts, it did not deter their activism in trying to prevent racism, inequality, or discrimination from the learning environment. The literature review also shows how the leaders contributed to the social justice discourse. For example, because of the leaders' advocacy, a consultative committee was formed for the education of Black children in the Toronto Board. The Race Relation Act was implemented in 1978. The dropout rate of Black students was documented. The Black focused school was implemented in 2008 in TDSB. In 1994, York University began teaching multicultural courses to prospective school administrators and teachers. A Special Commission on learning was created to assess education in Canadian schools (Johnson, 2016). Although there have been some changes, more social justice work is needed for creating a meaningful social change in Canadian schools. An implication of this review is the need to conduct my own research on the perspectives of current Black leaders so that I can add to the literature and attempt to close the gap that currently exists in the literature.

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