



education review/reseñas educativas

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a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

March 23, 2010

Arizona State University

ISSN 1094-5296

Theoharis, George (2009) *The School Leaders Our Children Deserve: Seven Keys to Equity, Social Justice, and School Reform*. NY: Teachers College Press

177 pages ISBN 978-0-8077-4951-7

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March 23, 2010

George Theoharis offers a first-hand astonishing account of the arduous process of social justice leadership (SJL) in our public schools. In *The School Leaders our Children Deserve*, he masterfully orchestrated the experiences of seven socially just school leaders (including himself) and their drive “to seek, succeed, and continue to struggle to create more just and equitable schools” (p. 12). After a brief presentation of each principal and their respective schools, the author delves into the application of the seven attributes or seven keys that each leader utilized to “challenge injustice, face barriers, and develop resilience” in their drive for reform (pp. 14-16). By employing an autoethnography methodology, Theoharis brings to life the genuine experiences (both positive and

Citation: Mixon, Jason R. (2010 March 23) Review of *The School Leaders Our Children Deserve* by George Theoharis. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev899.pdf>

negative) of the leaders and “grounding social justice not in theoretical terms but in actual school with real-life leaders” (p. 152). Finally, a book that deals in first person accounts from the trenches of social justice leadership. This book will appeal to any aspiring administrator, current administrator, or any populace striving to improve the current situation of our schools.

The first chapter by Theoharis is a call to arms to school leadership. “Not only are schools failing many historically marginalized students, but also the causes of that failure are known and remediable” (p. 1). The causes can be remedied by principals searching for “just and equitable schools” and that “leadership needed to close the access, opportunity, and achievement gaps-leadership for social justice” (p. 1). Social justice leadership works to actualize the “nation’s promise in educating each and every child” (p. 4). No child left behind means no child left behind. The author presents an excellent remedy in that of social justice leadership.

Theoharis describes several barriers that these seven eclectic leaders and other educators experience in their struggle for “equality of treatment for all and equal opportunity for all students” (p. 9). Poverty, racism, and differential educational opportunities all serve as barriers to school success, but Theoharis provides a “framework for social justice leadership” that were critical to the leaders “foundational beliefs in equity and justice” (pp. 12-13). The social justice framework in Figure 1.1 thematically presents an excellent visual to follow throughout the book. I intermittently referenced the framework as I read chapter after chapter.

The call to arms provided by Theoharis in Chapter 1 introduces seven keys to sustaining socially just schools. This call to arms needs to be embraced by all administrators as it is the foundation of a democratic school. The remainder of the book addresses these important keys through the lives of these “socially just leaders” and the “school leaders our children deserve” (p. 17).

Chapter Two narrates background information for each of the seven social justice leaders. The author followed his

framework by addressing the “center of the framework-the social justice leader” (p. 18). By providing demographic personal information, school information (including summative assessment results on marginalized students), and “the principals’ paths and contributing factors”, the author releases the book from just words on pages to peoples’ lives (p. 19). As a result, Theoharis depicts that social justice leadership comes from different backgrounds, different areas, different size schools, and that “not one common path led these leaders to seeking social justice through school administration” (p. 26). By utilizing purposeful and snowball sampling, Theoharis portrays leadership candidates that anyone can empathize with and learn from. Interwoven throughout the book is anecdotal information from each leader that validates and adds credibility to “the framework for understanding social justice leadership” (p. 12).

Chapter Three addresses “There is No Social Justice without Inclusion.” The author describes the importance of the leaders working within their respective schools “to establish models of inclusion for all students” (p. 27). Theoharis builds the connection between inclusion and social justice by presenting “inclusive services that moves beyond some students being included and others not to systems that are poised to meet to the academic and emotional needs of a diverse range of learners” (p. 29). Figures 3.1 – 3.5 depict examples of inclusive processes utilized by the social justice leaders and were somewhat confusing. However, the literature supporting these figures on “eliminating pullout and separate programs” was pivotal as a “critical philosophical decision made by these principals” (pp. 30-31).

Chapter Four narrates “the connection between improving the core learning context and social justice” (p. 47). The author discusses the importance of improving both the teaching and the curriculum in the classroom. The epicenter of transformation is in the classroom and Theoharis highlights strategies such as “addressing issues of race, providing ongoing staff development focused on building equity, hire and supervise through an equity lens, adopt common research-based curricular approaches, and empower staff” (p. 48). These strategies alone will not

improve the instructional leadership, it is “ultimately about bringing a lens of equity and justice to the role of instructional leadership” (p. 61). Improving the core learning context must be done one teacher at a time.

“Connecting and Respecting” capsule Chapter 5 with the author effectively describing the “connection between a climate of belonging and social justice” (p.63). The author lists a compilation of strategies evidenced in the work of the social justice leaders. Strategies such as “creating a warm climate, foster community building, reaching out to marginalized families, incorporate social responsibility into the school curriculum, and using proactive school discipline measures” are expanded upon; however, one of the principals opined that “calling the police on a 13-year-old who is disrespectful does not change the behavior and only sentences that child to be part of the criminal system perhaps forever” (p. 73). This narrative defines why connecting and respecting is vital to a socially just school. A much discussed and often argued topic in education is “closing the achievement gap”. Theoharis eloquently tackles Key 6 in “raising student achievement” (p. 77).

Chapter 6 provides easy to read charts and graphs of principal progress in tackling the achievement gap. By introducing a “three-legged approach” to improved student achievement, the author’s theory of “increasing access to core learning, improving core learning, and creating a climate of belonging” creates a “meaningful, equitable, and just school reform” (p. 84). Examples provided within the text are resolutions to the much discussed achievement gap problem in education. “Without all students and particularly students from marginalized groups becoming increasingly proficient on state exams, we are perpetuating injustice. Thus, raising student achievement is a central component of SJL” (p. 79).

“Barriers faced by social justice principals”, and “the resilience that leaders develop” highlight Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. Acting administrators would find these chapters most entertaining as these two chapters complement each other very well, and I found myself as the reader going from

one chapter to the next while reading. The application of these barriers and the implementation of the resiliency strategies are most beneficial. Each barrier addressed at “the school site, district level, and institutional level” all can be tamed through the resiliency of “professional strategies and personal strategies” (pp. 114-128). What better clients than successful, acting, socially just leaders to present barriers that are faced and strategies to overcome these barriers.

The book concludes with operational chapters in that of “the intricacies and details” and “but that’s just good leadership”. Theoharis brings closure to his work with the final chapters focused on operationalizing “acquiring broad, reconceptualized consciousness, knowledge, and skills” (p. 129). By addressing each of the 7 keys and giving specific examples of the leaders work in this area, the reader is able to operationalize the work and move it from theory to practice. Table 10.1 summarizes the book in a most simplistic manner that allows the reader to compare a “good leader” with a “social justice leader” (p. 160). The table is an excellent schematic in summary of the authors work. This work provides a cohesive analysis of social justice leadership (SJL) and its importance to school reform. “Social justice in schools does not happen by chance” and Theoharis provides a research-based template for implementation (p. 159).

About the Reviewer

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