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And the Band Played on?

Social Justice and the Wilson Middle School Arts Program

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Effecting change for educational equity is challenging for school administrators. This case study focuses on a new principal with a social justice perspective who recognizes that changes in student demographics require a reassessment of school programs. Realizing that gross inequities have become institutionalized at the school regarding student placement in courses in the arts program, the principal is also concerned that this imbalance may have spilled over into other aspects of school life and instruction. Change will require confronting inequities and adjusting attitudes, procedures, and instruction.

Keywords: *social justice; change; arts program; middle school*

Introduction

The reculturing of a school is a familiar topic in the literature of educational administration (Barth, 1990; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Schein, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1998). An educational leader who faces that challenge can employ a lens that can be a key to understanding the school's culture and structures and can lead to desired outcomes. Given the increasing diversity of the student body in American public schools and the dissimilar experiences of public school students (see Brown, 2004; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Lopez, 2003; Marshall, 2004; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Sleeter, 2001), social justice provides not only a lens to recognize inequities but also a perspective to encourage action for greater equity in public school experiences. Public schools have long been institutions that have replicated societal inequities (Anyon, 2005; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brantlinger, 2003; Larson & Murtadha, 2002), and those preparing educators have contributed to educational inequity (Nieto, 2000; Scheurich & Young, 2002; Young & Laible, 2000). Therefore, it is imperative that those preparing educational

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administrators allow for an examination of how a social justice perspective can undo those inequities. However, whereas the discourse on social justice has intensified, the perspective lacks a well-defined and widely acknowledged definition (see Shoho, Merchant, & Lugg, 2005; Young, as cited in McDonald, 2005). For those like Rita Martinelli, the center figure in this case study, a social justice perspective refers to the viewpoint of someone who seeks to identify inequities and who pursues practices that offer opportunity and equity to historically marginalized students (see McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). This case study is designed to present education leadership students an opportunity to analyze a school situation where abundant inequities exist and to consider how leadership for social justice looks in practice. It also offers the opportunity for discussions of access and equity in the middle school and the relationship of arts programs to student achievement, engagement, self-esteem, and peer interaction.

Case Narrative

Wilson Middle School is the largest of three middle schools in a Midwestern metropolitan area. When it opened in 1980, Wilson had a predominately White student population with some Asian Americans. After redistricting during its 1st year, about 8% of Wilson's students were African Americans who were bused in along with a small percentage of Hispanic and White students from a low-income neighborhood. About 25 years ago, Wilson's neighborhood was largely middle to upper middle class with a high number of white-collar professionals. Homes surrounding the school were priced above the national average. Interspersed throughout the neighborhood at the time of the school's opening were large open areas and wooded lots that have recently been filled with lower priced multiple family dwellings. Moreover, lower priced housing developments grew on the school's zoning perimeter. Low- to low-middle-income families have purchased or rented these homes. Most of the newcomers who work as day laborers or in service industries are immigrants from the Middle East and South America and a few from Asia. Enrollment has skyrocketed due to the increased concentration of dwellings. Today, Wilson is above capacity with more than 1,200 students in Grades 6, 7, and 8.

During Wilson's 1st decade of operation, a particularly vocal and cohesive group of parents exerted considerable pressure on the principal and two assistant principals to shape a "neighborhood" school that would support their children's academic needs as well as their areas of special interest, such as music, art, and drama. Many students had private tutors to develop their musical, dramatic, and artistic talents. Paul Campbell, a former English teacher and the principal who opened Wilson, was responsive to parents and oversaw the development of a highly regarded program of talent courses that constituted part of the noncore classes¹ and rivaled those at some high schools in comprehensiveness and excellence. Noncore classes were either "talent" (band, chorus, drama, and art) or "basic skills" classes.

Sixth graders who entered Wilson and who had not been tapped for band or chorus as a result of auditions conducted in the fifth grade followed an exploratory set of courses in writing, drama, and art. At the conclusion of the sixth grade, art and drama talent students were selected, and the remaining students took basic skills classes in addition to their core subjects such as math, science, and so on. Over time however, the administrators turned a blind eye to the ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic composition of these basic skills classes, which were few at the outset (see Shields, 2004; Young & Laible, 2000). Almost all those students who were accepted into the band program after auditions—either for the symphonic band or the more selective wind ensemble—had their own instruments and took private lessons. The art program was also highly stratified. The most elite classes consisted of middle-class White students who specialized in a different medium for 2 years. Because those courses required the purchase of costly materials, students from lower socioeconomic classes who could ill afford to purchase the supplies were often removed from class and placed in a basic skills class. As for the drama classes, sixth-grade teachers recommended students for talent drama at the conclusion of the academic year. Rehearsals for performances and for the setup of art exhibits occurred after school, with individual parents arranging their child's own transportation. Thus, students without the means or money for that option were excluded. By the end of sixth grade, students had been sorted and followed either the talent or basic skills program for their remaining years at Wilson.

At its inception, the selection process for this program satisfied community members who could afford to give their children the support for these talent courses. Teachers for these courses favored this selection procedure for several reasons. The selection process created a hierarchy among teachers. Teaching talent students was akin to teaching the honors classes for academically gifted students. Some of these talent teachers regarded themselves as “better” pedagogues than colleagues who taught basic skills classes. The winnowing-out process eliminated entry-level students who needed more attention and students without prior experience or their own instruments. Far too often, students from lower socioeconomic groups fell into one of those two categories. In addition, teachers accepted compliant students into their talent program rather than ones who appeared to be “high maintenance” because of behavioral difficulties, attention deficit disorders, or language barriers (see McIntosh, 1990; Shields, 2004; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). Moreover, students who were newly admitted to Wilson were seldom placed in talent classes because they had not been through the screening process. Therefore, the talent teachers' classes were stable. Furthermore, they taught the same designated students for at least 2 years. The arts teachers argued against admitting newcomers to their classes, claiming these students had missed the basics and could not catch up. When pressed to accept a new student, most of the talent teachers did so with great reluctance. Frequently however, and not surprisingly, after several weeks the new student was transferred to one of the basic skills classes at the teacher's request.

The two assistant principals who supervised the talent program, Mike Rowe and Tom Bailey, signed off on the student transfers without questions. Although Rowe,

a former physical education instructor, and Bailey, a former woodshop teacher, were career assistant principals at Wilson since its opening, they seldom expressed interest in the talent program's overall structure. Instead, they were content to cultivate a favorable relationship with the Parent Teacher Organization and left each day telling each other and/or the principal that they had "kept the lid on." In addition, Rowe and Bailey failed to review the talent program's selection process from year to year, allowing it to remain in the teachers' hands, with the spiraling of a disproportionate number of students of certain ethnic and racial groups and socioeconomic status into basic skills classes. Moreover, like Principal Paul Campbell and his successor, Diane Applebaum, they condoned the process by failing to recognize and confront the faculty regarding the talent selection procedures and by not reconsidering the process and its implications. Clearly for Campbell, Applebaum, Rowe, and Bailey, the successful semiannual concerts, plays, and art exhibits were opportunities to provide positive publicity and proof that the talent program was working. And positive publicity was important to them given some underlying tensions. Whenever test scores declined and student misbehavior captured headlines in the local paper, some teachers and some longtime residents attributed such "anomalies" to those students from lower income neighborhoods (see McIntosh, 1990; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997).

The designated leaders at Wilson acted similarly throughout its history until Principal Applebaum retired midyear due to a serious illness. One of the candidates for the principalship was Rita Martinelli, a White administrator who had been a teacher at Wilson for several years. When she earned her certification as an assistant principal, Martinelli left Wilson to be an assistant principal at another middle school in the district—a school with mostly high-achieving upper-middle-class students. When Applebaum announced her retirement, Martinelli applied for the principal's job, received the appointment, and returned to her former school.

As a teacher at Wilson, Rita had had her fair share of challenging classes. When she began teaching, most of her colleagues were tenured and high on the seniority list. Consequently, they invariably taught the honors classes. Although Rita sometimes taught a class with academically gifted students, she typically had classes with students who were taking basic skills classes. Most of these students were African American or Hispanic, and many had been bused to Wilson. As a new teacher, Rita enthusiastically explored various techniques to help them to succeed academically. During her first 2 years as a middle school social studies teacher, Rita realized that engaging the students in conversation at the start of a session was an effective classroom management technique and a tool to providing a positive learning environment. Rita learned a great deal about her students' interests, attitudes, lives, and values.

A reflective practitioner who took risks, Rita was sensitive to her students' needs, and they in turn recognized that. One year, they scraped together the money for a full page in the school's yearbook and dedicated it to "Our Teacher—Ms. Martinelli. She cares" (see Valenzuela, 1999). As an educator, Rita often thought and acted "out of the box" to correct social and educational inequities she saw in her classroom and school.

She worked with colleagues in her department on fundraising projects so that students could enjoy field trips to a museum or theater. In addition, as teacher, she volunteered for the school discipline committee to review discipline procedures. The committee prepared a spreadsheet that indicated those students who had the most disciplinary infractions and the elementary school they had attended. The committee intended to brainstorm discipline procedures with the administrators, faculty, and staff from the elementary schools. When the discipline committee reported that the majority of the so-called troublemakers at Wilson had graduated from an elementary school in a predominately White middle-class neighborhood, their colleagues expressed disbelief, preferring to blame minority and less affluent students (see McIntosh, 1990; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). This reaction disturbed Rita but reinforced her interest in getting to the heart of the matter through data collection and analysis.

As a teacher, Rita clearly remembered conversations in the teachers' lounge where administrators were skewered verbally and where students, especially those who had been bused to Wilson or were residing in the new townhouses, were slammed repeatedly. Sometimes, Rita as a teacher avoided the teachers' lunchroom because of the pervasive negativism exemplified by discussions of "classes from hell" and students "dumber than dirt" (see Bell, 1992; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Scheurich & Young, 2002). When she challenged a colleague about these depictions, she was berated for being naïve. She also recalled how she had resented the teachers who selected or auditioned students for their talent art, drama, chorus, and band classes. As a social studies teacher, she had had no such discretion. Moreover, she was especially rankled by the fact that school assemblies were often by invitation only with students from talent classes and honors classes the only ones in attendance. However, Rita and some other teachers at Wilson gauged their own success not by the grades of their most gifted students but the progress of those who were struggling.

With 5 years of administrative experience, Rita looked forward to her return to Wilson as its third principal. Rita received a warm reception from her former colleagues. The faculty, except for two members, was Caucasian. Many had been teaching at Wilson since its opening and were nearing retirement. Her "walk through" on Monday morning of her 1st full week as principal was quite revealing. As she passed by one of the band rooms, she was astonished to see no more than 23 eighth-grade students—most of them Asian American—at their music stands.² Wilson's administrators were reluctant to have mixed grade classes, so the band students met by grade for class and as a mixed grade group only for rehearsals a few times before concerts. This single grade per class arrangement was a constant source of tension between the administrators and the teachers of music and drama. As Rita would realize, this scheduling pattern limited the growth of the talent program, but there were other more serious reasons for its stagnation. In a school that was operating at capacity, such a small number in one band section was surprising. From her preliminary review of the budget and allocation, she knew that overall, class sizes were large

given the pupil-teacher ratio. Perhaps there were many absentees that day, she thought. She did note that Scott Morris was still teaching band, and except for the size of the class, the demography of the band group looked the same as in years past.

As she continued her walk through, Rita noted that students were busy working on their art projects in the numerous art rooms on the second floor, and once again, what she saw recalled past days, namely, the same art teachers she remembered from her years as teacher. Also as in the past, there were few, if any, African American students in those art classes. However, when Rita walked to the fourth floor to a wing reserved for the basic skills classes, she was struck not only by the size of the classes but the ethnic/racial composition of them as well.

The basic skills wing, dubbed the “sauna” by faculty because of its blistering room temperatures throughout most of the school year, was hot and noisy (see Anyon, 2005; Delpit, 1995; Kozol, 1991). Rita entered one classroom in which a teacher was struggling to control more than 30 students. Several students were at desks clustered in the back of the room and were totally disengaged from the lesson. She walked up and down the aisles looking at notebooks and asking the students about their class as the teacher fumbled nervously with a piece of chalk. The students were predominantly Hispanic and African American. One student lamented, “Hey, Ms. Martinelli, can’t you get me outta this class? We don’t do nothin’ in here.” “Yeah, this school sucks. All we do all day is sit,” interjected another (see Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999; Holloway & LeCompte, 2001). The teacher, embarrassed, began to admonish the students. As a seasoned middle school educator, Rita was not shocked by their language or outspokenness. Not wishing to distress the teacher any more or cause more disruption, Rita decided to invite the two students to her office for “lunch with the principal” the next day so that they could air their concerns. After the invitation was extended, the two students grinned at each other and at Rita.

Rita returned to her office to reflect on what she had seen. She was uneasy and anxious. Where should she begin? She decided to gather as much information as she could about Wilson. Having assumed her new post in early spring, Rita had not been involved in the academic programming or scheduling for the current school year. Moreover, she had had only a quick look at the budget, test scores, and so on during the search process, which had been hastened by her predecessor’s sudden illness. That afternoon, Rita grabbed several of the school’s yearbooks and began flipping through the pages. There were large, glossy, colored photos of talent students at teen arts festivals in the state capital and photos of some participating in invitational music competitions throughout the country. When she was a teacher, many girls including many of the African American girls were delighted with the organization of a drill team where they could display their talents and release their energies. The drill team lasted only a year because there were no funds to provide the students with transportation. In reality, what had transpired since she was a teacher at Wilson was hardly surprising. Rita remembered that ironically in a school that touted its talent program, a schoolwide talent show was not widely supported by the teachers. Moreover, the administrators let it

die while the elite music students performed several times a year. As Rita flipped through the pages of several yearbooks, she sighed and noted that the cheerleading squads in successive years were as “lily white” as they had been in the old days. Moreover, there was no drill team. Chagrined to find that this activity had not been reinstated, Rita reflected on the literature she had read that had indicated the benefit of arts programs for student achievement and self-esteem (see Catterall et al., 1999; Holloway & LeCompte, 2001; Krensky, 2001; Smithrim & Uptis, 2005; Swanson, 2006). Moreover, she wondered how the unequal access to the arts program at Wilson was shaping the perspective of students regarding their peers (see Bigler, Brown, & Markell, 2001).

Putting the yearbooks aside, Rita then drew up a list of reports she believed she would need to determine what was happening at Wilson as well as a list of meetings to schedule with school and community members. She wanted to ascertain areas where inequities persisted. She began to run some of the reports herself and requested others from the central office. Several days later, Rita had a substantial amount of data on student placement, enrollment, achievement, and demographics. Rita realized that the highly regarded talent program that had earned Wilson its reputation in years gone by was not only problematic but symptomatic of other larger inequities. Wilson’s students were highly stratified during more than 25% of the school day. The talent classes appeared to contain only White or Asian students, only 10% of whom were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Yet according to her school’s demographics, only slightly more than half of the students were White and fewer than 15% were Asian. Furthermore, more than 70% of the students at Wilson were eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Stratification by race and class was the norm at Wilson. How had this division been perpetuated? Was this happening elsewhere in the school? What was the composition of academic classes? Who were the teachers of those classes? What attitude did they have toward diversity? Were the teachers and administrators attuned to White privilege and cultural politics (see Brown, 2004; Shields, 2004)? Was there a “hidden curriculum” (Apple, 2004)? Was this division also affecting the composition of participants in extracurricular activities? Although state, district, and school report cards addressed testing performance and raised awareness of achievement gaps and demographics, it was clear to Rita that there were equity issues at multiple levels of this educational setting. How pervasive were these inequities? What were their roots? And most important, how could she turn things around?

Teaching Notes

Effecting change for educational equity is challenging for school administrators. This case study focuses on a new principal with a social justice perspective who recognizes that changes in student demographics require a reassessment of school programs. Realizing that gross inequities have become institutionalized at the school regarding

student placement in courses in the arts program, the principal is also concerned that this imbalance may have spilled over into other aspects of school life and instruction. Change will require confronting inequities and adjusting attitudes, procedures, and instruction.

This case study is designed to raise awareness of issues of race, ethnicity, and class as they relate to the welfare of children and their public school experiences. This scenario study will open up discussion of a broader view of “social justice” that includes issues such as religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities.

This multilayered case study provides future and current educational leaders an opportunity to view a school ripe for change and allows the instructor to formulate questions and activities to suit the focus of a particular session or the course overall. The case is replete with topics related to leadership, including decision making, data collection and analysis, communication skills, curricular decisions, scheduling, faculty and administrator rapport, contractual obligations, community and school relations, and student diversity. The activities are designed to encourage students to view these matters through a social justice lens. Although change presents dilemmas for educational leaders, this case study is especially rich because it deals not only with school procedures, policies, and activities but also with the underlying values of administrators, faculty, and community on instruction and diversity.

Initial Questions on the Case Study

1. What issues faced administrators at Wilson when it opened? How did they handle them? What contributed to their actions? Or what shaped their actions?
2. Were Campbell and Applebaum effective leaders? Explain. Were they shaped by the school culture or a product of it? Explain.
3. What is your opinion of the talent program at Wilson? Do you think it an exemplary program? Does it reflect “best practices” for a middle school? Explain. Relate this study to Diamond and Gomez (2004), Holloway and Krensky (2001), and Noguera (2001).
4. Why do you think Rita can be regarded as a leader with a social justice perspective? What might have contributed to her embrace of that perspective? What are the obstacles, dilemmas, or professional dangers of adopting a social justice perspective?
5. To what extent are the administrators and/or the teachers responsible for the inequities at Wilson and the other dilemmas?
6. How and to what extent will No Child Left Behind affect the strategy for change at Wilson?

Suggested Activities

1. Working in groups, students are to develop a plan of action for Rita, an administrator with a social justice perspective. Students are to develop a data collection method

- to determine the extent of the dilemma at Wilson, a list of likely obstacles Rita might face on the way to change, a decision-making plan, and an outline of proposed actions. Groups will present their plans orally in class. Mindful that “rational discourse involves a commitment to extended and repeated conversation that evolve over time into a culture of careful listening and cautious openness to new perspectives” (Brown, 2004, p. 93), the class will critique plans to determine their suitability and the likelihood of achieving social justice objectives (on the value of discourse, see Brown, 2004; Bruner, 1988; Senge, 1990; Shields, Larocque, & Oberg, 2002).
2. Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) stated “The greatest challenge for the educational administration field may be to shift its mental model of what it means to be a school leader rather than a school administrator” (p. 209). In addition, even if that shift occurs, deficit thinking can perpetuate inequities (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Swanson, 2006; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). In groups, individually, or as a class, students are to compile a list of items related to educational administration that are dealt with in this case study. Each student will write an analytical paper in which he or she will describe a personal plan as an educational leader for handling one item such as community and school relations using his or her own experiences and readings. This activity will allow students to clarify their own values and sentiments and articulate an action plan (see Brown, 2004; Delpit, 1995) and to become aware of deficit thinking.
 3. “The purposes of critical reflection are to externalize and investigate power relationships and to uncover hegemonic assumptions” (Brown, 2004, p. 84). In small groups, students will present their action plans from Activity 2. Peers will analyze from a social justice perspective the plans and discuss any underlying assumptions, values, and attitudes that may be vital to execution. Often the invisibility of such dynamics perpetuates inequities. Students are encouraged to use the monthly night program discussed in Noguera (2001) as a point of reference.
 4. Equity audits can force administrators to become cognizant of those values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that have become embedded in the school and that forestall or prevent an equitable education for all students (Skrla et al., 2004). As Skrla et al. (2004) suggested, these audits can contain indicators on teachers, curriculum, resource allocation, and so on. Each student is to design an equity audit for the school of his or her choice and explain the indicators selected, the collection process, the evaluation of data, and the process of applying the audit results to realize change for social justice.
 5. Current and future educational leaders generally lack craft knowledge, academic training, and expertise not only in the overall dimensions of an arts program but also in its subtleties. This can be especially problematic given the demands of No Child Left Behind and the tensions regarding curricular choice (see Ashford, 2004). However, research indicates the benefits of arts programs (see Catterall et al., 1999; George & Alexander, 1993; Holloway & Krensky, 2001; Holloway & LeCompte, 2001; Ingram & Seashore, 2003; Krensky, 2001; Smithrim & Uptis, 2005; Swanson, 2006). Therefore, this activity is designed to assist educational leaders in acquiring knowledge about arts programs and clarifying their view of the place of those programs in schools.
 - a. Students are to develop a strategy for learning about and establishing an arts program in the school of their choice. They are to consider the implications of the program on

- students, parents, the community, faculty, and staff. How would such a program relate to the academics at the school and the available resources? What benefits would accrue or what problems develop? The strategy may be in outline form.
- b. This activity will also require students to prepare a written proposal in the form of a 4- to 6-page paper that can be presented to a board of education for such a program. The paper may also be accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation. Students should argue for the program using a social justice perspective and relevant research.

Notes

1. Noncore classes refer to subjects other than mathematics, science, language arts, social studies, and foreign language. They can refer to talent courses such as band or courses not related to the arts.
2. By contract, band classes were capped at 50 students but these classes generally had fewer than 40 students.

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