

Social Justice Leadership and Inclusion: Exploring Challenges in an Urban District Struggling to Address Inequities

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Abstract

Research Approach: This cross case study describes the challenges that two principals working in one urban school district addressed while attempting to transform their school cultures to embrace an inclusion model. Analysis of interviews and observations in each school revealed the actions, values, and orientations of the individual leaders and the influences of conflicts and dilemmas that exist in social justice work. **Findings:** The article describes how two principals enacted social justice leadership by making decisions that addressed resistance and challenges to inclusion. Implications for administrator preparation, future research, and theory are presented.

Keywords

social justice, school leadership, inclusion, students with disabilities, special education

Introduction

School leaders with social justice orientations seek to improve the educational outcomes for historically marginalized groups but confront daunting challenges when navigating high-poverty urban schools and districts that

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often maintain structures of inequality that include the segregation and non-recognition of students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners (ELLs). Schools serving historically marginalized student populations have been widely viewed as inferior because they often have fewer resources and less access to high-quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). Within such schools, minority students are overidentified as having a disability and are more likely to be placed in a segregated school setting away from their peers; the majority of the students are more likely to be living at or below the poverty level (Orfield & Lee, 2005; United States Department of Education, 2008). Students with disabilities in these setting more frequently do not have access to the highly qualified teachers, grade level curricula, thoughtfully developed individualized instruction, and meaningful educational experiences. For many of these students and their families, the concept of schooling as a vehicle for social mobility or equalizer of inequality appears to be nothing more than rhetoric of policy-makers and politicians.

There is, however, evidence that some schools have been effective in addressing inequities, and in doing so, school leaders have overcome numerous challenges. Evidence of these successes are reported in a small but emerging literature that examines leadership for social justice (Furman, 2012). Although a number of interconnected themes have emerged that have begun to inform theory and practice, there is still much that we do not know about leading for social justice. Indeed, research has only begun to uncover some of the challenges and conflicts school leaders are confronted with when they engage in social justice work (Theoharis, 2007).

This article reports on the work of two principals in high-poverty urban elementary schools located within a challenging, and historically inequitable, urban school district. Both leaders possessed social justice orientations and values, attempted to lead in socially just ways for students with disabilities, and advocated for inclusive reforms, but also experienced tensions and conflicts within their work. The findings from this article contribute to the theory and practice of social justice leadership for students with disabilities by exploring the challenges and dilemmas school leaders are confronted with when leading for social justice in historically inequitable schools and districts.

Conceptual Framework: Social Justice Leadership and Inclusion Leadership

School leaders with social justice orientations investigate, make issue of, and generate solutions to social inequality and marginalization due to race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other forms of diversity (Dantley &

Tillman, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). Scholars have long argued that students with disabilities have been marginalized with respect to access to curriculum, peers, teachers, and social standing within public schools. Dunn's (1968) seminal article entitled, "Special Education for the Mildly Retarded—Is Much of It Justifiable?" claimed that minority and disadvantaged children were being over identified as students with disabilities, and that segregated programs were ineffective and morally corrupt. Inequality, segregation, mis-identification, and poor educational achievement of students with disabilities stubbornly persist today in schools across the United States but particularly in high-poverty urban schools (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Harry & Klinger, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

The impact of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004* (IDEA, 2004) has been significant for students with disabilities although the benefits have not been clearly distributed across all student subgroups. According to the United States Department of Education (2008), African American students were more likely to be in a more restrictive placement, 2.75 times more likely to be classified as having an intellectual disability, and 2.28 times more likely to be classified as having an emotional/behavioral disability than students in all other racial and ethnic groups combined. The report also detailed a pervasive overrepresentation of African American students in regard to suspensions, dropout rates, and expulsions. The historical marginalization and discrimination of students with disabilities and, in particular African American students, establishes the inherent link between social justice principles and inclusion. Equitable and inclusive education for all students becomes a core element of social justice leadership because the pervasive system of segregation has established such unequal outcomes for marginalized groups.

Leading for Social Justice

Defining and describing social justice leadership. Despite the wide range of definitions of social justice leadership, there is a clear consensus that social justice leadership involves the recognition of the unequal circumstances of marginalized groups with actions directed toward eliminating inequalities (Bogotch, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2006, 2010; Furman, 2012; Gerwitz, 1998). Dantley and Tillman (2006) assert that a social justice leader "... interrogates the policies and procedures that shape schools and at the same time perpetuate social inequalities and marginalization due to race, class, gender, and other markers of otherness" (p. 19). When social justice leaders recognize policies and procedures that perpetuate inequalities, they take action. Furman (2012) concluded that leadership for social justice is "action

oriented” and “involves identifying and undoing these oppressive and unjust practices and replacing them with more equitable, culturally appropriate ones” (p. 194). School leaders not only recognize inequality, but also must have the necessary competencies to take actions in ways that replace preexisting structures of inequality with more equitable structures.

Social justice leadership is demonstrated through ongoing actions, skills, habits of mind, and competencies that are continually being created, questioned, and refined. Social justice leadership has been described as “the exercise of altering these [inequitable] arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions” (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002, p. 162). The experiential aspect of social justice leadership assumes the school leader and school context influence social justice work. This assumption has prompted theorists to question whether or not one definition of social justice can, or should, exist given that every situation, individual, and context differs (McKenzie et al., 2008). Bogotch (2002) expands on this assumption to claim that “no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice [exist] prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices” (p. 153). Leaders engage with school contexts through ongoing experiences and in doing so “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223).

Theoretical and prescriptive writings describe theories of action for school leaders (Jansen, 2006), but empirical research focused on how principals enact social justice leadership is relatively new and still emerging (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Existing empirical research has primarily explored principal experiences in leading inclusive and culturally relevant reforms (Jansen, 2006; Lopez, González, & Fierro, 2010), principal responses to cultural change and diversity (Cooper, 2009), the nature and history of commitments to social justice (Merchant & Shoho, 2010), challenges faced while leading for social justice (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Theoharis, 2007), ways principals provided training and support for social justice work (Jean-Marie, 2008; Kose, 2007), and how principals leading for social justice interacted with various stakeholders (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002). This small body of research reveals themes connected to leadership traits, orientations, and actions (Furman, 2012).

A prevalent theme in the literature is the “action-oriented” nature of social justice leadership (Furman, 2012). Leading for social justice incorporates a heightened sense of awareness of issues related to oppression, exclusion, and marginalization (Brooks & Miles, 2006). The awareness of leaders is viewed

as a “conscious commitment to recognizing ... choosing to remove blinders and recognize the multiple needs of the children and families” (Lopez et al., 2010, p. 69). The powerful influence of personal qualities and commitments of leaders committed to social justice has also emerged as a theme. (Furman, 2012; Jansen, 2006). Since school leaders confront tremendous resistance and pressure as they attempt to transform their schools (Theoharis, 2007), persistence and commitment become key characteristics or traits of social justice leadership (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Theoharis, 2007). A willingness to take personal and professional risks in the name of social justice becomes evident as stakes increase and resistance mounts (Jansen, 2006).

Additional research has shown that school leaders committed to social justice have preexisting values and conceptions of justice that enable them to maintain their commitments (Jean-Marie, 2008), while others highlight the importance of ongoing reflection (Jansen, 2006), or the development of coping strategies to maintain these commitments despite challenges and resistance (Theoharis, 2007). Leaders also maintain commitments by working collaboratively. Another key component of social justice leadership is related to communication skills, emotional awareness, and the ability to build meaningful and long-lasting relationships. Those described as social justice leaders connect groups of people (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007) while fostering collaboration, democratic dialogue (Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002), and shared decision-making (Wasonga, 2009). Vital aspects of social justice leadership are related to attending to personal relationships and increasing stakeholders’ sense of ownership. Theoharis (2007) found that social justice leaders resist “the historic disconnect between marginalized families and schools ... to create welcoming school climates and also reached out to the community and in particular to disenfranchised families” (p. 237). Communication and emotional awareness extends beyond marginalized families to focus on relationships with students and staff members. Social justice leaders connect groups, but in doing so strive to make engagement work meaningful, self-sustaining, and proactive.

Technical expertise and a commitment to learning have emerged as key themes in social justice leadership research. Leaders assess their own expertise and make choices about their own learning in order to have the ability to provide ongoing professional development on instructional practices or social justice principles (Jean-Marie, 2008; López et al., 2010; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). The ability to assess and restructure school resources to support inclusive programming, maximize resources and staff expertise, or develop programs that foster collaboration and culturally relevant pedagogies is essential for school leaders. Effective leaders recognize they cannot do all of this labor-intensive work alone, so they actively seek out and

encourage teacher leadership (Giles, Johnson, Brooks, & Jacobson, 2005). They become visible actors who raise concerns, mediate conflicts, and champion ideas and values (Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Not only do they articulate their beliefs and model high expectations (Giles et al., 2005; Jansen, 2006), but they also challenge others to think about issues of social justice and question the status quo (Lopez et al., 2010). Social justice leaders become activists working for change in their schools, and their work helps to sustain the momentum for reform (Brooks et al., 2007; Jansen, 2006; Jean-Marie, 2008; Theoharis, 2007).

Challenges, resistance, and dilemmas of social justice leadership. Research has long acknowledged that principals confront tremendous demands and challenges as the organizational leaders of schools nested within complex bureaucracies (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Greenfield, 1995). The challenge of school leadership becomes greater when working within a failing urban district because school leaders are asked to lead without appropriate resources (Anyon, 2005) and with more unqualified and inexperienced teachers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012), navigate large bureaucratic school districts with red tape, and reorganize and re-culture schools with histories of segregation and deficit thinking. Research focused on the dilemmas and challenges of social justice leadership has recently started to emerge (Furman, 2012; Jansen, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). Theoharis (2007) found that principals met numerous challenges from within the school and at the district level and beyond. At the school level, principals confronted “demands of the principalship, the momentum of the status quo, obstructive staff attitudes and beliefs, and insular and privileged parental expectations” (p. 240). They also confronted resistance from the district associated with “unsupportive central office administrators, a formidable bureaucracy, prosaic colleagues, a lack of resources, harmful state and federal regulations, and uninspired administrator preparation” (p. 241). The principals in Theoharis’s study described personal feelings of despair, discouragement, jeopardized emotional and physical well-being, and a slow pace of progress due to resistance. Theoharis (2007) acknowledges that further research is needed to expand understandings of the scope of resistance and challenges to social justice leadership. One potential area of investigation is decision making associated with competing interests, the focus of the research we discuss in this article.

In the past decade, the decentralization of power from school districts to the principalship and the increase in school-based management responsibilities has expanded the scope of school leader decision making (Cranston, 2002; Edwards, 2010; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber (2006) posited that school leaders are confronted with leadership

dilemmas on a daily basis. They identified numerous circumstances that require “a choice between competing sets of principles in a given, usually undesirable or perplexing, situation” (p. 137). Ethical dilemmas are common in school leaders’ lives and common to school leadership. Cranston et al. suggest that dilemmas are not always about right versus wrong, but instead arise when school leaders must choose among varying degrees of right versus right options

Contradictions in redistribution and recognition principles. Social justice theorists have begun to explore the complexity of challenges and dilemmas by theorizing on how principles of social justice can be at odds with each other. North (2006) argues that redistribution and recognition principles of social justice theories create significant contradictions and conflicts for practitioners in education. The social justice principle of recognition is concerned with defending the identity of marginalized groups for the purpose of establishing mainstream conceptualizations of marginalized groups as communities of value. The social justice principle of redistribution is primarily concerned with economically defined classes struggling to end exploitation for the purpose of winning redistribution (Fraser, 1997). North described an example of a fictional school funding reform that provided equal funding for schools (an example of redistribution), which, in turn, diluted a school’s efforts to procure additional resources for the implementation of a culturally relevant curriculum (an example of recognition). These kinds of conflicts pervade the work of school leaders seeking to establish more inclusive schools because while inclusion is about providing recognition to students with disabilities, it also requires a redistribution of resources to support those students in the regular classroom. To illustrate this claim, in the following section we describe the actions school leaders take to create more inclusive schools, noting that this requires confronting the challenges of changing school culture to embrace inclusion (recognition), while also reallocating resources more evenly to better support students with disabilities (redistribution).

Leading for Inclusion

Although it has numerous definitions, the word *inclusion* is not present in IDEA. As a result, schools, districts, advocacy groups, and educational researchers use a variety of definitions. For example, Katzman (2007) defined inclusion as “an educational philosophy that calls for schools to educate all learners—including students with disabilities and other special needs—together in high-quality, age-appropriate general education classrooms in their neighborhood schools” (p. 129). Osgood (2005) described inclusion in

the real world as “more of an ideal than an idea, one to which schools should continually aspire but also one that remains unobtainable in the foreseeable future” (p. 200). Inclusive schooling, according to Slee (2007) “is not the adaptation or refinement of special education. It is a fundamental rejection of special education’s and regular education’s claims to be inclusive. Inclusion demands that we address the politics of exclusion and representation” (p. 164). Udvari-Solner and Kluth (1997) further addressed the politics of exclusion:

Inclusive schooling propels a critique of contemporary school culture and thus, encourages practitioners to reinvent what can be and should be to realize more humane, just and democratic learning communities. Inequities in treatment and educational opportunity are brought to the forefront, thereby fostering attention to human rights, respect for difference and value of diversity. (p. 142)

For the purposes of this study, we recognize inclusion both as an ideal to be aspired to and as a pragmatic policy. All students deserve access to the general education classroom and to obtain all the same benefits granted to nondisabled students. Principals who choose to segregate students cannot promote inclusion and do not reflect values of social justice. School leaders are responsible for establishing a school culture that rejects segregation and inequitable treatment. Their daily work must reflect this responsibility. Yet, scholars must recognize the inclusion of all students may not be immediately obtainable during transitional reform periods (schools moving from segregation to full inclusion) because inclusive reforms often confront obstacles that cannot be remedied in the short term. Some obstacles include the availability of resources, appropriately trained teachers and staff, legal mandates related to IDEA, and other challenges associated with each individual classroom, student, the school, and the district level.

Inclusion may require time, which leads some to question whether a principal can be seeking social justice but willing to segregate some of their students in the short term. The answer to this question could be “yes” or “no” depending on the circumstances. For example, in a school that is beginning an inclusion model, students with more severe emotional and behavioral disabilities could present extreme behaviors that could raise serious safety concerns, especially if the staff was not been trained appropriately. Surely a school would not be socially just if the school was fully inclusive but unsafe for students or teachers. These questions do not have simple answers but highlight the complexity of social justice leadership and the situational trade-offs school leaders must make as they transition schools from segregated to inclusive.

Some actions and orientations related to establishing the necessary conditions for creating more inclusive schools have been described in the literature (Billingsley, Gersten, Gillman, & Morvant, 1995; Guzmán, 1997; Hasazi, Johnston, Liggett, & Schattman, 1994; Mantle 2005; Salisbury & McGregor, 2002), but empirical research focused on how principals enact inclusive reforms is still emerging. These studies highlight three major foci for principals attempting to implement inclusive reforms: school culture building, resource allocation, and ongoing professional development. To a large extent, these commitments are similar to the actions described in social justice leadership. Establishing a school culture with the values, beliefs, and feelings that promote inclusion for students with disabilities is vital to success (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Salisbury & McGregor, 2002).

Inclusion starts with school leadership and is associated with a social justice awareness of issues of marginalization. Hasazi et al. (1994) argue, "How leaders at each school site chose to look at the least restrictive environment was critical to how, or even whether, much would be accomplished beyond the status quo" (p. 492). School leaders who promote inclusion can influence school culture by communicating values, sharing beliefs, conveying attitudes, modeling behaviors, providing supports, and addressing problems and concerns related to inclusion (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003). In some instances, school leaders engage in a process of reflective inquiry with teams or individuals in order to conduct "discussions about the values and implications of diversity, inclusion, collaboration, and instructional practices" (Salisbury & McGregor, 2002, p. 270). School leaders can also take a more assertive approach and challenge dissenters of inclusion or utilize systems of teacher and staff accountability to shape culture.

The distribution of resources also communicates values and commitments of school leaders to equity for students with disabilities. Resources may need to be added or shifted to create a more inclusive school. School leaders promoting inclusive reforms ensure resources are allocated fairly to students with disabilities (Salisbury & McGregor, 2002) by directly influencing "resource allocations, staffing, structures, information flows, and operating processes" (Nanus, 1992, p. 142). They serve as facilitators of resources as they modify teacher schedules to enable time for collaboration and co-planning, provide necessary classroom resources, and regulate class sizes (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2001). School leaders may seek additional resources from their local school district, state department of education, community-based organizations, and other groups interested in supporting students with disabilities. Effective school leaders also emphasize and support constant learning through professional development, in part, because they realize special education teachers and general education teachers are typically undertrained

on special education issues and research-based instructional strategies (Sands, Adams, & Stout, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). They promote inclusion by providing teachers access to research-based instructional supports, connecting teachers with external expertise, supporting teacher initiatives, and creating structures such as routine high-quality professional development sessions that promote teacher learning.

In sum, we propose that social justice leadership starts with a leader being able to recognize the marginalization of a group. Once recognition occurs, leaders engage in an ongoing process to eliminate inequalities. When school leaders take action to create more inclusive schools for students with disabilities, they shift resources and change culture to recognize and redistribute resources to better support a historically marginalized group. The leadership practices and actions demonstrated in social justice and inclusion leadership go hand in hand, particularly in schools and districts that have suffered from antiquated systems and structures that have promoted segregation and non-recognition of students with disabilities.

Methodology

This article reports on findings of an examination of how principals of two elementary schools engaged in practices that created more inclusive schools for students with disabilities. We report on the secondary analysis of data from a larger study of how five principals in one urban school district made sense of inclusion policies. In the larger study, a qualitative case study method was utilized to explore principals' leadership for inclusion in one school district over the course of the 2010–2011 academic school year (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). Five school leaders were selected for having made progress in implementing inclusion at their school. In this article, we report on a secondary analysis of the practices of two of the five principals, selected for study because their work raised issues related to social justice leadership.

Initial Data Collection and Analysis

The process of data collection for the larger study spanned the 2010–2011 academic school year (August 2010–July-2011). Data collection consisted of multiple school observations focused on principals, teachers, and staff in five schools that were working in collaboration to implement inclusion reforms, in-depth interviews with principals over the course of the school year, and documents collected from each of the participating schools, the school district, city council hearings, court proceedings, and the district's Office of

Special Education. A number of policy documents, district memos, and training presentations were reviewed and analyzed.

Structured and semistructured interviews with the five principals occurred over the course of the school year. Each interview was approximately 72 min, but ranged from 42 min to 105 min. Generally, interviews were conducted as conversations and focused on: (a) the principal's orientation, values, and conceptions of inclusion, (b) how the school's inclusion program was developed and implemented, (c) challenges to inclusion and student achievement, (d) the history of inclusion and achievement at the school, and (e) specific principal actions related to creating a more inclusive school. Observations occurred throughout the school year and lasted from 120 min to 200 min. Observations conducted in the presence of principals occurred in various settings: (a) classrooms, (b) IEP meetings, (c) parent-administrator conferences, (d) grade level team meetings, (e) special education team meetings, and (f) community meetings at the school. Numerous documents were collected and examined: (a) district accountability reports, (b) state accountability reports, (c) meeting agendas and meeting notes, and (d) professional development curricula presentations.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously over the course of the larger study. Data collected and analyzed early in the school year directed further data collection and analysis. We analyzed data using Nvivo 9 software in two primary phases. In the initial phase, we coded data associated with (a) action-oriented nature of inclusion leadership, (b) personal qualities and commitments to inclusion, (c) communication and relationships, and (d) technical skills and expertise around inclusive educational practices and serving students with disabilities. We also coded data related to district policy, school history, and inclusion policy development and implementation. In the secondary coding phase, additional inductive and deductive coding processes were employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Findings of the larger study of principal sensemaking for inclusion are reported elsewhere (DeMatthews, 2012).

Sampling for Social Justice Leadership for Inclusion

The two school leaders who are the focus of the analysis we present in this article were selected from the five who participated in the larger study using a purposeful sampling strategy (Maxwell, 2005). We used four criteria to select the leaders for the secondary analysis we present in this article. The leader (a) showed a demonstrated commitment to implementing inclusion at a school wide level, (b) had previous teaching experience with students with disabilities, (c) demonstrated a heightened sense of awareness related to the

marginalization of students with disabilities, and (d) worked in a high-poverty urban school with a history of segregating students with disabilities. Evidence of meeting this criterion was drawn from analysis of data from interviews and observations to identify principals who specifically addressed issues related to marginalization and the effects of segregation, and who demonstrated an awareness and recognition of inequitable practices related to the identification, placement, and instruction of students with disabilities.

Only two school leaders of the five in the larger study met all four of the selection criteria. More information is provided in the discussion of the individual cases about the context of each school and leader including (a) school leader background, commitments, and inclusive definitions, (b) school context, (c) special education programs before and after the principal began to implement inclusion, and (d) leadership dilemmas and challenges. The other three leaders did not meet all criteria for two reasons. One principal demonstrated progress toward inclusion and an active awareness to issues of marginalization but did not work in a high-poverty urban school. The other two leaders had inclusion programs that appeared successful in terms of an increase in students with disabilities gaining access to the general education classroom but our analysis revealed that that inclusion was only superficially implemented and that these school leaders lacked a social justice orientation.

Context for the Study

Edmondson City Public Schools (ECPS) is a medium-sized urban school district located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The district had approximately 125 schools with a highly diverse student population (African American: 69%, White: 16%, Hispanic or Latino: 13%, and Asian: 2%). Student demographic data highlighted the district's socioeconomic diversity, with 61% of students qualifying for Free and Reduced Meals (FARMs), although FARM rates in schools ranged from less than 5% to over 99%. Of particular relevance to our analysis, 16% of students enrolled in the district were classified as students with disabilities. In the year prior to this study (2009–2010), the proficiency rate for all students was 44% whereas only 16% of elementary students with disabilities met proficiency on state-mandated reading assessments. These data revealed a 28% achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. The district's superintendent acknowledged the district's historic failure when she told the city council in an oversight hearing: "we cannot lose sight of the perpetual neglect special education students have endured for decades."

ECPS provides a politically important case context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At the time of our study, the district was under court supervision for failing to implement numerous aspects of IDEA but had begun to address some historical inequities through new policies intended to improve special education programs and educational outcomes for students with disabilities. These policies had yet to be fully implemented and, as we will show, provided contradictory pressures on principals. ECPS had been under federal court supervision for three longstanding class action lawsuits in special education dating back to the 1990s, each with consent decrees. An independent court-appointed evaluator reported the following to a federal judge:

Due process complaints in [ECPS] typically raise basic legal compliance issues under IDEA with respect to evaluations and the development of appropriate IEPs, claims of [ECPS's] failure to implement earlier HOD/SAs, and claims of the denial of a Free and Appropriate Public Education ("FAPE") associated with the above legal breaches or schools' failure to implement required IEP services.

ECPS had previously created an inequitable structure of segregation for students with disabilities. Of the district's 8,500 students with disabilities, approximately 2,400 attended nonpublic schools or lived in residential facilities. The district also operated six special education schools: three were designated solely for students with emotional disturbances and other behavioral disabilities, two were designated for students with severe intellectual disabilities and traumatic brain injuries, and one school was designated for students with specific learning disabilities. In addition, a variety of cluster programs¹ or self-contained programs were established in neighborhood schools for students identified into different disability classifications.

Two district-level policies were developed to promote inclusion and were being implemented at the time of the study. The first policy was the Neighborhood School Access policy, which required all schools to enroll any student with a disability residing within their boundaries. Prior to this policy's enforcement, principals were able to deny students access to their school based on their own personal determination of whether or not their school could meet the needs of a student. The policy also mandated that schools should attempt to implement any IEP for at least 30 days before reconvening an IEP team to make a change in placement. An addendum to this policy gave the school district staff the authority to reject a change in placement even after the 30 days regardless of the IEP team's decision. The second policy related to school closings. The district began closing special education schools and eliminating self-contained programs located within schools. From 2007 to 2010,

ECPS closed four of the six schools that served students with severe emotional disturbances. The majority of the students were placed in their neighborhood schools with some or no additional supports to the school. Budget allocations changed for schools based on a general budgeting allocation formula. Principals were directed to develop an inclusion program within their schools, but there was little oversight or support from the district.

Findings

Lane Elementary School

School description. Lane Elementary School (ES) was a Title I school located in a high-poverty area of the city. In the academic school year 2010–2011, Lane ES enrolled 230 students in grades Pre-K–5; 29 of the students had IEPs. The school served a population of predominantly African American students (98% African American and 2% Hispanic). Over 90% of the student population qualified for free or reduced meals. In the year prior to this study, approximately 40% of students scored proficient on reading, and 38% on math assessments administered for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Approximately 12% of students with disabilities scored proficient on reading and 16% scored proficient on math assessments. The school staff was made up of a mixture of veteran teachers and first and second year teachers, many holding alternative certifications from programs such as Teach for America. Parental involvement was extremely low, with few parents attending parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings, going to back-to-school nights, participating in conferences, or engaging in the school’s leadership team.

The superintendent told Lane ES’s principal, Mrs. Kraft that the school was “chaotic” and “parents and students did whatever they wanted in the building.” The school had been branded as unfixable and had a poor reputation. Those previously assigned as principal had either resigned from the position or were removed. Lane went through four principals in ten years. Although the superintendent acknowledged that the chaos at Lane posed a serious leadership challenge, Mrs. Kraft was directed to “clean up the school” and “improve test scores by at least eight percentage points a year.”

Mrs. Kraft’s commitment to inclusion. Mrs. Kraft was a White woman in her early forties who was never shy about voicing her opinions. She was a vocal leader, open about sharing her commitment to students with disabilities. Mrs. Kraft sought out the most challenging school in the most challenging urban district as a teacher and administrator because she truly wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. She worked as a special education teacher for

9 years in both segregated programs for students with emotional disabilities and in cotaught inclusion settings. Her experiences with an unjust principal while working as a teacher in a self-contained classroom led to her decision to become a principal herself. Throughout interviews, she frequently recalled one of her self-contained classes, a group of 12 boys, ages 11 to 14, identified as having emotional or behavioral disabilities. She described the circumstances during this period that motivated her to become a school leader:

It was the best experience but each time I tried to talk to my principal about giving some of my kids access to the general education classroom I was just shot down. I couldn't understand why she wouldn't give my students a chance. I argued with her and finally the principal just told me to basically be quiet and do my job. I knew then that I had to leave the school.

Mrs. Kraft came to the principalship at Lane ES with a deep commitment to furthering inclusion. To her, inclusion was a value and personal belief that "all students have the right to be in the regular class." She explained that "a school can serve all students in the regular class² if they are thoughtful, have a strong team, and use data to drive their instruction." Mrs. Kraft's commitment to her students' extended beyond issues of inclusion. She strongly believed that all students had "the right to a safe and orderly school with loving adults" and that under the right conditions, any student, regardless of background or circumstance, could be successful. At the same time, she recognized that she was faced with significant challenges during the painstaking change process that was necessary to turn around such an underperforming school. She said, "this is my life's work. I believe in my heart that all kids can learn and be successful. If I didn't, I couldn't do this job, not here. It would be too difficult, but I believe."

Special education programming. Most students with disabilities had been segregated for all or part of the day prior to Mrs. Kraft's tenure as principal. Mrs. Kraft described the school she inherited:

Teachers didn't work together, co-plan or even meet on any regular type of basis. Teachers didn't know the RSPs (related service providers) and weren't aware of their IEP goals ... They [general education teachers] think because a kid has a disability, they need to be in a separate room because they can't keep up in a regular class or that they disrupt other students.

Mrs. Kraft had a visceral reaction: "It made me sick to see this, to see so many kids not having their needs met. Even worse, when I started looking at IEPs I saw that many of them were exactly the same for all the kids on a

particular teacher's caseload." She felt that the low test scores in general were a reflection of a lack of caring for students and their needs, and that the significant achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers was due to staff doing what was convenient for them and not for kids.

Mrs. Kraft took action to reform Lane ES. Her top priority was student behavior and discipline. During the first month of the school year, she focused solely on student discipline, student behavior, and classroom management. This meant that she was highly visible in classrooms and common areas. She provided feedback and support to teachers on classroom management concerns and developed systems and standard operating procedures for dealing with discipline issues (e.g., expectations for parent communication, data tracking of disciplinary infractions by class and student, ongoing positive behavioral support activities for students and staff). In the first month, Lane ES had a significant decline in student behavior issues, but a core group of students continued to misbehave and disrupt classrooms and the school.

Mrs. Kraft met with her assistant principal to discuss the group of students who were persistently misbehaving and found that the students frequently misbehaving were mostly boys who had been identified as having emotional/behavioral disabilities or specific learning disabilities. Next, she reviewed their IEPs, began observing the students, and met with them individually. She learned that most had poorly written IEPs that did not describe their strengths and needs, and that IEP goals were broad and similar to the IEP goals of other students. Her classroom observations revealed that many of the students were given work that was too easy, too hard, or not related to the curriculum or their IEPs. She concluded that teachers continually struggled to differentiate instruction for students with IEPs.

Mrs. Kraft believed that "these kids had been getting the short end of the stick. They needed to be included. They needed to learn what everyone else was learning. ... You can't expect them to behave if teachers are treating them like they are dumb." However, she also recognized that change posed a tremendous leadership challenge. She seriously questioned whether or not her teachers were prepared to effectively teach the school's student population.

I need teachers who know how to teach students who are struggling and behind. Right now I have a lot of teachers who teach only the students who are on grade level and I am starting to think that my teachers don't know how to differentiate instruction or give interventions.

Mrs. Kraft began to work with teachers to significantly change practices around special education. In doing so, she confronted significant challenges

because some teachers were simply unwilling to change their practices while others complained that they did not have enough time to plan lessons that addressed the needs of all learners. Recognizing the importance of teacher buy-in for an inclusion model but also realizing some teachers were not in favor of inclusion, she began by reviewing her teacher roster to identify one general education teacher at each grade level that she felt had the necessary skills and disposition to be successful with inclusion. Then, she convinced those teachers to work as inclusion teachers. She described the supportive leadership style she adopted in persuading the teachers to take on new responsibilities as inclusion teachers: "I schmoozed them over. I told them how great they were and that we really needed this for the kids. It totally worked."

Once she had a group of teachers who agreed to work on developing an inclusion model, she called a larger meeting with all special education teachers and the new inclusion teachers. They collaborated to develop new class rosters, a new bell schedule to allow for coplanning and coteaching, and teacher expectations for how the new inclusion teachers could be helpful. Each special education teacher would be paired with two general education teachers. The primarily service delivery model would be a coteaching/coplanning model where general education teachers and special education teachers had scheduled time to develop lesson plans and teach together. Teachers would have a weekly 30-min morning planning time before the start of the school day. Special education teachers scheduled IEP team meetings to make changes to the location and type of services that would be provided to students. Some of the parents of students with disabilities did not like the new approach to inclusion but most were excited about the change. The school held about 20 IEP meetings over a 2-month time frame to change students' placements to the regular classroom or to placements that consisted of less pullout. Mrs. Kraft recognized that implementing new IEPs posed an even greater challenge. In order to lead teachers to successfully support students with disabilities in the regular classroom, Mrs. Kraft and the special education and general education teachers who cotaught courses met regularly to discuss progress and express concerns.

New logistical challenges emerged with the move toward inclusion because special education teachers now had difficult schedules to balance in order to provide instruction across multiple classrooms. Mrs. Kraft tried to make adjustments in the student's schedules and offered special education teachers additional pay to work after school in order to dedicate more time during the school day toward instruction. In addition, new behavioral problems emerged and both general education and special education teachers began to complain about students with disabilities acting out in class. Students with emotional and behavioral disabilities were historically isolated in small

self-contained classrooms, but the new inclusion program meant that many of these students were placed in larger classrooms with less teacher support where they ended up displaying disruptive behaviors. More and more students were referred to Mrs. Kraft's office because of disciplinary problems.

Mrs. Kraft's classroom observations suggested that the disruptive behaviors displayed by many of the students with IEPs surfaced because they did not have work in regular classrooms that was tailored to their needs. She found that students with disabilities were often seated in the back of the classroom or had work that was not challenging or too difficult. She concluded that many of her teachers needed ongoing support with planning lessons and developing materials, so she worked with the district and with other schools to develop professional development on differentiated instruction. She also created a teacher library filled with instructional resources and connected teachers with staff from other schools that were successfully coteaching. Teachers and staff began to buy in to the inclusion program once they saw students finding success in the classrooms; Mrs. Kraft was quick to praise the successful teachers.

The inclusion program progressed throughout the course of the year, and the school had tremendous progress in increasing the access to general education classrooms. Table 1 below summarizes Lane ES's progress toward inclusion and academic outcomes.

Leadership dilemmas and challenges. Mrs. Kraft believed that developing and maintaining an inclusion model was a very delicate process. Around the middle of the school year she said, "right now, we are holding on by a shoe string. Some of my teachers are getting burned out; there's a huge implementation dip but things are getting better. We're going to make it but next year will be so much better." In one meeting teachers were clearly overwhelmed, complaining about having to skip lunch, and being dead tired. Mrs. Kraft praised them and promised things would improve in time. She recognized that efforts to implement inclusion were being undermined by the challenge posed by the ongoing enrollment of students with IEPs. Over the course of the previous year, approximately 12 students with IEPs had enrolled despite the fact that the school had only three special education teachers. That meant that Lane ES, although staffed for 24 students with disabilities, had to serve 36 such students without any additional resources or support.

Each time a new student enrolled, special education teachers would complain and worry that they would not be able to appropriately serve the students. Mrs. Kraft was well aware of her staff's capacity but also recognized that under the Neighborhood School Access policy, she was required to enroll any student with a disability in her school's boundary. She firmly believed

Table 1. Lane Elementary School Student Change of Placement and Academic Achievement.

Classification Change August 2010/ June 2011	0–39% in General Education Classroom	40% to 79% in General Education Classroom	80% or more in General Education Classroom
Emotional/behavioral disabilities (<i>n</i> = 7)	5/2	1/2	1/3
Learning disabilities (<i>n</i> = 20)	5/0	14/8	1/12
Other (<i>n</i> = 7)	0/0	3/1	4/6
Total (<i>n</i> = 34)	10/2	18/11	6/21

Student Achievement		
	2009–2010	2010–2011
All students (<i>n</i> = 230)		
Reading	38% proficient or advanced	30% proficient or advanced
Math	40% proficient or advanced	33% proficient or advanced
Students with disabilities		
Math	15% proficient or advanced	13% proficient or advanced
Reading	12% proficient or advanced	12% proficient or advanced

that any child who lived in her neighborhood had the right to attend Lane ES. However, on a case-by-case basis, Mrs. Kraft took actions to block students from enrolling:

When a parent would come in and try to enroll I would tell her, look, this probably isn't the best place for your child. I don't think we can meet his needs. You should try the school down the street.

Mrs. Kraft believed that teacher support for students with disabilities had already been stretched thin because of ongoing enrollments, but continued enrollment without an influx of resources would reduce the benefits of the inclusion program. In this context, she concluded, the new students would be better served in other district schools.

Mrs. Kraft explained that her commitments to serving the school community as a whole while ensuring that students with disabilities received inclusive programs were not always reconcilable. She was forced to make hard decisions that did not fully fit her own personal values or the inclusive values she tried to spread throughout her school. She said, "I'm not proud of what I do sometimes, but I pray on it, and I hope that I made the right choice. It's the decision I thought was best for all my students." So by directing parents of

students with disabilities living within Lane's boundaries to other schools where they might have appropriate inclusion services, Mrs. Kraft enacted a policy that might be viewed as exclusion rather than inclusion.

She confronted additional dilemmas because not all students were successful in inclusion settings. Some students struggled with behavior and academics. For Mrs. Kraft, it was a dilemma because she knew the outcome of removing a student from the inclusion setting. She gave an example of one boy,

But, he would hit, grab, and yell at teachers and we didn't get much parental support. It was really, really bad. I observed him in class, gave feedback to teachers and even started teaching him myself. Nothing seemed to work. We ended up keeping him the entire year but in the summer, finally, I worked with the district office to get him sent to a more restrictive placement. . . . It got to the point where he just messed things up for the other kids too much. I had to draw the line.

This student was Lane's most challenging case, although Mrs. Kraft felt pressure from teachers to take action to remove other students, particularly those with behavioral problems.

Mrs. Kraft also struggled with broader leadership challenges and dilemmas. For example, since ECPS gave principals a great deal of control over the school budget, she had difficult choices with budget and staffing. Given the caseloads of the school's special education staff, Mrs. Kraft believed her students with disabilities could benefit from another social worker and another special education teacher. However, choosing to hire an additional staff member to support the inclusion team meant she could not continue to pay for an after-school program: a program that primarily benefited nondisabled students who needed additional tutoring. Allocating discretionary funds was also problematic. Some special education teachers identified an intervention program that included leveled readers and activities that students could take home and work on with their parents. Mrs. Kraft wanted to purchase the program, but in the past, part of the discretionary funds was allocated to funding a long-standing tradition for a school-wide trip to a historic site. Many other budget decisions created similar dilemmas and required tradeoffs.

Parents sometimes created dilemmas for inclusion. Mrs. Kraft struggled to maintain positive and meaningful relationships with parents when they were unwilling to do what she felt were best for their children. For example, four parents of students with disabilities did not want their children in an inclusion program because they feared bullying and felt that Mrs. Kraft was trying to take services, supports, and interventions away. The fact that four students

with disabilities (two in the third grade and two in the fifth grade) had to have their instruction in a separate space away from the regular classroom heavily influenced the amount of time the special education teachers could spend with the other students on their caseloads. Having each of the special education teachers work in their separate classrooms (each with only two students) and then go to support the inclusion of the rest of their caseload was a highly inefficient use of human capital. Mrs. Kraft worked very hard to persuade parents to accept inclusion settings, and at times her attempts at persuasion caused a great deal of aggravation for both the parents and Mrs. Kraft.

Hall Elementary School

School description. Hall Elementary School was located in a high-poverty, high-crime area of the city, but demographics of the neighborhood had been changing to upper middle class. However, the school primarily served African American children living in poverty (95% of the students were African American and over 90% of the students were eligible for FARMs). In the academic year 2010–2011, 34 of the 247 students enrolled at Hall ES had IEPs. Hall ES had not made AYP or safe harbor in the previous 3 years. The school's previous school-wide test proficiencies on the state-mandated reading and mathematics assessments were 37% and 29%, respectively. Only 15% of special education students achieved the state's proficiency level in reading, and 13% reached proficiency in mathematics. Hall ES provided a self-contained program for students classified as having emotional and behavioral disabilities;³ most of the students lived in other communities within the district and were bused to the school each day. The program consisted of two classrooms with eight students in each class. Of the 16 students, 14 were African American males, and each class was assigned one special education teacher and one paraprofessional. Historically, neither classes had any interaction with the rest of the school.

Hall ES teachers were primarily seasoned veterans, most of whom had spent the majority of their careers working at the school. Similar to Lane ES, there was an extremely low level of parental engagement at Hall ES with few parents attending PTA meetings, back-to-school nights, and parent conferences. The newer, mostly upper class families in the community did start to engage with Hall ES. Although these families had yet to enroll their children in the school, some brought their children to play at the school's playground, asked for tours of the school, and began attending PTA meetings.

Mrs. Jackson's commitment to inclusion. Mrs. Jackson was an African American female in her mid-forties who had dedicated her life to working with

students with disabilities. Mrs. Jackson had a wide range of teaching experience, having been a first grade teacher in an elementary school as well as a special education teacher at a state prison for teenagers convicted as adults for serious criminal offenses and a speech and language pathologist. At the time of this study, she continued to provide speech services to children in her local community free of charge. Mrs. Jackson had also been the chief of staff for the director of special education in ECPS. She had asked the superintendent for the opportunity to become the principal of a school because she felt that “district policy, no matter how good you make it, won’t help kids unless there is good leadership. ... I wanted to work back in a school because I belong with the kids. That’s my calling.” Mrs. Jackson was directed by the superintendent to raise test scores by eight percentage points a year and to increase student enrollment. She was also directed to make a special effort to collaborate with the upper middle class families in the community.

Mrs. Jackson had been very familiar with the special education programs at Hall ES because of her previous position. She knew that students in the programs were segregated and that the school had a self-contained special education program for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Mrs. Jackson believed in inclusion and felt that she could help create a more inclusive school that would ultimately increase student performance on state-mandated assessments. She recognized that although

inclusion is about placing all students in their least restrictive environment... [and] almost every student should be included in the general education class ... for some kids, at a particular point in their life, the general education class isn’t what’s best. ...Our job is to make sure we get each kid to a place where they can thrive and be successful in inclusion.

Mrs. Jackson was also concerned about instructional practices in her school. Her focus was directed toward improving instruction in each class because she felt it was not just special education students at Hall ES that were “getting the short end of the stick.”

Special education programming. Mrs. Jackson described the status quo at her school when she arrived:

It has been a place where you stay your career, people really get along well. There are some really good things about that but some issues come along with it too. The staff had a number of misconceptions. A lot of teachers did not feel it was their job to teach students with disabilities and some honestly believed that a [segregated] special program was what is best for them. They also felt that the kids in the programs were not their responsibility because they didn’t

come from the neighborhood. There was a feeling of having kids being dumped on us. . . . Even worse, the teachers felt that they were successful because there weren't a lot of classroom management issues.

Mrs. Jackson recognized the challenges she confronted at Hall ES but believed the faculty was capable of making changes relatively quickly. She knew she could draw on her veteran staff and the family-oriented culture of the school to improve instruction and establish a more inclusive school. She believed her main obstacle was to convince veteran teachers that they needed to improve their practice and learn new instructional strategies.

Many of the teachers have worked in this district and have gone 30 years without professional development from the district. A lot has changed in education since some of these people started teaching. I mean IDEA wasn't even around yet! If I can show them a thing or two, I mean show that it works, they will come around.

Mrs. Jackson decided to make professional development around differentiated instruction a priority. She also began the process of providing students with disabilities more access to regular classrooms. To her, both inclusion and high-quality instruction were tied together so both priorities were addressed concurrently throughout the course of the school year.

Professional development was one tactic Mrs. Jackson used to address the problems she observed in classrooms. Through observations, she had learned that most teachers did not change the content, process, or products in daily lessons and concluded that most teachers did not embrace the idea that individual students have different learning styles and preferences. She described the typical classroom as "inflexible to the needs of particular kids" and "overly focused on the kids who are at or near grade level." She also believed that if teachers enhanced their planning and delivery repertoire, they would be more willing and better able to serve all students. As a result, she provided professional development on differentiated instruction.

Mrs. Jackson took many steps to improve instruction and to promote inclusion. She started by revising the approach that had been taken to providing teachers with planning time. Prior to her tenure, teachers began each school day with a 30-min block of time for professional development or planning. The time had been unstructured, a practice Mrs. Jackson changed by having teacher teams meet and plan together with a particular purpose. The purpose of the planning sessions varied; on some days Mrs. Jackson had teachers share their lesson plans with colleagues and give peer feedback. While teachers reviewed lessons, they used a Bloom's Taxonomy worksheet

(Bloom, 1956) or other assessment tools to give feedback on the rigor of the lessons and to make suggestions on different types of activities that could be used to accomplish the lessons' stated objectives. The main purpose of these new practices was to "create a collaborative environment where teachers feel comfortable sharing and giving feedback." Mrs. Jackson believed that collaboration would enhance instruction and coplanning as essential for an inclusion model to work.

Mrs. Jackson combined discretionary budget funds with a grant from the state to contract with professional development specialists to assist faculty in learning how to engage in coplanning and differentiated instruction. Half-day or full-day professional development sessions were held each month and provided specific training and support on three inclusive teaching types: (a) one teach, one assist; (b) parallel teaching; and (c) station teaching. Teachers were also given instruction on learning theories, ongoing assessment systems to track student progress, various learning styles, and methods for tailoring instruction and activities for students. The specialists and the teachers shared their ideas and lessons, and debriefed on goals set in previous sessions. Additionally, the specialists observed teachers once a month and gave each individual feedback on differentiated activities and learning experiences evident in lessons.

During professional development, teachers shared areas for growth and how they made progress with particular students. Commenting on the approach to professional development she had taken, Mrs. Jackson stated: "I think if I would have come down with a heavy fist and ordered teachers to change the way they taught we wouldn't be here. Instead, look at them, they are open to feedback, they feel safe, and they are starting to believe they can teach anyone." Observations of professional development conducted during the study confirmed her assessment that teachers and staff held positive views on the changes she had initiated at the school.

Mrs. Jackson also took a number of steps to improve the learning opportunities for students in the self-contained program. First, she formed a team of general education and special education teachers to collaboratively review data on students who spent the majority of their day outside of general education classrooms. Mrs. Jackson explained, "we prioritized certain kids for inclusion ... if we could find a few students who are successful relatively quickly, we help fight the negative views teachers have against these kids and begin to change the way they think." The team immediately identified students that were on, or close to, grade level, had mild to moderate behavioral problems, and had open-minded parents.⁴ IEP meetings were scheduled and convened, and IEPs were revised. Students with mild disabilities began thriving in the regular classrooms and soon after teachers began to express their

pride and sense of accomplishment. Mrs. Jackson would proudly point out that a stranger could not tell who was receiving special education and who was not.

Mrs. Jackson and her team then turned their focus more directly to the program. At an initial meeting of the team held to discuss this new effort, members of the team pointed out that some teachers were very reluctant to teach the students from the program, and others held deficit views of the students and their families. One team member mockingly mimicked a teacher she had heard saying: “these kids are from [Southwest] and from lil’ Iraq [a nickname for a notoriously violent housing project] they don’t belong here with us and our kids.” Mrs. Jackson responded to these comments by encouraging her inclusion team to work collaboratively with teachers to determine the amount of time that special education students should participate in regular education classroom activities. The inclusion team immediately identified three students that could be transitioned into the regular classroom based on their observations of the students and an analysis of their academic levels of performance. The inclusion team also decided that other students in the program would be moved more gradually into regular classrooms by taking only certain classes with their nondisabled peers. Mrs. Jackson further mandated that all students in the program participate in recess, lunch, and physical education with the rest of the school.

Some students fit in well in the regular class but others struggled as their teachers attempted to deal with their more challenging and intense behaviors. Mrs. Jackson recognized the importance of supporting her teachers throughout this period. She remained highly engaged with teachers, giving them feedback, encouraging them to vent their frustrations, holding parent conferences with teachers, participating in professional development sessions with the hired specialists, and modeling techniques in classroom management in classes and in professional development sessions. Being present and modeling appropriate techniques was a significant feature of Mrs. Jackson’s approach to leadership. She stated:

They follow me because they know I am in it just like them. How can I expect these people to do what I tell them if I am not in it with them each day. If I tell you to do something you might not do it, but if I tell you to do something and every day you see me doing the same thing or at least willing to try every day, you’re more likely to do it or try your best.

The number of special education students included in general education classes at Hall ES had increased from the previous year. Many of the students from the self-contained program were thriving in the regular classroom. Hall

Table 2. Hall Elementary School Student Change of Placement and Academic Achievement.

Classification Change August 2010/ June 2011	0–39% in General Education Classroom	40% to 79% in General Education Classroom	80% or more in General Education Classroom
Emotional/behavioral disabilities (<i>n</i> = 17)	16/5	1/8	0/4
Learning disabilities (<i>n</i> = 8)	0/0	6/2	2/6
Other (<i>n</i> = 4)	0/0	2/0	2/4
Total (<i>n</i> = 29)	16/5	9/10	4/14

Student Achievement		
	2009–2010	2010–2011
All students (<i>n</i> = 237)		
Reading	29% proficient or advanced	46% proficient or advanced
Math	37% proficient or advanced	41% proficient or advanced
Students with disabilities		
Math	13% proficient or advanced	20% proficient or advanced
Reading	15% proficient or advanced	24% proficient or advanced

ES also made improvements in student achievement outcomes on state-mandated tests. Despite this, Mrs. Jackson wanted, and expected, greater improvements:

I'm sad we didn't see academic progress on the test but I saw tremendous progress in the classroom. Kids are happier and more kids are learning. Some of our kids are so low [on reading and mathematics assessments] that even a year and a half's worth of growth would not yield growth on the test after a year, but the test scores will come if we stay focused.

Table 2 below summarizes the progress toward inclusion and academic outcomes at Hall ES at the end of the year this study was conducted.

Leadership dilemmas and challenges. Making student placement decisions was difficult because some of the students had significant behavioral problems or were generally well behaved, but, on occasion, would have extreme outbursts (e.g., fighting, throwing objects, having profanity-laced tirades). Although Mrs. Jackson believed that all students, particularly students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, needed access to the regular classroom, at times she feared these behaviors would significantly undermine learning for students in the regular classroom. She described one such dilemma:

On the one hand, a student who has been stuck in a classroom with other students with behavior problems his whole life may never learn how to behave appropriately in a regular class. Behavior is learned, so he needs access to other students. On the other hand, if we give him access he will build new skills but may be too disruptive to the rest of the class. The issue is, how do you find a balance? Can you find a balance? Where do you draw the line? There's not always a clear answer for what's right. You also have to respect your teachers. It's not fair to put them in a position to fail or in harm's way...

Mrs. Jackson continually struggled to put into practice her values of inclusion and her belief that students with emotional and behavioral disabilities needed access to the regular classroom, while also ensuring that the school created the best learning environments for all students.

One student example stood out for Mrs. Jackson. The student was in the full-time self-contained program and was classified as having an emotional disturbance.

Daquan stands out to me. He can be a real sweetheart but he can also really be a handful. He is on grade level, very smart and a straight "A and B" student. We started giving him some opportunities in the gen. ed. classes but it just wouldn't work. At least three times a week he would have these outbursts. He would bully, then get bullied, and then we would have a fight. We tried a lot of things but when his grades slipped we decided to scale back his placement.

Daquan's situation presented a dilemma for Mrs. Jackson because she believed he needed access to his peers and knew he was academically capable, yet her eventual decision with the IEP team was to significantly reduce his access to the general education classroom for the remainder of the year. Mrs. Jackson explained, "I think we did what was best for everyone. I hope it was what's best for Daquan as well." Daquan's behavior and grades improved once he was placed back in the self-contained program.

District policy and the demands of the upper-middle class community members living in the school's neighborhood were also challenges. Whenever a student in the self-contained program had his or her IEP revised to be included in general education classes more than 50% of the school day, the district would add another student into the self-contained program from another school. At first Mrs. Jackson thought that the district wouldn't notice, or at least not in the short term, but that was not the case. She soon realized that Hall ES would never be fully, or even mostly, inclusive as long as the self-contained program existed. As a result, she decided that she would work to gain control from the district of the self-contained program. She wanted control over the students' placements and how to best use the resources

(teachers, paraprofessional, and resources) allocated from the district. Mrs. Jackson shared her ideas for reform with both parents and the superintendent and explained she wanted the school to keep the students but she did not want the district to manage the program any longer. A few meetings occurred with district officials to discuss the proposal and the logistics of such a change. In one of the meetings, Mrs. Jackson was informed that community members did not want the self-contained program to be located at Hall ES, and that the district was considering eliminating the self-contained program altogether or moving it to another location. Mrs. Jackson expressed her frustration about these developments, stating: “This is the politics of gentrification, of race, of class. As these White parents are moving in, they don’t want to have this program, where these—quote, unquote—bad black boys from all over the city go.”⁵ Although Mrs. Jackson was very displeased with learning about the resistance of the program, she felt that she could convince the community members to change their minds.

She explained to the parents that Hall ES would be a stronger school if it could keep the two teachers and two paraprofessionals assigned to the self-contained program. She spoke at community meetings and shared her ideas. In one meeting, she told community members, “I know we can do it better here than someplace else, I didn’t want to keep the program [as is] but those are our kids and we know what’s best for them. We will figure it out.” Unfortunately, Mrs. Jackson was not successful in keeping the self-contained program at Hall ES. The district decided to close one of the two classrooms in the program and moved the remaining classroom to a different school. All the students in the self-contained program with the majority of their instructional day inside the self-contained program were sent to other schools. Of the 16 who started in the program at the beginning of the year, only six remained in a placement that was more than 50% of the day outside of the regular classroom. One parent demanded her child stay at the school, so the student’s IEP was changed and the student was enrolled at Hall ES for the following school year. Although Hall was successful in moving 11 of the 16 students out the self-contained program, Mrs. Jackson was unhappy with the district’s decision and felt that the change had a negative impact on many of the teachers who had worked so hard to support the students from the self-contained program.

Mrs. Jackson predicted she could find herself in other situations where her approach to serving the needs of the poor and disadvantaged students enrolled at Hall ES would be at odds with some of the newer residents. She felt the new community members would continue to push for issues and reforms that might not be socially just and noted that if this occurred again, she intended to make decisions that would meet students’ needs rather than respond to community demands.⁶

Like Mrs. Kraft, Mrs. Jackson faced additional dilemmas in her work. The following year's budget reduced her staff allocation. She had hoped to use the teachers and paraprofessionals from the self-contained program in the upcoming year to further promote inclusion and give more students access to the regular classroom, but she lost those staff members and was forced to make decisions about a number of other positions. Lane ES lost one special education teacher because of budget constraints. Mrs. Jackson confronted the challenge of deciding whether to cut the school's librarian or the assistant principal to keep the second special education teacher on staff. In the end she cut the assistant principal's position although she felt it would have a negative impact on staff morale and the quality of professional development.

Discussion

Each leader in this study demonstrated a commitment to implementing inclusion at a school-wide level, had previous teaching experience with students with disabilities, maintained a heightened sense of awareness related to the marginalization of students with disabilities, and worked in a high-poverty urban school with a history of segregating students with disabilities.

Previous research has reported on social justice leadership issues related to the inclusion of marginalized groups and on the actions, values, and orientations of social justice leadership but has rarely focused on the challenges and dilemmas in that work. In this article, we have begun to document the leadership actions of school leaders engaged in social justice work in districts fraught with inequity. We have described some of the leadership challenges and resulting dilemmas that two elementary principals faced when leading from a social justice orientation. Table 3 summarizes these issues and dilemmas.

Both Mrs. Kraft and Mrs. Jackson spent their careers working with students with disabilities, and both were trained and experienced in the field of special education, unlike many school leaders. They embraced inclusive values, recognizing that students with disabilities should be included in the regular classroom not only in order to comply with IDEA but also because they need experiences with their nondisabled peers in order to be successful. These values led both leaders to reorganize their schools to foster inclusive cultures and values. Both leaders also actively challenged forms of resistance to inclusion that persisted within the school, throughout the district, and in the community. We have also shown that although such actions could be viewed as evidence of social justice leadership, other actions taken by the principals in response to challenges and dilemmas of forwarding inclusion of students with disabilities might not be viewed so. Our findings are consistent with research noted in our literature review that confirms an increasing part

Table 3. Contradictory District Policies That Impact Leadership.

Challenges	Issue(s)	Dilemma(s)
Ongoing enrollment	New students with disabilities continue to enroll throughout the school year posing an increased burden on special education teachers to deliver specialized instruction to a continually growing caseload.	Should school leaders continue to follow a district policy even if it limits the school's ability to appropriately serve all students with IEPs?
Budget	Budget cuts negatively impact the school culture or the prospects of staffing a school to successfully implement inclusion.	Should school leaders add staff to support an inclusion program but in doing so eliminate other meaningful programs?
Community	Some parents of students with IEPs in more restrictive placements are resistant to the idea of inclusion.	How do school leaders address a portion of the community that has discomfort with a marginalized group of students attending the school?
	Segments of a community are feeling discomfort around a program that brings students with emotional disturbances from all over the school district into their neighborhood school.	How do school leaders engage with parents who do not want their children in less restrictive placements even when such a placement is appropriate and when more restrictive placements impacts the efficiency?
Student behavior	A minority of students with disabilities, particularly those with emotional and behavioral disabilities, struggled when placed in less restrictive environments and as a result disrupted other students' learning.	How do school leaders balance a need for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities to have access to their peers while ensuring classrooms are safe and efficiently utilizing instructional time?

of school leadership is about handling dilemmas. We argue that this is particularly the case when considering evidence of social justice leadership. This is because in its practice, dilemmas often arise from conflicts between

recognition and redistribution principles of social justice work. These principles can come into conflict when leaders attempt to simultaneously address issues of inequality of resources for and nonrecognition of marginalized groups.

Such conflicts arose for both Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Kraft because students with disabilities had been historically provided with unequal resources and recognition in relation to their nondisabled peers. Both leaders attempted to establish more inclusive school cultures that recognized all students, but once particular challenges surfaced, school leaders met serious dilemmas. For example, after numerous behavioral infractions by some students classified as having emotional and behavioral disabilities, both leaders with the support of IEP teams decided to move some students back into their previous placements. The leaders were forced to reckon with potential safety issues, the impact of frustrated teachers on the overall reform, and the educational outcomes for all students. In doing so, Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Kraft redistributed the school resources to better support for students with disabilities who thrived in inclusive settings and the rest of the general student population at the expense of a subgroup of students with disabilities who struggled with behavior. They hoped that their decisions would maximize instructional time and increase the chances of making inclusion a success. Both leaders recognized that their decisions further marginalized some students with severe behavioral and emotional disabilities, which, in turn, created a marginalized group within an already marginalized group.

Their responses to the dilemmas of recognition and redistribution and their final decisions under difficult circumstances raise questions about their social justice orientation. Should Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Kraft even be characterized as social justice leaders? Mrs. Kraft's attempts to persuade new parents to enroll students with disabilities in other schools could be described as socially unjust. Yet such a judgment does not fully account for the context in which she made those attempts. ECPS was a district historically entrenched in inequity for students with disabilities. The district was embattled in numerous lawsuits, focused on filling seats rather than ensuring students had access to a continuum of placements; it lacked any substantive inclusion policy, provided only limited guidance or professional support, and offered only limited resources to staff schools appropriately for inclusion. Many of the district policies contradicted one another. For example, the district promoted inclusion at a general level through broad policy language yet maintained self-contained programs that continually enrolled new students in the program if a school changed the placement of the students to access to the regular classroom.

This district context profoundly influenced school practices and priorities. Mrs. Kraft and Mrs. Jackson both came to work in schools that had

historically separated grade level teachers and special education teachers. Prior to their appointments, all instruction in their schools had been planned and delivered separately. Both leaders observed classrooms where teachers and staff maintained deficit perspectives of students with disabilities, lacked skills to develop instruction suitable for a diverse group of students, and only provided instruction on grade level. Many teachers in their schools taught with the view that students should “sink or swim” rather than attempting to address students levels of learning while seeking to bring them up to grade level.

Our analysis led us to consider a number of questions. First, we wonder if leaders can maintain their social justice orientations in practice when tested with such overwhelming circumstances or whether they are forced to make tradeoffs. Seen in this light, perhaps we should view both Mrs. Kraft and Mrs. Jackson as struggling principals who work hard but at times don't live up to their own standards and values. Our findings raise another important question: Can leaders be socially just but only partially successful in their work? Theoharis's (2007) study of social justice leadership found that challenges slowed the pace of reform. In our study, the principals faced numerous internal and external forces that were discouraging and slowed the progress of their social justice work. While Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Kraft both made progress in including students with disabilities in regular classes, achievement gaps were not closed. Mrs. Kraft's school failed to make academic gains on state-mandated assessments at a school level and did not close the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers.

Some might question whether Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Kraft should be considered social justice leaders. Certainly we might ask if these principals could have done more to promote inclusion, but we hold a different view. Instead of asking questions about whether or not the principals in this study should be classified as social justice leaders, we seek to move the conversation beyond branding leaders as “social justice leaders.” We believe this is critically important because the gritty experiences of social justice work, particularly under the most difficult circumstances, do not always result in positive outcomes, at least not in the short term. The fact that persistent historical and structural marginalization not only exists but is pervasive in education underscores the fact that eliminating inequities is an ongoing struggle rather than a singular battle fought and won over the course of a school year. In reality, principals leading for social justice experience the physical, mental, and emotional ups and downs of the work, press on while engaging in ongoing battles inside and outside of the school, and learn new lessons based on past experiences. Principals that continue to engage in social justice work are truly heroic but at times imperfect, especially while leading under immensely challenging conditions.

Implications

Researchers should continue to investigate the experiences of leaders with social justice orientations and examine how challenging contextual features of schools, districts, and other entities create complex dilemmas of leadership. These studies should explore the leadership actions employed to establish socially just schools, leadership dilemmas, and the personal commitments and orientations of leaders engaged in the work. Researchers should also push forward in more practitioner-oriented endeavors. To date, educational researchers have done little to investigate or understand district-level policies that help to substantiate such inequitable circumstances in schools (DeMatthews, 2013). For special education and inclusion, this means examining district assessment and placement policies, budget allocations, how special education teachers are allocated based on student population size and intensity of need, and competing organizational priorities such as exiting class action lawsuits. Similar investigations should be conducted in areas that relate to other marginalized groups, such as ELLs. Without a robust understanding of such district-level policies, the relevance of social justice leadership research for practitioners will be limited.

Our research also contributes to debates on how principals should be prepared and professionally supported throughout their careers. In our study, in part, a key element of both leaders' sense of commitment toward inclusion was related to their experiences as special education teachers in challenging situations. When leaders take action but meet challenges and resistance, their commitments enabled them to continue. Unfortunately, principals rarely take active leadership roles in the area of special education because most leaders have limited knowledge of issues related to special education and students with disabilities (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Obviously, not every school leader can have years of special education teaching experiences similar to the principals described in this study but preparation and in-service professional development programs can ensure that all leaders receive the appropriate training in special education areas including: (a) assessment, evaluation, and placement, (b) policies, laws, and court decisions, (c) best practices at the classroom level and school level, and (d) an understanding the IEP. In addition, programs can engage future leaders in endeavors where they lack specific expertise so that in practice, principals will not shy away from particular leadership responsibilities where they have limited experience or knowledge.

Both current and future school leaders also need to develop the ability to identify areas of inequity that may extend beyond their previous experiences or areas of expertise. Leaders should have practice using emerging social justice tools, such as equity audits (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2006), that can

assist in identifying and addressing inequities in schools. Social justice leadership frameworks or models (e.g. Brown, 2004; Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Furman, 2012; McKenzie et al., 2008) can be used to guide the development of programs or as tools to analyze case studies in order to stimulate awareness of inequities in schools and how to address these issues. Finally, we want to point out that although we have provided a glimpse of the challenges Mrs. Kraft and Mrs. Jackson faced, we have certainly not captured the dedication, the fighting spirit, and the persistence of these two leaders in the efforts they made to forward inclusion each day, every week, and all school year.

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Notes

1. Cluster programs were designated within certain schools for students with specific disability types (e.g. autism, intellectual disability, deaf/blind, and emotional disturbance).
2. The regular class and the general education classroom describe the same education placement. Both refer to the general education classroom. Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Kraft use these terms interchangeably in quotes. As much as possible, this article has selected to refer to this setting as the regular classroom.
3. The two self-contained programs at Hall Elementary School consisted of two classrooms. Each student in the program had IEPs that designated the entire instructional day outside of the general education classroom.
4. Two parents were unwilling to have their children's IEP change in any way. Both students were sent to Hall's self-contained program through a hearing officer decision.
5. Mrs. Jackson used the phrase "White parents" but noted that it was not simply race but rather interplay between race and class.
6. New community members also advocated for the elimination of remedial reading and math interventions and for the development of foreign-language immersion programs and advanced coursework.

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