

BUILDING HOPE,



GIVING AFFIRMATION

**LEARNING COMMUNITIES THAT ADDRESS
SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES
BRING EQUITY TO THE CLASSROOM**



By Stephanie Hirsh and Shirley M. Hord

A school that ensures that all students — regardless of race, creed, color, socioeconomic status, gender, or disabilities — have access to and receive the highest-quality education has achieved a key measure of social justice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Curren, 2009). Since the most significant factor in whether students learn well is quality teaching (Haycock & Crawford, 2008; Peske & Haycock, 2006), and teaching is enhanced through continuous professional development (Hord, 2009; Hord, 2010), the link between social justice and professional learning is undeniable.

Teachers cannot promote social justice if they do not have the knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes necessary to ensure success for all students. Principals cannot lead a school committed to social justice if they do not believe in social justice and promote a vision for advancing it in a high-performing school, with the knowledge of how to prioritize resources and support the needs of faculty.

Social justice advocates posit that successful academic achievement alone does not address inequities that occur as a result of the “isms” of racism, oppression, and others (Sensoy & Diangelo, 2009). At the same time, the goals of a successful education are not defined solely as academic achievement, but include proficiencies related to participatory membership in a democratic society. As Trueba (1998) so elegantly stated, “Perhaps the main dream of our democracy is that education is for all and that education can empower all peoples to participate in our democratic structures and make an important contribution to our society” (p. 166). Additional goals are the development of capacities and confidence to conduct oneself responsibly in support of one’s own well-being; the ability to contribute to the well-being of others whose circumstances bar them

from completing successful attainment of well-being for themselves; and facilitating the translation of the society’s beliefs and values to upcoming generations, ensuring community service and social justice are maintained and remain an integral part of society’s fabric (Arneson, 2007).

To contribute to this robust vision for schooling, there must be a consideration of the value systems that educators bring. When educators grow to the point that they can see “the light in the eyes of their students as evidence that they are capable and worthy human beings, then schools can become places of hope and affirmation for students of all backgrounds and all situations” (Nieto, 1999, p. 176). Professional development must include appropriate content, use effective designs, and strengthen the context necessary to sustain these efforts.

IDENTIFYING CONTENT

Schools that are successful at achieving such a vision are places where all staff are members of a community committed to professional learning. In the learning community’s work, the faculty is focused on what data about student academic performance and other measures tell them (Hord & Hirsh, 2008; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). They examine all data from multiple perspectives to determine where gaps exist (Guerra & Nelson, 2007). Then they establish a purposeful learning agenda that will support their own acquisition of new knowledge and skills to assist all students.

Well-intentioned teachers can be committed to great teaching, and still the beliefs, habits, and strategies they have adopted over the years may work against them. As an example, there are skillful teachers who view slowing the pace of instruction as an appropriate strategy for serving struggling students. And yet research reports that acceleration, not remediation, has a greater impact (Coalition for Student Success, 2009). There are teachers who lower expectations because of students’ home living circumstances. Exposing and discussing these issues as a faculty can expose

misinterpretations of research and ultimately strengthen the community’s commitment to the school vision for social justice (DeMulder, Ndura-Ouédraogo, & Stribling, 2009).

When a school staff limits its learning goals to academic performance only, the data analyses and subsequent decisions for learning may be a bit easier. But when social justice as an outcome is added to the mix, the content needs to expand, as do the data examined. In addition to understanding literacy, math, or differentiation strategies, for example, principals and teachers must understand the foundation and requirements for social justice. Such learning is not just about appreciating racial or class differences; it is about helping all staff to identify and understand the impact of organizational and individual practices on each person — staff and students, those in the majority and those in the minority (Berman, Chambliss, & Geiser, 1999).

Three critical questions guide the selection of content for professional development, and the social justice lens raises several other integral questions (see box below).

- To what degree are educators able to use the content to capitalize on the unique qualities of each student; create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments; and demonstrate high expectations for all students?
- To what degree do educators possess deep content knowledge, expertise in rich instructional strategies, and ability to develop and use appropriate classroom-based assessments?
- To what degree are educators prepared to engage families in support of students’ outcomes? (NSDC, 2001).

In exploring these questions, staff select new practices that accommodate academic performance and social justice goals. Then the faculty determines learning outcomes, the policies they want to examine, the teaching strategies they want to be able to implement in classrooms, as well as how they will monitor and assess the impact of their efforts.

LEARNING IN COMMUNITY

Under the best circumstances, schoolwide staff learning promotes collaboration, joint responsibility, and implementation of a compelling vision for teacher and student performance. Team learning at the grade level or subject area increases consistency across classrooms and helps teachers address challenges associated with grade-level or content-specific learning objectives (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hirsh & Hord, 2008).

Learning team members work together to apply schoolwide learning to their classrooms and their students. Some begin by determining where students are struggling, and planning how to apply new schoolwide learning to those challenges. Some wait to see how schoolwide learning supports their own cycle of improvement. When the learning teams identify student learning needs, they can isolate their own learning questions and create their own learning agenda.

As they increase their knowledge and skills, team members design new lessons for students based on a stronger understanding of the content and the skills their students need to achieve academic and social justice outcomes. Together they test the lessons and critique them afterward, looking for ways to improve them. They create classroom assessments to determine if new strategies produced desired results. And when they do not, they identify additional strategies for reteaching and reinforcing. When they feel confident their students have mastered the desired objectives or content, they repeat the cycle with another set of objectives or unit of study, each time identifying new learning priorities that lead to improved instruction and student growth (Lewis, Perry, & Hurd, 2004; Perry & Lewis, 2009).

SELECTING LEARNING PROCESSES

How educators approach their own learning is key to successful implementation of any new program and/or strategy (Hall & Hord, 2010). Schoolwide and grade-level teams increase the likelihood of successful social justice implementation by addressing questions related to social justice and adult learning. Questions may include:

- How will educators acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to implement the strategies successfully?
- How will the learning be monitored and evaluated?
- How will educators be supported throughout the change process?
- How will the relationships within the school be leveraged to advance implementation?
- And, importantly, who is going to ask these hard questions and monitor the tough conversations?

If the learning community is committed to substantive change in knowledge, skills, and dispositions, then research suggests that teams will need to set aside time for traditional workshop learning supported by follow-up coaching sessions (Joyce

What do we need to learn to become socially just?	Are multiple goals influenced by the selection of a particular content learning agenda?	Does the content take into consideration the many student differences and challenges teachers face in classrooms and provide accommodations for them?	Are teacher needs for working with children of different backgrounds met?	Does the content facilitate teacher reflection?	Does the content prepare students to become empowered citizens?	Do the system’s policies support equitable access of appropriate content that advances learning for all?
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& Showers, 2003). Workshop learning is used as a broad term to include sessions with experts, colleagues, or external assistance providers. While some teachers may be able to acquire and demonstrate new knowledge and skills without some form of organized learning, most teachers will require such learning and support in order to develop a foundation for making instructional and philosophical changes. If schoolwide changes about attitudes and expectations are a desired outcome, then settings that convene the entire staff for hard conversations and facilitated dialogue may be necessary

first steps. This fulfills the need to support and guide staff to look deeply into their beliefs and values, their predispositions and worldviews (Guerra & Nelson, 2009).

While we can start with changing behaviors, if we don't modify beliefs about our children's needs and what is truly required to provide them social justice, we will make changes at the superficial level and will not initiate nor sustain true and lasting change (Guerra & Nelson, 2009). Once new knowledge and skills are deeply implemented, there are many options for rein-

forcing their application through different modes of continuous professional development: learning team meetings, classroom observations, support groups, peer coaching, classroom walk-throughs, and more.

ASSESSING PROGRESS

Establishing goals for professional learning is key to ensuring results. Team members can move from goals to setting benchmarks that will demonstrate they are making appropriate progress. They can determine what documentation will serve as evidence of progress. If changes in teacher beliefs and practices are expected, they may develop Innovation Configurations (Hall & Hord, 2010), a road map that will allow each staff member to understand what the innovation looks like in practice, and what it will potentially mean for the entire school. If changes in student achievement are expected, they will create formative and summative assessments to provide feedback necessary to know if they are on track. Grade-level and subject-matter teams can use student work as another indicator of staff and students' sense of efficacy.

SUPPORTING CHANGE

How will educators be supported through the emotional and psychological aspects of making change? The school learn-

ing community has many strategies to draw from to support teachers from all backgrounds and at all stages. These strategies include organizing support groups to discuss challenges or calling on a coach to assist with implementation or provide feedback. While there may be predictable patterns of beliefs and behaviors that educators transcend through the change process, the community will be able to access multiple strategies to assist themselves in dealing with the technical and personal challenges associated with change (Hall & Hord, 2010).

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Finally, how will the relationships within the school be leveraged to advance implementation? The potential impact of any change initiative is only as powerful as the number of staff members committed, as well as the depth of expertise (Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010). Implementation must be supported at the school's leadership level as well as the grade and/or subject level (Hall & Hord, 2010; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Without the support of colleagues at all levels who commit to mutual accountability to all students, there is little incentive or pressure to work through what is necessary to achieve success with the innovation (Hord et al., 2010). Trust and transparency should permeate the community and allow for each voice (Bryk & Schneider, 2004). Each person must feel empowered to speak; the outliers must have a voice and be listened to, with the opportunity for others to exert persuasion.

CREATING A CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

To support learning, the real work of those collaborating in professional learning communities, all teams require a supportive culture to assist them in their efforts to achieve goals that reach beyond academics. When examining the culture, key questions emerge:

- How does the school organize itself for the purpose of professional learning?
- How do leaders responsible for guiding professional learning go about this work?
- Do leaders themselves have a social justice lens through which they anchor their work (Berman & Chambliss, 2000)?
- How are resources allocated to support the learning agenda that advances the social justice agenda?

The responses to these questions are embedded in the research-based components of professional learning communities identified by Hord (2004).

A pursuit of social justice begins with educators' self-examination and results in not only acknowledging content needs and learning gaps, but recognizing where they lack a deep understanding regarding society, their students, their students' circumstances, and what students need from schools and teachers to be successful. A social justice lens inspires more questions:

- What system policies and power structures are prohibiting our students from being truly successful in these areas?

Forthcoming book

This article is adapted with permission from the forthcoming book, *Educational Leaders Encouraging the Intellectual and Professional Capacity of Others: A Social Justice Agenda* by Elizabeth Murakami-Ramalho and Anita Pankake.

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- At what level do we believe our students can achieve the vision and goals we have set forth for them?
- What do we need from everyone — administrators, parents, community — to achieve this vision (NSDC, 2001)?

COMMUNITY PROVIDES THE RIGHT CONTEXT

The community of professional learners is a self-organizing entity, characterized by democratic participation of all members, teachers, and administrators (Hord & Hirsh, 2009). This participation promotes sharing power, authority, and decision making, one of the research-based components of the professional learning community. This is not the typical positional leader's behavior, but it is foundational to the professional learning community and to a community committed to social justice (McKenzie et al., 2008). In terms of achieving social justice, sharing power, authority, and decision making allows for all voices to be expressed — and counted — creating a place to initiate equity (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005).

In these and other ways, the context of a community of professional learners fosters the ideals of social justice. Leaders will elaborate especially on the imperative of uncovering and changing inequities (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004) through the articulation of a challenging yet attainable vision. They do this while engaging the entire community with all its perspectives. The result is a more complete vision for students that demands a more complex learning agenda for staff.

We close with the belief that the culture created by a community of professional learners can nurture social justice and directly contribute to social justice for students and staff of the school. A school organized to support schoolwide as well as team-based professional learning offers a powerful setting for social justice to grow, develop, and impact the school's citizens.

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