



Leadership for social justice in Hong Kong schools

Addressing mechanisms of inequality

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to instigate a focused dialogue of social justice in Hong Kong schools and of the responsibilities this holds for school leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors draw on economic, psychological, and sociological research to illustrate how the unequal allocation of resources and school status hierarchies affects students and challenges leaders' understandings and actions.

Findings – This article identifies several contextual factors prevalent in Hong Kong that maintain inequality and then applies research findings to explain how these discriminate against both disadvantaged and advantaged students. To address social justice issues, school leaders can start by understanding these inequality mechanisms, their own values and beliefs, and those prevalent in their communities. Then, they can introduce structural and cultural changes to reduce inequality.

Originality/value – This article exposes several mechanisms that sustain inequality in Hong Kong schools and suggests how leaders can address them through specific pragmatic actions.

Keywords Social justice, Leadership, Hong Kong

Paper type Conceptual paper

Multiple institutionalized inequalities riddle the Hong Kong school system and challenge school leaders seeking to promote social justice. A dynamic amalgam of Hong Kong's colonial history and enduring cultural traditions have embedded an education system built largely around stratification and ingrained inequality within its society. Although widely acknowledged in political and educational circles, few research articles have targeted these issues or their influence on student learning and their later lives. Even less attention has been given to the role of school leaders in addressing inequality at an organizational level. Therefore, this article aims to instigate a focused dialogue of social justice in Hong Kong schools and of the responsibilities this holds for school leaders.

The article has three main sections. The first section introduces the concept of social justice in schools, the importance of leadership, and the Hong Kong context. Although necessarily brief, this segment provides the background for the discussion that follows. In the second section, a discussion of economic, psychological, and sociological studies illustrates how unequal allocation of resources and inbuilt school status hierarchies affect

- disadvantaged students; and
- all students.

Inequality is at least partly dependent on a school-based awareness of and sensitivity to the *status quo*. While acknowledging the difficulty of ingrained systemic allocation mechanisms and societal norms, the third section discusses strategies Hong Kong school leaders might use to reduce disadvantages and promote social justice.



School leadership and social justice

Social justice is primarily concerned with positively equalizing and improving the opportunities and prospects for disadvantaged and disaffected members of our societies. Disadvantage is often linked to race, ethnicity, culture, social class, wealth, gender, family structure, sexual orientation, age, and disability. Deeply embedded at multiple levels across most societies, inequity carries similar detrimental consequences regardless of context. However, just as cultural and social structures and accompanying mores differ across societies, so do understandings of what constitutes inequity and the extent to which it is accepted. As Furman and Shields (2005, p. 124) note:

Diverse meanings of social justice are constructed by members of a given community, drawing from their understandings of the historical context, their present circumstances, and the moral purposes of their organizational contexts.

In schools, social justice is about working to reduce student disadvantages at the classroom, organization, family, community, and broader societal levels. The interconnections among disadvantages across multiple levels stubbornly obstruct the educational and social progress of individuals and sub-groups. Given their pivotal positions in schools, leaders can reduce inequality through their leadership and through the communities they work to engender. While calling for social justice to be elevated in the school leadership research, Furman and Shields (2005, p. 128) constructed an “interactive model of social justice, democratic community, and learning”. Their model explicitly focuses on moral and ethical leadership, context and community, democracy, pedagogy, and critique.

The importance of leaders addressing social justice is increasingly prevalent in the education literature (Foster, 1989). An acknowledged pioneer in the area recently affirmed the message by calling for school leadership to be grounded in educative rather than administrative principles. Bates (2006, p. 282) described these principles thus:

[The principles] would be based themselves upon a conception of a learning society which took the development of capabilities centred around ideas of human agency, well-being and freedom as central, thus claiming that the development of a truly democratic free society should be the purpose behind human activity; one to which economic development of societies should be directed.

The Hong Kong context

The meanings associated with social justice in schools are part of the broader policy and societal context. Although space restrictions allow only a brief introduction to this context, a basic understanding helps frame the argument that follows. Thus, we use contextual snapshots to capture the “equity context” of Hong Kong, that is, its structural, procedural, and culturally ingrained inequity. Structural inequity is tied to how education is controlled and how resources are allocated, both centrally and at the school level. Meanwhile, culturally ingrained inequity is the extent to which inequity is embedded within Hong Kong’s dominant value structures and how these manifest in schools.

- The Hong Kong school system developed under British colonisation. While based on the selective British system, its governance structure emerged from a complex mix of cultural and historical factors (see Walker, 2004). Hong Kong did

not fully adopt the British comprehensive system and so retained a highly stratified structure. Despite some recent attempts at reform, the Hong Kong school system continues to separate students by academic ability as determined by norm-referenced tests both across and within schools (Biggs, 1996). Secondary schools are classified into three *bands* based on entering students' primary school academic achievements. Band 1 schools cater to the highest-achieving one-third of students, Band 2 the middle third, and Band 3 the bottom third. Although the banding system somewhat reduces the incentive to track students within schools, schools nonetheless often segregate by ability within year levels and across subjects. Thus, stratification is common both between and within schools, thereby creating layer-upon-layer of inequity.

- Hong Kong has four main types of schools – government, aided, direct subsidy scheme (DSS), and private/independent schools. The first three types are supported by government money and generally follow the banding system. The government fully funds government schools, hires their principals and teachers, and selects their students. In contrast, aided schools are run by non-profit-making sponsoring organizations and hire their own principals and teachers, while being 90 percent supported by government funds. Aided schools can also charge small fees pre-approved by the government (generally less than \$HK3,000, or \$US384 per year) for school activities. DSS schools can charge up to \$HK68,000 (\$US8,707) in annual fees, receive government funding inversely proportional to their tuition, and have greater freedom in selecting students, language of instruction (Cantonese, English, etc.), hiring and remunerating staff, and curriculum. DSS school fees are determined largely by the school's reputation, which is often built on outstanding academic results. Thus, many Band 1 schools have chosen to become DSS schools.
- The Hong Kong government's Education and Manpower Bureau (HK-EMB) directs most students to attend a specific school, specifically 47 percent of primary school students and 81 percent of secondary students enrolled in government or aided schools in 2005 (Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005a, 2006). Also, HK-EMB hires and appoints all primary and secondary school teachers in government schools (Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005b).
- HK-EMB permits a few primary schools and about a quarter of secondary schools to teach in English; others must use Chinese (Cantonese). As English remains the language of "power" and "progression" in post-colonial Hong Kong, parents prefer schools that use English. Thus, these schools often attract the highest-achieving students. Even as falling student numbers threaten the survival of many Hong Kong schools, those using English are relatively unaffected.
- Only DSS and private schools control their curriculum. Aided and government schools typically follow the government's prescribed curriculum (Wong, 2004).
- Like other predominantly Chinese societies, parents value education highly and view it as central to future success and prosperity (Lam *et al.*, 2002). As a result, getting into the best schools is highly competitive.
- Normally hierarchically structured and operated, Hong Kong schools rarely empower teachers, and most decisions follow established formal pathways from top to bottom. Furthermore, decision-power and status inequities are more openly

accepted than in most western societies (a high power-distance culture; Hofstede, 2003). Few schools have meaningful parent participation, and systemic governance is diffuse as a result of the School Sponsoring Body (SBS) system (Walker, 2004).

In sum, Hong Kong education is framed by systemic and organizational stratification. Multiple forms of stratification combine to produce many harmful inequalities in schools. Despite public remonstrations to the contrary by politicians and public officials, this tradition seems too readily accepted by the system and the community at large and too deeply embedded to be easily shifted. Like many other groups, school leaders have yet to realize their potential to promote social justice.

The following section extracts relevant studies to explain some of the most influential dynamics underpinning inequality in Hong Kong schools. Given the dearth of empirical investigation conducted only in Hong Kong, we turn to international studies (that often include Hong Kong). We then consider how school leaders might battle the mechanisms by which inequality operates, and thereby promote social justice.

School inequality mechanisms and effects

Although universal and mandatory schooling has reduced the inequality in student achievement due to family socio-economic status (SES) by over 40 percent (Hanushek and Wöbmann, 2006; see also Blossfeld and Shavit, 1993), children of privileged parents still learn more than other children. As in other countries, privileged parents in Hong Kong use their superior SES (higher incomes, broader social networks, and greater knowledge) to obtain more educational benefits for their children (Chiu and Khoo, 2005). Privileged parents can pay the high tuition needed to enrol their children in elite private schools or hire tutors to help their children perform well on the achievement tests necessary to enter the best public or DSS schools.

Likewise, privileged parents can exploit existing inequalities in schools (or foster new ones) to benefit their children. School inequality manifests itself through both unequal allocation of school resources and steep status hierarchies. Schools that allocate more resources to some groups of students than to other groups of students create an incentive for privileged parents to make their children eligible for the advantaged groups. For example, if schools assign the best teachers to high ability students, privileged parents find ways to get their children assigned to those classes. This can happen through explicit “bribes” of teachers (e.g. Hani, 2005), special favours through social connections with the school staff (cronyism, Lloyd and Blanc, 1996), greater affinity with teachers due to similar social norms or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Heath, 1983; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell’s, 1999 “cultural gatekeeping”), or simply hiring tutors for their children. Not surprisingly, privileged students learn more than other students. According to Sirin’s (2005) meta-analysis, when a student’s family SES exceeds the mean by 10 percent, he or she averages 3 percent higher achievement than other students. However, the achievement gap varies widely, depending on system policies and school leadership.

Next, we examine in greater detail how privileged children benefit through two types of inequality: unequal allocation of resources and status hierarchy (see Figure 1). The initial discussion examines the detrimental effects on disadvantaged students. A later section discusses the harmful effects on all students.

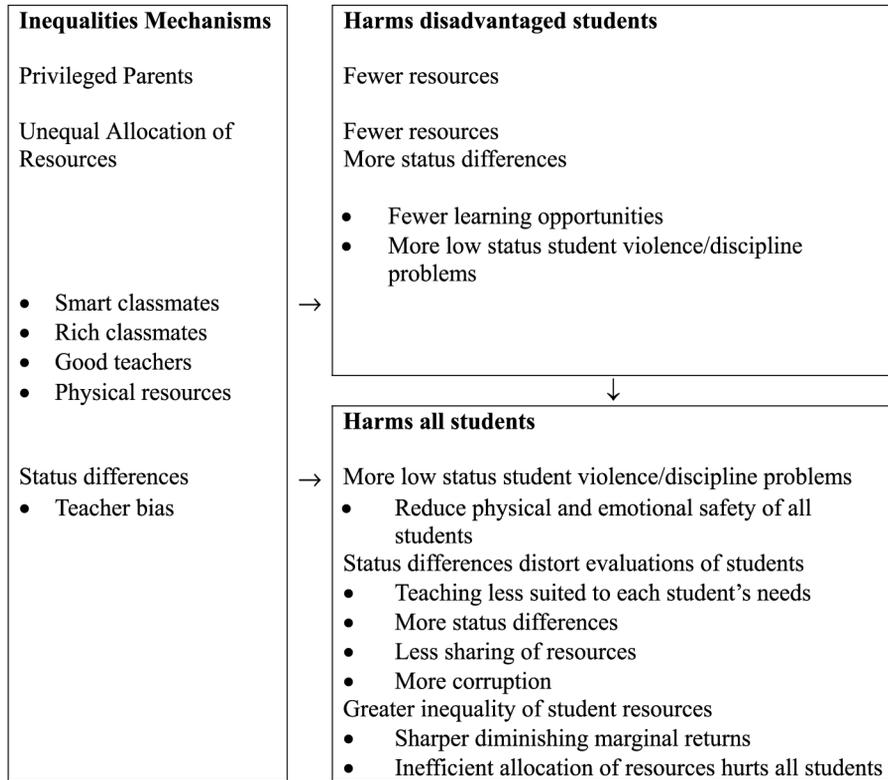


Figure 1.
School inequality mechanisms and their effects on disadvantaged and all students

Resource allocation within schools

Allocation of high-achieving students. Schools allocate many vital resources, including students, teachers, and physical resources. Some schools (or school systems) assign students with similar past achievement scores together in a class (or a school, or a group within a class, also known as tracking, ability grouping, or streaming). In contrast, other schools mix students of different abilities together (mixing). Meta-analyses and international studies (including Hong Kong) show that tracking either has no overall significant effect on student learning (e.g. Ireson and Hallam, 1999; Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2001; Slavin, 1990) or a small negative effect (-1 percent; Hanushek and Wöbmann, 2006). At the same time, tracking increases inequality. Specifically, countries that track have 25 percent greater academic achievement inequality than countries that do not track, controlling for other country-specific factors (Hanushek and Wöbmann, 2006).

The sharper inequality in countries with tracking occurs in part because students with higher-achieving classmates learn more (Ireson and Hallam, 1999; Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2001; Slavin, 1990). Students assigned to high-track classes benefit from their high-achieving classmates' greater intellectual resources, positive academic attitudes, and strong self-discipline (Berends, 1995; Eder, 1981). In contrast, students assigned to a low-track class not only have classmates with fewer intellectual resources

but also face more student misbehaviour. This, in turn, can reduce their sense of psychological safety or comfort in the classroom (Eder, 1981). Tracking is often accompanied by unequal allocation of other educational resources. Higher tracks often have richer students, better teachers, and more/better educational materials.

Clustering rich students together. As ability-grouping creates elite schools or classes, privileged parents often advocate ability grouping and place their children in high track schools or classes (Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2001). Hence, high-track classes have proportionately more high SES students (Gamoran, 1987; Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2001). Students with classmates from higher SES families often enjoy their classmates' greater economic, social and cultural resources. Like other countries, Hong Kong students from higher SES families have superior educational resources, such as books or computers (Chiu and McBride-Chang, 2006; Entwisle and Alexander, 1995) and larger social networks with more highly skilled or educated people (Horvat *et al.*, 2003). In families with more human capital, family conversations often help children acquire cognitive and social skills, and social and cultural norms more effectively (e.g. Ochs *et al.*, 1992). Privileged classmates tend to help a student understand and appreciate the societal and cultural value of schooling, thereby contributing to a class or school culture of higher academic achievement and better discipline (Chiu and McBride-Chang, 2006; Davalos *et al.*, 2005; Willms, 1999). As a result, high track students often benefit from high SES classmates' greater learning resources, while lower-track students often receive fewer learning resources from their low SES classmates.

Better teachers and materials. Teachers are often attracted to the smarter students in higher tracks. Not surprisingly, teachers teaching higher tracks often have higher qualifications, more years of schooling, and more teaching experience (Darling-Hammond and Post, 2000; Oakes, 1985). These positive teacher characteristics are linked to more effective instructional practices in higher tracks. In addition, these teachers tend to have better prepared lessons and promote student learning with greater zeal (Oakes, 1985). In higher tracks, teachers use more complex teaching materials (Oakes, 1990), include more academic courses (Gamoran, 1987; Vanfossen *et al.*, 1987), teach at a faster pace (Oakes, 1990), and lead more stimulating discussions (Grossen, 1996).

In contrast, lower-track students receive fewer explanations and directions regarding teacher expectations and goals, reducing learning opportunities (Evertson, 1982; Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985). These distinct instructional practices might explain the differences in academic performance across high and low track groups (Gamoran, 1987; Grossen, 1996; Van Houtte, 2004). Regardless of a school's tracking policy, its allocation of teachers and physical resources affects the degree of inequality in the school.

School status hierarchies

Allocation of school resources also interacts with a school's status hierarchy to produce inequality. According to *status characteristics* theory, people with higher status receive more attention and other social rewards (Cohen, 1994). Cohen (p. 23) states that schools, like most institutions, have "an agreed-on rank order where it is generally felt to be better to be high than low rank". In other words, a *status hierarchy* is created. In Hong Kong schools with "steep pyramid" status hierarchies, a small group of elite staff and students receive additional resources and social rewards, separating them from others. In contrast, schools with "gentle hill" status hierarchies, resources and social rewards

are shared more equally, so people view one another as more equal. Schools in Hong Kong tend to be steep status hierarchies where leadership is accorded respect and power based on position, while students' status hierarchies are often based on academic achievements (Cheung, 2000).

Steep status hierarchies sharpen the differences among staff and students, tightly aligning people's behaviours with their expectations based on perceived status differences. According to expectation states theory, status is linked to the expectation of competencies for the current activity (Berger *et al.*, 1972; Dembo and McAuliffe, 1987). High status is conferred on people who are expected to contribute positively to a desired outcome. These expectations create different opportunities to perform and receive rewards. Members can selectively invite and defer to high status members' opinions while discouraging, undervaluing, or outright ignoring lower status members' ideas. By doing so, members enact their expectations of high status members dominating the interaction.

High-track students often have higher status, whereas low-track students often have lower status. Thus, teachers and students might have different expectations of these groups and treat them differently. Teachers tend to have higher academic expectations for higher placed students and view them as more teachable (Pallas *et al.*, 1994; Van Houtte, 2004). According to Hallinan and Kubitschek (1999), higher teacher expectations also tend to boost student confidence, resulting in greater goal attainment. In contrast, teachers with low expectations tend to give lower status students tasks that do not sufficiently challenge them, often resulting in both lower motivation and less learning.

In Hong Kong schools, the primary status characteristic is often past achievement, but teachers might also use less related characteristics (diffuse status characteristics) to make assumptions about a person's competence. These elements include gender, socio-economic status, race, and immigrant status (Lockheed *et al.*, 1983; Webb, 1984; Cohen, 1982). Furthermore, teachers tend to prefer interacting with students like themselves (*homophily*; McPherson *et al.*, 2001), and thus are likely to give more attention to these students (called "cultural gate-keeping" by Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Likewise, students can also enact these status expectations to favour high-status classmates over low-status classmates during academic discussions or social interactions, either inside or outside of class (Cohen, 1984; Dembo and McAuliffe, 1987; Kircher and Davis, 1986).

Low status and discipline. In less equal schools, low-status students lack the social standing and self-esteem that teachers and peers value (Sahlins, 1974; Schor, 1998). Thus, low-status students typically have fewer friends and weaker social relationships than high-status students (social capital; Putnam *et al.*, 1993). As peer judgments often affect a student's self-esteem, low-status people often feel both socially and psychologically insecure (Wilkinson, 2004). Low-status students' lack of self-esteem often makes them more vulnerable to feeling disrespected or losing face (Gilligan, 1996). Thus, they react to disrespectful comments with physical violence more often than do higher-status students (Gilligan, 1996; Tracy and Tracy's (1998) "face attacks").

Likewise, schools that give privileged students more resources (better equipment, better teachers, and so on) can fuel disadvantaged students' resentment of privileged students (Goldsmith, 2004). This inequality undermines the legitimacy of the school's authority (Henze *et al.*, 2000). As disadvantaged students become less likely to respect school authority or rules, they are more likely to violate school rules and misbehave (Arum, 2003).

Thus far, we have focused on how inequality harms low achieving or low SES students. However, school inequality (as manifested through unequal allocation of school resources and steep status hierarchies) also harms *all* students (not only disadvantaged students) through discipline problems, distorted evaluations of students, less social solidarity, more corruption, and diminishing marginal returns. This is true even in Hong Kong where schools tend to be more academically homogenous than in some other societies. Inequality in these terms is a matter of degree. For example, a Band 2 school still has a significant range of abilities and other differences.

How inequality mechanisms hurt all students

Student discipline distracts all students. First, the poorer discipline of disadvantaged students can spill over into the general student population. Greater student discipline problems can heighten all students' concerns over their physical and emotional safety. Distracted from their studies by safety concerns, students often have lower academic achievement (e.g. DeBaryshe *et al.*, 1993).

Distorted evaluations of students' competencies and needs. A steep status hierarchy might also harm all students. When staff and students enact their status expectations, they tend to be less aware of all students' actual competencies and weaknesses (Ferguson, 2003). For example, teachers might tend to overlook high-track students' weaknesses or underestimate low-track students' strengths. Furthermore, students might likewise reduce lower status students' participation opportunities and distort evaluations of one another's ideas through the greater influence of high status members (Cohen, 1984; Dembo and McAuliffe, 1987; Kircher and Davis, 1986).

Less similarity, less social solidarity. People prefer to befriend and interact with others of similar gender, age, status, and so on (homophily; McPherson *et al.*, 2001). Within a steeper status hierarchy, teachers and students differ more and feel less social solidarity with one another. As a result, they are less likely to befriend one another, share resources, or help one another, thereby yielding less learning (Chiu, 2007).

Corruption. In less equal schools, people feel less social solidarity, trust one another less, and are more willing to pursue selfish gain at the expense of others, so staff and students tend to be more corrupt (Uslaner, 2004). When corrupt people steal from the school system, they take away educational resources from all students, resulting in fewer learning opportunities and less learning (Chiu, 2007; Segal, 2005; Williams, 2005). Corruption can also reallocate more educational resources within the school system to the elite (typically the rich) at the expense of others (typically the poor; Uslaner, 2004), which can further exacerbate the unequal distribution of school resources, increase disadvantaged students' resentment, reduce the legitimacy of school authority, increase student discipline problems, and ultimately harm all students (Chiu, 2007; Chiu and Khoo, 2005).

Diminishing marginal returns. Inequality can also lower overall student achievement due to diminishing marginal returns. Consider a thirsty girl and two glasses of water. She highly values the first glass of water and drinks it all. Her thirst quenched, she does not value the second glass of water as much and does not finish it. The lower value of the additional glass of water is an example of diminishing marginal returns (Mankiw, 2004). Hence, an extra book (or any other educational resource) benefits poor students (with few books) more than rich students (with many books). With less equality, poorer students often have fewer resources, resulting in less

learning overall (Chiu and Khoo, 2005). Thus, schools that allocate more resources to richer students exacerbate the effect of existing family inequalities. Because of diminishing marginal returns, greater inequality likely reduces the efficiency of resource allocation, which lowers the overall achievement of all students.

Inequality also shows non-linear negative effects and hurts the poorest students' learning disproportionately (Chiu, 2007). Hence, taking away resources from poor children has a multiplicative effect (like pushing disadvantaged students off a cliff), rather than a linear effect (like pushing them down a flight of stairs).

In sum, students who receive more family or school resources have more learning opportunities on which they can capitalize to learn more (Amato, 2001; Entwisle and Alexander, 1995; Horvat *et al.*, 2003). Students with higher status receive more attention and other social rewards from other students and school staff (Cohen, 1994). Lastly, greater inequality can hurt all students through less social solidarity among students and school staff, more corruption, less motivation, more student discipline problems, and diminishing marginal returns (Chiu, 2007; Wilkinson, 2004).

Leadership and the promotion of social justice in Hong Kong

Given the palpable inequities within Hong Kong schools, it is incumbent upon the principal and other school leaders to work tangibly to promote social justice. However, concrete actions by a single or small group of actors, regardless of their position or power, only becomes meaningful if these actions are based on a clear set of authentic, just values shared within the school community. We suggest that reducing inequality in schools requires leaders to clarify understandings of their own value stances and those within their communities and; and to focus change efforts simultaneously on structural and cultural mechanisms. After briefly introducing the importance of Hong Kong leaders' understanding of their school communities and themselves, we suggest some strategies they may use to address the mechanisms which support inequality (see Table I).

The ongoing construction and reconstruction of school communities in Hong Kong is at the heart of addressing social justice. The type of community which describes the school determines the types of decisions made, how resources are allocated, relationships understood, and learning promoted. Furman and Shields (2005, p. 130) suggest a dynamic conceptual frame which attempts to pull together democratic community (the communal dimension), social justice (the contextual dimension), learning (the pedagogical dimension) and leadership (the moral and ethical dimension). These are tied together by what they label the processual dimension:

Inequality mechanisms	Leadership strategies
Unequal allocation of resources	More equal allocation of resources Randomly allocate students to classes Reassign teachers across grades, courses and levels
Status differences	Eliminate tracking Creating a caring school community
Teacher bias	Institute broader system of rewards Articulate clear goals and standards
Perceptions of bias	Institute more transparent decision making

Table I.
Addressing inequality mechanisms with suitable leadership strategies

Our frame suggests a “processual striving” toward social justice in schools. The process of deep democracy – open inquiry, communication, and collaboration, combined with sensitivity, respect, and absolute regard – are key.

To build a socially just community, principals must confront and clarify their own values and recognise both the state and shape of their communities within and beyond formal school boundaries and how school life and expectations interact with social inequities. Shields (2004, p. 126) stresses that leaders take responsibility for understanding and communicating that “some students come from difficult or impoverished family situations, some are not fluent in language”. In sum, the building of just communities in Hong Kong schools calls for deeper leader understanding of self and community, and of how the present system too often promulgates inequality. As such, individual and collective development may best be pictured as an ongoing, communal learning process. For this learning to happen in the complex, often socially and financially disadvantaged nature of many school contexts suggests that a deeper understanding of community is essential for reducing inequality (Walker and Chen, 2007). A prerequisite to reducing inequality then is that the leaders consciously seek to learn about themselves through clarifying and articulating their values. Until this understanding is sharpened, changes might remain superficial.

Inequality is often hidden deep within preconceived notions of the world and how schools work. Consciously seeking deeper knowledge of self helps leaders challenge their existing worldviews and determine how and where they see themselves in schools. Inequality must be “seen” before it can be countered. However, it is not just a matter of seeing inequality, but of more clearly understanding one’s place in its maintenance. Given the structural and cultural inequality in place in Hong Kong schools, leaders tend to view the *status quo* as the norm, perhaps not even as inequities. Change cannot emerge unless such assumptions are openly faced and subsequently challenged by leaders themselves, as well as by and in their communities. We now turn to some strategic actions leaders may employ to address inequality, countering the mechanisms discussed in the previous section.

Implications

Change is dependent upon the more equal allocation of resources and the reduction of status differences. School communities are unlikely to become more sensitive to issues of social justice unless the formal processes and structures which restrict equity are changed. As Starratt (2005, p. 127) states: “educational leaders must ensure that the structures and processes that support and channel the learning process (must) reflect a concern for justice and fairness for all students”. Meaningful structural reallocation, however, must be accompanied by a concomitant shift of organization values, particularly in terms of established status differentials and expectations. Structural, procedural, and cultural linkages must be approached simultaneously within a broader community building exercise.

Hong Kong principals can apply at least two interrelated resource allocation mechanisms to promote social justice. First, leaders can allocate students, teachers and physical resources more equally. Although rare in Hong Kong secondary schools, principals may randomize the allocation of students across courses and multiple classes rather than grouping students by ability (within or across classes). The random allocation of students also helps overcome the practice of assigning the best teachers to

the highest achieving and/or more privileged students, hinders iniquitous allocation of resources to the same groups, and reduces ingrained perceptions of unfairness (Chiu and Khoo, 2005).

Second, principals can assign capable teachers to a variety of grade levels and subjects. Even if principals cannot randomize student allocation, the reallocation of teachers reduces the likelihood that the best teachers only teach the best students in the highest grades (Darling-Hammond and Post, 2000). By teaching multiple grades, teachers instruct the same students in different classes across different years. Thus, teachers have fewer students under their charge over time and can devote more time to each student, yielding closer teacher-student relationships (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Shifting values is more difficult than altering structures, but neither can endure without the other. Hence, Hong Kong principals seeking social justice must also reduce status differences and expectations. We propose five strategies to do so: eliminate tracking, create a caring school community, institute a broader system of rewards, articulate clear goals and standards, and make decisions more transparent.

- (1) Eliminating tracking increases student contact time across ability and family SES levels. This fosters diverse friendships and can flatten the status hierarchy (Hallinan and Williams, 1989; Joyner and Kao, 2000; Quillian and Campbell, 2003).
- (2) Closer teacher-student relationships are the building blocks for a caring community (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Similarly, joint activities among students with suitable teacher guidance (e.g. cooperative learning during lessons, extra-curricular teams, etc.) increase student contact with one another, which can help foster a culture of cooperation (Gutierrez *et al.*, 1999). Care for students encompasses more than worrying about academic grades, discipline lapses, or even attendance – these are often more about schools and teacher agendas than those of students. Care as used here is about looking ahead to student mobility, increasing life chances, and understanding how communities, groups, or individuals are disadvantaged by the school system.
- (3) Principals can review their schools' incentive structures in order to better align teacher and student efforts with the latter's cognitive and social goals. For example, teachers or groups of students who improve students' achievement and self-discipline from year to year can receive greater rewards (for example, public recognition or school privileges; Wöbmann, 2000). A broad range of rewards can be given each year, commensurate with the degree of improvement. As students (and teachers) must work together to achieve greater improvements, group rather than individually focused rewards can also encourage cooperation (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). Suitably rewarding more people can help flatten the status hierarchy among both staff and students.
- (4) Regularly articulating clear, shared goals and standards (e.g. student learning and mutual respect) that openly acknowledge disadvantage and what should be done about it helps students and teachers alike to understand and develop pragmatic strategies to achieve these common goals (Bransford *et al.*, 2000). Clear, shared goals focus the school community on understanding social justice issues and help everyone concentrate effort, time organization, and pedagogical strategies on redressing student inequality (Ames and Archer, 1988). Clear

standards also provide important measures of progress and identify short-term goals (Ames and Archer, 1988).

- (5) Principals can consider opening the closed decision structures that currently dominate Hong Kong schools. Making these structures more transparent can reduce both actual and perceived bias. Increased transparency may involve consciously explaining major decisions and how they are made, consulting staff, and using reasoned persuasion rather than dictating orders. As information asymmetry creates greater inequality; increased transparency and information flow can flatten status hierarchies and help build democratic, socially just communities.

Note that this set of strategies is not comprehensive. Other strategies might focus, for example, on curriculum structures, appropriate pedagogies, professional development, or deeper community connections, to name a few. However, given the structural stratification inherent in the Hong Kong education system, reconsidering resource allocation and addressing status differentiation appear good starting points.

Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to initiate a discussion of leadership for social justice in Hong Kong schools. In doing so, we focused on a number of ingrained inequities within the system and suggested some ways school leaders may address these within their school communities. As inequality is deeply rooted in the structures and cultures of Hong Kong schools, shifting emphasis toward social justice issues is difficult and complex – but it is also incredibly important. If present perceptions are to change we must push these issues into the limelight, rather than hide behind the apparent intractability of the *status quo* – even if this appears an integral part of cultural traditions and ingrained policy. It appears incumbent that policy makers address change from the system level and that inequality in Hong Kong be openly challenged by those who lead schools if they are to provide the best, most equitable, education for all.

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