Principals' perspectives of social justice in public schools

A. William Place

Department of Educational Leadership,
School of Education and Allied Professions,
The University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio, USA

Julia Ballenger

Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, USA

Teresa A. Wasonga

Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, Illinois, USA, and

Joyce Piveral and Carole Edmonds

Northwest Missouri State University, Maryville, Missouri, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on social justice issues identified by American principals. A research question that guided this qualitative study was: do educational leaders relate to the concept of leadership for social justice?

Design/methodology/approach – The standardized protocol for focus group discussions was based on Krueger and Casey's work on how to conduct effective focus group interviews. Each focus group carefully followed the protocol, which was designed to give voice to the informants and not to be led by the moderator in preconceived directions. This procedure provided a framework to maintain consistency in eliciting and collecting information but not leading participants to discuss social justice issues just to please the researchers.

Findings – This paper both confirmed that principals are concerned with social justice and identified that some principals do not explicitly discuss issues that relate to social justice. Principals who raised social justice issues felt that leaders should be courageous enough to make decisions that are best for children, even though they may not be popular.

Research limitations/implications – Qualitative research such as this adds to the breadth and depth of human understanding, but findings cannot be generalized to any larger population.

Originality/value – The term social justice has become pervasive in US academic discussions, yet there has been little dialogue with practitioners and even less data examined concerning if the term has any relevance to practitioners. This paper explores the voices of practitioners in relation to a pervasive term in US academic discourse.

Keywords United States of America, Principals, Leadership, Social justice

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and framework

Social justice is at the core of democratic communities. Blount (2006, p. 1) recently noted:

> Within the field of education, the term "social justice" has been used quite extensively over the past decade in particular, and to a more limited degree over the past half-century.

However, Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005, p. 201) raised specific concerns "about the extent to which social justice issues are being considered in the development

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of new approaches and standards for preparing leaders". Grogan and Andrews (2002, p. 250) recommended the reorganization of principal programs in order to prepare aspiring principals to "understand their ethical and moral obligations to create schools that promote and deliver social justice". Furthermore, Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005, p. 204) maintain the need to prepare aspiring principals to become advocates for social justice by noting the need for "school leaders to take an activist stance in making deep structural decisions around issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and exceptionalities".

Two recent themes for the annual University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA) conference have included the term social justice. While papers and sessions abound with the words in the titles, not all professors are in complete agreement about how social justice should be used or defined. At a 2005 UCEA session, a number of professors (personal communication, November 12, 2005) stated that the term social justice was ill defined and often not used in a proper academic manner. Thus, we begin this paper with the conceptual framework for social justice that guides this paper taken from the research of Furman and Shields (2004) and Dantley and Tillman (2006). These scholars challenge us to focus on questioning inequities based on social power. Social power is defined as "the power to influence behaviors of others" (Brey, 2008, p. 76). While Brey posits that social power can be exercised by individuals, groups, and organizations, French and Raven (1959) suggest that social power may act as a resource that people use to exert influence on others. These resources form the bases of power over others. Furman and Shields (2004, p. 12) include power in defining social justice as "a deliberate intervention that challenges fundamental inequities that arise, in large part, due to the inappropriate use of power by one group over another". They added, "educational leaders for social justice embed an explicitly moral practice in values that undergird an ethic of a deeply democratic community" (p. 13). Dantley and Tillman (2006, p. 19) noted, "Social justice scholarship includes concepts such as the impact of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability on the educational outcomes of students".

These conceptualizations of social justice (i.e. in the inappropriate use of power by one group over another group) may impact academic outcomes for students. Thus, an understanding of the complexity of social power is important for educational leaders who may need to adopt a transformative leadership style to alter inequities. Shields' (2004, p. 111) research on social justice calls for transformative educational leaders who:

[...] foster the academic success of all children through engaging in moral dialogue that facilitates the development of strong relationships, supplants pathologizing silences, challenges existing beliefs and practices, and grounds educational leadership in some criteria for social justice.

English (2006, p. 2) makes the argument that "unless social justice is anchored to a specific theory it consists of little more than protest of schooling practices that are symptoms instead of causes". He suggests school leaders use a specific theory, such as social power as elaborated by Mann (2003) to discuss how to help "leaders to become transformative agents" (English, 2006, p. 2). English encourages educational researchers to go further to pursue:

[...] a line of inquiry regarding creating a theoretical framework which moves beyond finding ways and means of erasing them (i.e. socially unjust practices) to more fully understand

whether (socially) unjust practices are built into the brick and mortar of society" (p. 5). English recommends Mann's framework because he argues that it acknowledges the complex realities in which administrators function and can be used to bring more rigor to the study of social justice.

Gerstl-Pepin's (2006, p. 145) acknowledged the importance of understanding the use of power in policy analysis, by stating, "To understand policy stories, it is important to understand power – the ability of a group, individual, or structure to exercise control or authority". Gerstl-Pepin (2006, p. 143) "juxtaposes national educational policy dialogues against the stories of educators working within an elementary school that serves a high-poverty community". For example, an elementary teacher is quoted as saying:

> There's a perception that people living in poverty are not working hard enough. We live in a culture that blames the victims. It blames poor people and the teaching profession (p. 143).

She summarized the position of then-President Bush as "No other factors (such as economic inequities or geographic segregation of high-poverty communities) intrude on his narrative: failure is the result of not being held accountable" (p. 148). What is notable is that silence (i.e. a lack of voiced opposition) about inequities provided support for the Bush perspective that accountability is the only thing that needed to be discussed.

Study methods and design
This qualitative study is part of a national research effort to study the perceptions of practitioners, both superintendents and principals across the USA, about their leadership practices. The data from principals were used for this paper. The purpose of this qualitative paper was to obtain principals' perceptions of issues related to their educational experiences and leadership practices. The research question that guided this paper was: how do educational leaders relate to the concept of leadership for social justice?

Instrument development and pilot process
The Voices 3 project coordinators developed a standardized focus group protocol through a process of reviewing current literature, including Salsberry's (1999) review of the original *Thousand Voices From the Firing Line* and soliciting input from:

- the originators of Voices;
- UCEA's Executive Committee;
- UCEA Centers for the Study of the Superintendency and the Study of School Site Leadership;
- Ohio school leaders at the UCEA Convention 2001;
- colleagues at the American Educational Research Association 2002 Annual Meeting; and
- colleagues at the UCEA Convention 2002.

From this input, Voices phase 3 researchers drafted two sets of focus group questions. These questions were piloted with principals and superintendents (for each of the three concepts: school improvement, democratic community, and social justice). After the pilot, questions and methods that appeared to be particularly useful were integrated

into a protocol for a larger scale study involving more UCEA researchers and focus groups discussions.

The protocol for the focus group discussions was based on Krueger and Casey's (2000) work on how to conduct effective focus group interviews. Each focus group carefully followed the protocol, which was designed to give voice to the informants and not to be led by the moderator in preconceived directions. This procedure provided a framework to maintain consistency in eliciting and collecting information and was not structured to lead participants in the direction of discussing social justice issues.

The protocol included opening, transitioning, key, and ending questions. Key questions dealt with three main areas of concern to principal, which were:

(1) involving people in decision making (or what we term democratic community);

(2) what has No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act meant to you as a principal (or school improvement/accountability issues – NCLB is an acronym that American principals know stands for the NCLB Act which passed with bipartisan support and which attached accountability strings to federal dollars that states and the local educational organizations called districts now must deal with); and

(3) principals talk about what is best for students.

The researchers felt that the question "what is best for students" would elicit comments about social justice in a broader conceptual approach. This broader conceptual approach is described in Furman and Starratt's (2002) research, which discusses social justice as respect for individuals, communities, and their cultural traditions. There was a final question that asked, "Of all areas we talked about today, which one is most important to you?" The protocol questions did not specifically use the concept of social justice nor did the questions inquire about the leaders' attitudes toward addressing inequities, power relationships of any group, or moral practice of speaking out against undemocratic practices involving social power. We believe it is important to note that by not including the topic of social justice in the questions, the comments that were made can be implied to be important to the participants and not simply giving the researcher what they want to hear.

Participants
The researchers conducted 12 focus group interviews, which consisted of six to eight principals selected by school types. School types refer to elementary, middle, and high school levels. The gender and ethnicity of the principals closely mirrored the US Department of Education (2002) percentages, which included 56 percent male, 44 percent female, 84 percent White, 11 percent Black, and 5 percent Hispanic. The participants were informed that their participation in the focus group was completely voluntary and anonymous.

Data analysis
The 12 focus group interviews were audiotaped and carefully transcribed verbatim to maintain the integrity of the data (Seidman, 1998). While a directed focus was guiding the interview questions, the researchers were prepared to examine the data, words, and stories and let the voice of the participants come through. Participants' names and all personally identifiable information were removed to maintain confidentiality. The demographic

information was transferred to the transcription. From the transcriptions, data were analyzed for patterns and themes (Marshall and Rossman, 1989).

Findings

As the data were examined, themes based on issues related to social justice emerged. The three themes reflecting the use of social power include leadership experiences, NCLB (positive and negative aspects of this important US federal legislation), and "doing what's best for students". In general, most of the principals agreed that schools can no longer ignore some students as they did before and that principals needed to use power available to them to intervene on behalf of students. This sentiment is summarized by one Illinois principal who noted:

> We can't ignore the sub groups, we can't say that if we are doing OK overall, that is fine. We can't ignore the African American subgroups or the special education population or any other minority populations.

Some focus groups clearly had discussion that the majority (if not all) were deeply concerned about issues involving some groups (for example, minority groups, lower socioeconomic groups, or special education students) that needed to be in schools which would assist them in dealing with injustices that principals stated they were experiencing. This discussion focused on the impact of the possible injustices that race and class had on the educational outcomes of these groups of students (Dantley and Tillman, 2006).

In contrast, other focus group discussions did not explicitly address social justice; they may have responded differently had the discussion explicitly covered the topic of social justice, but as noted, the facilitators were trained to not lead the discussion in ways that may lead to specific answers about their view of social justice as we defined it in this paper. While this could be viewed as a limitation, it could also be viewed as support for the findings that at least some principals were focused on the issues of social justice that they chose to discuss. In other words, it was not the protocol questions that led the principals to discuss social justice; these issues truly seem to be central to their leadership practice.

Leadership experiences

Leadership experiences were the actions, observations, or engagement in practices that exemplified intervention, the use or lack thereof of power in attending to school issues. A California principal discussed her shock and anguish in reacting to the discrimination faced by English language learners (ELL) when reacting to the opening prompt about an "experience with school leadership that made a strong impression on you, either positive or negative". The California principal shared:

> We have a lot of ELL kids and prejudicial comments that we heard about the children from the very opening of the school were – hurt me. [...] you go into this thinking, "Oh, everyone will be treated equally and fairly," and certainly that was not the case.

Another principal spoke about being "a leader in the sensitive social issues" such as the "fine, delicate balancing act it is when you're dealing with the community, and you're dealing with board members, and you're dealing with different racial groups – dealing with all of that and trying to create a situation where learning is happening". This situation is an example of how each group is perceived and how principals must use their influence to balance how each group interacts with every other group and the board.

A Michigan participant spoke of the things that principals do in fighting for what is needed:

Behind the scenes that many people don't realize what you're doing. You're not sitting in your office eating bonbons but fighting for those things that teachers need for supplies. How do you handle a situation when a parent's upset, [or] who needs more professional development as a teacher? How do you live knowing there's 25 students in a room and you know there's not the education going on in there that needs to? What do you do about it? Do you want to take it on? What's best for kids?

In reaction to the comment about sitting in your office, a couple of other principals added that visibility of the principal was also important in general for kids, but this principal added something which could be considered to be connected with intervention as defined in social justice, "Sometimes it's proper clothing as well. They don't come to school with that and we need [to] find that [sic, clothes] for them." This comment turned the conversation toward the bigger political arena of justice. Another principal added that politicians in Washington, DC, need to:

[. . .] come into a classroom, come into a building and see the children that go home and have no one at home; have no food at home. The least of their worries is whether they're going to pass that [state standardized] test come February. Their worry is, is there enough food in the cupboard to eat, and when that pressure is put on us and when your name is spread across the front of the [She names a newspaper], these people have no idea [. . .]. Can my school compete with a school like Judy's? Absolutely not. My kids are coming from poor, opposite places so when you get the comparisons done, and realtors use these [. . .] to sell houses and not sell houses [. . .]. the NCLB is very frustrating because it makes it look as if we are not doing our job and we are.

No child left behind (positive and negative aspects)
NCLB was a significant issue for principals. In one of the focus groups, a principal explained (before the facilitator made any mention of NCLB) that she felt that in order for schools to be successful with all groups, we needed to exercise power to "have these high expectations where each of the subgroups that you're working with and not leaving anybody out, finding a place for everyone and hiring the staff as they were saying, to support that, to support that mission, is important." Then another principal continued with the concept that NCLB was both good and bad in terms of social justice. It was good because it allowed school leaders to use NCLB as leverage to ensure that no groups of students were left out. Furthermore, the principal acknowledged:

[. . .] a lot of frustrating things about it, but it has made us more accountable and made classroom teachers more accountable to their students, to focus in more on some of their kids. I think most educators, good educators, would focus in on all the children in their classroom but there are some who would say "Well, they're not going to get it" but we have to educate all of them. The frustrating part is, it goes to the special needs kids. I mean, is it fair to test a kid on a fifth grade [standardized test] at a first grade reading level? This one percent rule is kind of ridiculous. [the one percent rule only allowed schools to exempt from the mandated tests up to one percent of the kids even if you have much higher percentage that were special education and not able to function at a high enough level for the test].

Several principals in the South focused on the negative impact NCLB had on students with disabilities and students who were performing several grade levels below. This was an indication that they were not only conscious about the unintended

consequences of this policy on some children but were ready to interrogate this policy. They exclaimed:

> I think that it is absolutely unconscionable that we have come up with a system – where kids are punished for the failures of adults, and that's what I see high stakes testing as. We let too many kids slip through the cracks too early and then we decide we're going to shut their lives down because we didn't provide the type of instruction that would have kept them from slipping through the cracks. I just – I think its' an abomination.
>
> We had a special education student move to our school. The student was a non-reader. The parent was not sophisticated enough to bring any special education papers with her and she didn't even tell us her child was in special education. We had to put a test in front of a child that could not read and couldn't operate a scantron sheet.

Principals who are advocates for social justice recognize the need to deconstruct some of the system requirements and reconstruct systems where students are not treated as commodities or products, but human beings. The accountability system focuses on disaggregating student performance by groups. In doing so, significant achievement gaps between student groups have been disclosed. Many of the principals from the South voiced a sentiment that schools perpetuate social injustices. These principals were referring to distributive justice. Young (1990, p. 15) suggested that, "We tend to ignore social structure and institutional context that often help determine distributive patterns". Instead, Young (1990, p. 15) argued, "Social justice means attending to not only how goods are distributed, but also how issues of domination and oppression (e.g. institutional racism and patriarchy) affect this process". Furthermore, these principals declared:

> Those kids who are the neediest and would benefit from the best teachers are usually the kids who have the poorest teachers because their parents don't scream the loudest. Their parents are not on these boards where they can maintain some power, to where they can say, "My son or daughter is in an enriched or an honors class and we want the best teacher possible to teach those classes." However, kids in low-performing schools are not presented with the same challenges as other students.

Although some of the principals questioned the policies without mention of actions they had taken, others went beyond questioning and used NCLB as an entry point for discussions and redistribution of resources for the good of students. For example, a California principal in reaction to NCLB said: I would "use it to my advantage. It's in talking with teachers who are dealing with special populations and changing their approach to being fair, doing what they really need to, understanding the special education folks". Another principal from Kansas reacted:

> On the positive side, it has allowed us in a school without many minority groups to focus in on some populations that we've ignored – maybe is a strong word, but we certainly hadn't put emphasis there. And so, NCLB is helping us put emphasis on some kids that we hadn't paid enough attention to in the past.

A Michigan principal supported Gerstl-Pepin's (2006) point that educators working in high-poverty communities view things differently when discussing social justice. The principal exclaimed (attributing the thinking to an unnamed critic of the public schools) that those with social power oversee an economic system that shortchanges the poor. He said:

Take the focus off our economic policies and blame the schools and we just won't look at the fact that we have a faulty economic system. Yet the data's all there that it's the children of poverty and it crosses all races, cultures. It's poverty.

For an Arizona principal, the focus on testing has shifted focus and resources from the whole child. He has challenged the status quo by intervening and developing district programs that attend to the whole child. Districts are the local organization that American schools use for much of our decision making. He stated it this way:

The other issue that I see more at the district level is that so many different districts are dumping programs because all we are worried about is test scores. In the last year, I've developed and am growing a stronger vocational program and developing a fine arts program that are just pulling the kids in and gaining interest and we're getting actually better results out of the kids in school because of these things. We've got to stop just thinking about a raw test number because that's not what it's all about. Our kids are breathing human beings and tests don't show everything.

Another Arizona principal agreed, adding:

I do believe that the philosophy of No Child Left Behind is what we believed in anyway. Yet I think our legislators have done a terrible disservice and injustice for our children.

Doing what is best for students
Social justice was also addressed in response to doing what is best for students. Principals used the concept of what is best for kids to justify interventions and use of social power as defined in the concept of social justice in this paper. However, others took a neutral and passive stand arguing for reflection, consensus, or "hiring the right people". A principal from New Mexico said:

To me it means looking into the needs of all children, our English language learners, our children with disabilities, even meeting the needs of those children that excel that are on the other spectrum of the special ed, pendulum, I guess. But, just really reflecting on our practice and doing what's best for every child in the classroom.

From Missouri, a principal at a small school in responding to the question about doing what is best for kids mainly spoke about doing what was right for students in general. The following statements indicate this was of importance to principals of small schools and to the staffs they lead. Statements such as:

- The consensus that we came to was that we are here for the children and what is best for them.
- Decisions you make in hiring and what you do in your school may not be the most popular but it might be the best for the kids.
- So that is something if you ask (for) things over and over, they get that you are focusing on doing things for the kids.

Similar responses came from a Kansas focus group where a principal stated:

I think one of the best ways we influence students or help students get better is by being sure we have our best staff possible – help anybody on staff get better.

Another principal from the same group added:

> With the agreement that I would get to hire all the staff from, you know, my assistants through custodians and cafeteria. And we just centered our questioning on their perception of kids.

The Kentucky focus group also had general responses such as:

> That's been real important in our district learning environment. The phrase "It's About Kids" has not only became a catchphrase for the newspaper, it truly became how people looked at every issue and I've enjoyed seeing that happen.

These attitudes are caring and empathic but show no concern for challenging fundamental inequities. If you are at a school that is all privileged and you focus only on your students, we question if this caring attitude should really be considered social justice.

Principals from Michigan viewed the concept of best interest to exemplify social justice and social power in another way. The principals in Michigan felt that it was essential that they focus their power on doing what was in the best interests of students. These principals spoke on the need to be student centered and hold high expectations for all students. A principal spoke of a program that allowed students in at-risk situations to recover credit (i.e. to make up credits) that would allow students, who do not have the required number of credits to graduate on time. He stated:

> Several of the adults in the building had a difficult time. They didn't agree that all students had to do was take a test to get credit. Enrollment in our credit-recovery program has really gone down. The adults have learned to do the things they should have been doing to begin with so that those at-risk student needs are being met in the classroom. And they don't need that credit-recovery program.

These principals used their power to keep students in school. Sometimes, doing what is right for children involves breaking rules – rules which may result in the unintended outcome of unjust consequences for students in at-risk situations.

Another principal reported how he obtained treatment for a student who had been suspended for drug abuse. It was important to not write children off. He stated, "I told them [. . .] let's get this kid some help. Let's not ship them on the road". The need to be student centered was voiced by many of the Michigan principals. One of those principals noted that his staff was "becoming more student centered. Our staff meetings have gone from gripe sessions to discussing issues that deal with kids [. . .] brainstorming how to best meet the needs of these kids". Other principals in Michigan spoke of the need to give students opportunities to be successful. They used their power to break the rules if needed and develop meaningful relationships with the students. One of the principals described an incident with a special education student who had dropped out of school. The principal noted:

> This student called me and asked if he could return to school. I told him to bring his mother with him and we would put him on a probationary status. I reduced his time at school. There is nothing in the handbook about that. There is nothing in the school policy about that. That's what we needed to do to give that kid this last chance to try to be successful.

The importance of building a relationship with students was highlighted by a principal. He noted: "Once you develop that relationship with children, you can teach

them anything". Another principal spoke of the need to break rules sometimes in the best interest of students:

> I frankly enjoy that I can break the rules when I think it is in the best interest of kids and their learning. I don't' apologize to anybody. Teachers love attendance policies.

He added:

> My attendance policy is if the kids are in the classrooms; educate the heck out of them. If they are not in the classroom, welcome them back and educate the heck out of them.

It is up to the school leader to use their social power to collaboratively align the vision of the school with the community's values and purposes and maintain the focus on the vision for all stakeholders.

Discussion
It appears that some US principals are definitely concerned with issues of social justice. However, the initial analyses of the data from these structured focus groups also indicate that some US principals do not have social justice issues, which are explicit in the discussions analyzed. Many seem to have concern for students in general; however, in this paper, we did not consider a general concern for the whole child to be a good fit for our adopted definition of social justice. School leaders must stress the values of equity and excellence and ensure that it is embedded in the vision. The difficulty in doing so is often because values of equity and excellence often conflict. Providing excellence situations for some students may result in inequitable situations for others. However, school leaders must articulate actions of intervention and use of social power to remedy inequitable situations for children while maintaining high standards for all. Scheurich and Skrla stated, "It is our responsibility, even our sacred or spiritual responsibility – to create such schools" (as cited in Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2006, p. 55).

Today, principals are faced with increasingly diverse student populations; therefore, equal treatment for all students may be inherently unequal. A principal noted, "We must put the right teachers in with the youngsters who are struggling. They need teachers who get in their hearts before they get in their minds". In other words, these American principals felt that leaders should be courageous enough to make decisions that are best for children even though they may not be popular. Banks (2004, p. 143) acknowledged the increased diversity in our nation's schools by noting, "Racial, cultural, ethnic, language, and religious diversity are increasing exponentially throughout the Western world, including the United States". Despite this increase in diversity, Banks (2004, p. 144) noticed that there continues to be "a wide cultural gap between teachers and students. While 40 percent of the nations' students are ethnic minorities, most of the nation's teachers are White and speak only English". The discrepancy may make it difficult for these leaders to advocate for some children. This seems to be a time in the USA when we need principals who are advocates for all children and who are not afraid of doing what is best for all students. English (2010, p. 46) warns that:

> [. . .] we will face the same assortment of opponents with the vested interests and agendas for retaining their own political power and social privileges as educators before us have faced. They will resist using the schools as levers for social change [. . .] Then as now, the struggle for justice, fairness and respect for all students continues.

Leaders for social justice recognize that there are situations where application of the same rules to unequal groups can generate unequal results. Thus, treating everyone the same does not necessarily mean fairness of treatment (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 33). Courageous implementation of social justice principles provides substantive equality to marginalized groups by recognizing past disadvantages and existence of structural barriers embedded in the social and political systems that may perpetuate systemic discrimination. Therefore, we believe that principals need to create a vision of equity of excellence, that is equal outcomes for all children. One way to accomplish equity of excellence is for educational leaders to attend to both academic excellence and social justice principles because one implies the other (Shields, 2004). This vision of equity of excellence calls for a moral purpose of leadership that seeks to "enhance the education and life chances of poor and minority children" (Larson and Murtadha, 2002, p. 150).

It was not clear in relation to social justice issues if there were any instructional level differences (i.e. elementary, middle, or high school) or geographical location differences. As with all research, this effort raised a number of questions that the authors would like to further explore with others. Bogotch (2002, p. 154) notes that while:

[...] no view of social justice can ever receive universal agreement. Nevertheless, the concepts of social justice and educational leadership provide for socially constructed agreements to emerge around specific problems, solutions, and courses of action.

The paper has both confirmed that principals are concerned with social justice as well as raised questions about what the voices of principals have to say that relates to social justice.

English (2006) and Shoho *et al.* (2005) have suggested we need to explore whether there can be an enough of a consensus reached among academics on a common language concerning social justice to move preparation programs and research forward on the issue. In addition, the perspective of practitioners in the field needs further exploration and examination.

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About the authors
A. William Place is the Director of Doctoral Studies at the University of Dayton and teaches research, school public relations and personnel courses. He is the past President of Mid-Western Educational Research Association and Ohio Council of Professors of Educational Administration and spent two years reconnecting with the field as a high school principal. A. William Place is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: will.place@notes.udayton.edu

Julia Ballenger, the E.J. Campbell Distinguished Professor in the Department of Secondary Education and Educational Leadership at Stephen F. Austin State University, teaches in both the doctoral and the principal educational leadership programs. Julia's research agenda focuses on leadership for social justice, gender equity, and culturally responsive pedagogy. She is the past President of the Texas Council of Professors of Educational Administration and currently serves on the Executive Board of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration.

Teresa A. Wasonga is an Assistant Professor at Northern Illinois University. Her areas of research include co-creating and democratic leadership and individual and organizational resiliency.

Joyce Piveral is the Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and the Assistant Director for the Professional Education Unit of Northwest Missouri State University. She is also a doctoral faculty member for the University of Missouri – Columbia. Joyce's research agenda focuses on teacher education and educational leadership issues as related to school improvement and improved student achievement.

Carole Edmonds is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Northwest Missouri State University, teaches in the principal preparation program and is the Director of undergraduate and graduate field experiences. Carole's research agenda focuses on instructional leadership and curriculum design. She currently serves as a Facilitator for the Missouri Leadership Academy. Dr Edmonds is also the past President of the Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals.

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