

Social justice and equity in Eritrean schools: Lessons from school principals' experiences

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This article examines Eritrean school leaders' administrative functions in promoting social justice and equity among students. A detailed discussion of the challenges they encounter in their daily activities and its effect on the promotion of social justice and equity is also presented. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 randomly selected school principals, followed by an inductive analysis based on the transcribed interview data. Three major approaches to social justice practices commonly adopted by the principals were discovered: promoting a collaborative learning culture, individual support, and working with communities and local administrations. Major pitfalls in the school system which negatively affect social equity practices were observed, including teachers' low levels of professionalism, poor commitment and awareness; the tendency towards a highly bureaucratic and delayed distribution of educational resources; low levels of parental involvement; and conservative cultural and traditional attitudes.

Background

Problems of social justice and equity have gained increasing attention among policymakers, practitioners, and academicians (Zeichner, 2009; Mills 2012; Boylan, Mark & Woolsey, 2015). Many countries have introduced an array of approaches targeting selected areas of action, including income distribution, democratisation and participatory decision making enacted through quotas, coupons and other support mechanisms. The educational sector is among the high priorities for nations to exercise social justice and equality agendas. UNESCO's "Education for All (EFA), MDGs, and SDGs" (UNESCO, 2000; United Nations, undated, 2018) motto culminated the worldwide efforts in this direction. Coordinated actions on the provision of targeted policies, support mechanisms, and fund allocation programs at the macro and micro levels for the marginalised and minority students were carried out widely.

In Eritrea, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GoSE) set education as a priority to achieve development and social justice goals. The macro-policy of 1994 (GoSE, 1994) stipulated that improvement in living standards and productivity could be realised by reducing the illiteracy rate. The policy noted that "... special attention to be given to those quarters of Eritrea which, so far have not had much schooling opportunities" (Provisional Government of Eritrea [PGE], 1991. p. 3). A decade later, the revised policy of the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2003 reiterated the objective as follows: "Promote educational investment among all demographic and geographic diversities of the country with due priority to disadvantaged sections" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.7).

The Eritrean educational system is structured at two levels; community (micro) and national (macro) levels. The macro-level refers to the government's implementation of educational projects, particularly to the expansion of schools in all regions of the country.

Unlike two decades ago, four of its six administrative provinces have at least one Institute of Higher Learning (IHL) providing tertiary education. Widespread sedentarisation of former pastoral and nomadic communities took place (Haile, 2017), and all the new sedentary communities became beneficiaries of school expansion. Moreover, the eight-year basic education was made “free and compulsory to all school-age children” and the policy opened all doors and opportunities to Eritreans of all ages for developing their potential, both professionally and personally (Ministry of Education, 2002a; 5). Finally, the government ratified the *Education For All* convention, and actively embraced international initiatives such as Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals to advance social justice and equality.

The full realisation of the educational policy, however, depended on how the micro-level of the educational system operated, especially the school community (teaching and administrative personnel, students and the host community). The former Minister of MoE, his Excellency Osman Salih, in 2003 said that the “role of school directors and supervisors is critical in transforming schools into conducive learning environments and facilitators of students’ success” (Ministry of Education, 2009). Accordingly, above all, ensuring social justice and equity in the schools became primarily the responsibility of the school principal.

School principals should work to enhance students’ academic achievement because their leadership style determines the delivery of a proper educational system (Fraser, 2012). Equity-centred leaders need to transcend the creation of academic environments to ensure equal treatment of all students (Dantley & Tillman 2006) and must actively involve all stakeholders in the activities of the school (Ministry of Education, 2009). Students who come from vulnerable families, economically disadvantaged and ethnic minorities deserve equal institutional support from the school management. Even under pressing circumstances, socially just school leadership should help all students to flourish in their studies.

This article demonstrates how school leadership affects the realisation of social justice and equity by closely examining the practices of school leaders in promoting social justice in Eritrea. The second part presents a detailed discussion on the challenges they have faced in their work and the pitfalls encountered in their practices.

Literature review

Social justice and equity in education

Social justice is a complex concept used in several humanity and social science disciplines, and few decades ago educational studies incorporated the concept to understand the cultural transformations and demographic shifts occurring in Western societies (Jean-Marie, Normore and Brooks, 2009). The concept has multiple meanings across disciplines (Blackmore, 2002), and sometimes display contextual variation within a discipline. In educational studies, it grossly refers to the creation of equitable schooling (Jean-Marie,

2008; Bredson, 2004), and examining issues of race, gender and other segregation tendencies (Dantley & Tillman, 2006).

Fraser (2003) defined social justice as the redistribution of resources in the educational sector to ensure access in every school and classroom to all kinds of students irrespective of their socio-cultural backgrounds. Some of the indicators of fair distribution of resources include inclusive curriculum that represents the epistemological uniformity of all students. Degree of correlation between students' socio-economic background and academic achievement (OECD, 2011) is also another indicator. It enables school principals to identify academic performance gaps between students from ordinary and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Sturman (1997) identified three approaches to social justice in Australian secondary education system. First, *distributive component* refers to the distribution of educational materials to eliminate material disparity among students, while *curricular justice* incorporates social justice principles and components into the curriculum. The third approach, *non-material component*, provides extra skills for students, such as decision making exercises, creativity, and innovation.

Recognition of social and cultural differences among students (Cochran-Smith, 2009), and involvement of all segments of the community in decision making processes are key for ideal social justice practices (Fraser, 2008). Garmon (2004) emphasised openness of the majority for change, and readiness to accommodate differences, while Argawal et al. (2010) stressed the incorporation of students' voices and democratic classroom practices. Therefore, social justice should include the distributive and participatory dimensions as well as mutual respect and recognition of students' differences.

Educational leaders and social justice

In contemporary educational policy, school leadership plays decisive role in students' overall academic performance (Pontz, Nusche & Moorman, 2008) because it determines the school's effort targeting the elimination of barriers of smooth learning processes (Torrance & Forde, 2017). The principal is the spearhead figure, and his or her commitment to social justice affects the cultivation of similar tendencies among the wider school community. A collegial spirit, effective communication, progressive instructional leadership (Woldu, 2017) and participatory leadership are some of the requirements for a school principal to be successful at promoting social justice.

The USA's National Policy Board for Educational Administration characterises the professional qualities of a school leader as a promoter of the norms in integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, learning, and continuous improvement (NPBEA, 2015). Principals are accountable for each student's academic success and well-being by accommodating diversity in the school. Effective communication skills, social-emotional insights, and an understanding of all students' and staff members' backgrounds are important qualities for successful leadership. Many scholars stress the school leader's ability to mediate the school, and parents and students particularly, to be actively involved

in decision making processes with regard to creating social justice. Participatory leadership yields better results in strengthening social justice (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Stevenson (2007) identified four domains of school leadership to promote social justice: *curriculum, teaching and learning, inclusive organisational culture, and support system*. The notion of inclusiveness in all walks of the school summarises the institutional effort for the installation and promotion of school justice by creating transparency, collaboration and confidence among the students. Leaders can make a difference in students' learning experiences by providing instructional support, monitoring school activities, modelling best practices and providing individualised support and consideration.

The notion of social injustice in the Eritrean school context, both in the national narrative (developmental outline) and public opinion, is manifested primarily in inequality of access to education dictated by geographical location. A large disparity existed between urban and rural regions in access to educational facilities, and the disparity widened for higher levels of education. As expansion of schools became the centrepiece of educational policy, many schools were constructed across the country in the post-independence era (since 1993). Support mechanisms including school feeding programs, distribution of textbooks, and widespread sedentarisation of pastoral communities (Haile, 2017) were introduced to encourage enrolment remote region students.

The second manifestation of social injustice in Eritrean schools is rooted in socio-economic disparities among students in the same school community. This is the focus of the paper. The vulnerable groups of students include girls, disabled, orphans, students from poor income families, and from female-headed families. These groups of students need extra support at micro-level to succeed in their education. Students from low-income families, in particular, regularly engage in petty trade, and some of them travel daily or frequently to the market to sell agro-dairy products and buy provisions in return. Since market days in the majority of the towns in the country are held on weekdays [1], such students miss lessons during these market days.

Finally, students from agrarian [2] families face persistent problems with collisions of school and farm schedules. The school calendar starts early in September and goes until June, and coincidentally farm chores in the majority of the country intensify between September and November. Since students help their parents in harvesting cereal and legume crops, and later oilseeds, often they either miss classes or arrive late to classes. From a pedagogical point of view, if students do not properly understand the introductory, beginning lessons in a subject, they will face difficulties in understanding lessons following later.

Therefore, the notion of social injustice in this study refers to the circumstances outlined above, and the main attention of this article is to disparities among students in the same school community. Consequently, this study tries to assess the practices of the school principals in promoting the success of all students who come from these disadvantaged backgrounds.

Method

The guiding questions of the study are qualitative, and the choice was made because qualitative research enables an in-depth analysis of the problem under investigation (Creswell et al., 2003), and facilitates deeper understanding of complex situations (Leady & Ormrod, 2010). The study was conducted among randomly selected former school principals, who were studying at the College of Education (CoE) to upgrade their academic qualification from a two-year diploma to a four-year bachelor degree. These principals were nominated by the MoE based on their experiences, performances and a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.75 out of 4.00 to enroll in the CoE 4-year program. The program incorporates both theoretical and practical components of training. English language is used in the research and in the program as it is the medium of instruction at all levels of education higher than middle school in Eritrea which starts at Grade 6. The last semester of their final year study is dedicated to practicum in schools, and they are required to write a thesis to complete their study.

The training opportunity was a reward for their marked contribution in improving their schools' academic performance. During the study, the interviewees were in their 3rd or 4th (final) year of study. The criterion of selection for interview was that a person should have worked as school principal and/or administrator at least five years before joining CoE. Additionally, the interviewee should have taken introductory and intermediate courses in educational administration including, Sociology of Education, Educational Policy, Educational Leadership, and Social Needs Inclusive Education. These courses discuss topics such as pluralism and multiculturalism in the school system, social problems, cultural identity, and instructional leadership. Finally, ten former school principals, who came from four (out of six) administrative regions, met these conditions (Table 1).

All the interviewees had worked as teachers and school principals or administrators in more than one school, except Principal 3 who became a school principal directly after graduating from college. Principals 3 and 5 served as administrators at the Sub-Zone MoE branch offices for 2 and 4 years respectively. The interviewees came to their principalship or administrator positions through nominations by the MoE branch offices.

All the principals were males except principals 2 and 7 due to the fact that principalships are dominated by males, except in a few elementary and junior schools. Consequently, participants in upgrade training reflect this disparity, and hence the majority of the candidates are male ex-principals or administrators. Finally, the main reason for choosing the CoE as research site was because one of the researchers was an instructor in the College. The researchers believed that the interviewees were qualified for the study with the qualifications and expertise they possessed. Besides, the researchers had financial limitations to travelling and collecting data from schools.

Table 1: Participants demographic profile

Princip- al No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male
Place of work (region)	Gash Barka	Gash Barka	North- ern Red Sea	North- ern Red Sea	South- ern	South- ern	South- ern	Central	Central	Central
School level	Elemen- tary; Junior	Junior; Second- ary	Elemen- tary; Junior; Second- ary	Elemen- tary; Junior	Elemen- tary; Junior; Second- ary	Elemem- -tary; Junior	Elemen- tary; Junior	Elemen- tary; Junior	Elemen- tary; Junior; Second- ary	Elemen- tary; Junior
Teach- ing expe- rience	7 yrs in two dif- ferent schools	3 yrs in one school	☒	4 yrs in one school	1 yrs in one school	2 yrs in one school	6 yrs in two dif- ferent schools	3 yrs in one school	4 yrs in one school	12 yrs in 3 dif- ferent schools
Princi- palship experi- ence (yrs)	5 years in one school	8 years in two differ- ent schools	7 years in two differ- ent schools	6 years in two differ- ent schools	6 years in two differ- ent schools	7 years in two differ- ent schools	5 years in one schools	20 years in three differ- ent schools	20 years in three differ- ent schools	10 years in two differ- ent schools
Sub- zone admin. (MOE) yrs	☒	☒	2	☒	4	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒

The interviews took a semi-structured form, because the technique allows the researchers to fully control the discussion, and to pose follow up questions. Moreover, it helps to formulate new questions for more in-depth discussions of diverse topics and understanding phenomena in the fullest capacity (Glesne, 2011). The participants were asked about their practices in promoting social justice in their schools and the challenges they encountered in the process. Some of the guiding questions which conform to international studies (Alsburly & Whitaker, 2007; Munns, Sawyer & Cole, 2013) included:

- Your background including your professional journeys and experience as school principal.
- Your experiences related to social justice in your school.
- Administrative practices you implemented to promote social justice in your school. Describe your key areas of practices.
- Efficiency of your practices to promote equity and social justice among students.
- Challenges you faced in the process to promote social justice.

Each interview lasted more than 80 minutes to extract the personal attitudes, experiences, and opinions of the participants. The interviews were audio recorded, and the interviewer avoided note taking during the interview to prevent interruption, and simplify the interview atmosphere. The interview records were listened to and transcribed, and later

the data was cleaned by omitting insignificant responses. For instance, some issues related to the burden of students' household chores and migration intentions, and school intervention were raised but the answers were very shallow and were repetitions of the other common themes discovered, and thus omitted. Consequently, data relevant for understanding the practices of each school principal to promote social justice was organised, and at the next stage each principal's actions were cross-examined with the others to find peculiarities and shared practices. The comparison among the school leaders brought emergent themes where an inductive analysis was made to reach conclusions.

Results

Since all interviewees had worked in more than one school, either as administrator or principal, the comparison became rich, even at the individual level. This helped to highlight their valuable experiences at different schools and communities. The findings are presented in two sections as, *actions to promote social justice*, and the *challenges* faced in the process.

Actions to promote social justice

Three major themes (action areas) of social justice practices were discovered in the study: *promoting collaborative learning culture*; *individual support*; and *working with communities and local administrations*. Usually, a combination (complementary) of these three actions is applied to help a particular student known to have been affected by his/her specific family conditions. The themes are explored below in detail.

Promoting collaborative learning strategy

This strategy has two realms of supporting disadvantaged students: *inter-student collaboration*, and *inter-teacher collaboration*. Inter-student collaboration introduces and reinforces peer education, where well-performing students academically assist their fellow classmates. Its popularity emerged from its mutuality; good performing students enhance their articulation skills and refine their mastery on the subject matter, and low performing students get extra-tutorials in a friendly atmosphere.

In inter-teacher collaboration, teachers exchange their observations and experiences regarding students' performance. Then, they coordinate their actions to help low performing students by designing suitable support activities, promoting participation, organising curricular and co-curricular activities and so on. Principal 6 shared his strategy for collaboration among teachers as follows:

I have tried to build trust and belief among my teachers to help them learn from their colleagues' best practices. So, I have used circle discussions and collaborative lesson planning among my teachers to promote students' learning and to ultimately create a socially just school.

Teachers also attempt to uplift the students' storytelling abilities by organising group discussions and fairy tale narration sessions, to cultivate a sense of cooperation among

students. Group discussion often concentrates upon mathematics and science, because these subjects facilitate teamwork, and the subjects also need extra tutorials. Principals 2 and 5 shared their practices on stimulating collaboration among students, saying:

We draw pictures and sketch maps on the walls of our buildings so that students can learn even outside the classroom. Often the pictures are taken from the textbooks and teaching manuals, for example, human organs. This visual technique stimulates the students to talk and discuss the syllabus informally, and thereby contribute to understanding and memorisation of concepts. We also provide students with newspapers to read with their colleagues, to intensify interaction. Teachers also give the students group assignments and projects that could help them do homework jointly, and meet after class hours and go to the library or one's house to work on the assignment. This extends the creation of collaborative learning beyond the limits of the school into the family and community life.

A majority of the interviewees agreed that the most effective mechanisms for collaborative learning are group assignments and round circle discussions, because they create platforms for active engagement among students. Principal 8 illuminated this point as follows:

The group assignment is usually a project set by the teacher having a large reward of a mark, up to 15%, meant to boost intra-group team spirit and inter-group competition.

According to the interviewees, students execute these kinds of assignments with high zeal, contribute all that is necessary for the completion of the task: prepare models, crafts, and drawings. Besides strengthening collaborative learning, "project work enhances creativity and leadership skills of the students" (Principal 6). Round circle discussions are widely used to enrich the students' discussion, narration and argumentation skills, by exchanging their views and experiences. Principal 9 noted "I have made efforts to boost students' storytelling ability and encourage group discussions and assignments to promote collaborative learning".

Organising individual support

Individual support means organising revision and make-up classes for poor performing students to help them prepare for final exams and cope with the discussion (Principal 3). Many students from agrarian or pastoral families miss several weeks at the beginning of the academic year due to their families' farm or mobility schedule, and when they come to school, a chapter or two may have been discussed already. The school arranges make-up classes to compensate the delay, and brings the students to the stage where they can follow the regular classes. Principal 3 continued his explanation:

Some students from nomadic families join school at least two weeks late at the beginning of the academic year. They have to re-migrate (seasonal camp) two to three weeks prior to the official closure of the school (June or early July). So, we were forced to arrange make-up classes so that they can catch-up with their colleagues and arrange special exams before they leave school in order to enable them to complete their study. Moreover, we were also arranging classes on Saturdays to make revisions so that those who were lagging behind can be at the same level as the regular students.

Providing financial assistance and material support to students with apparent economic problems is also practised, with provisions including notebooks, uniforms, pens, pencils, bags and, very occasionally, bicycles. Some schools allow students to pay the annual school fee in monthly instalments. Some students are totally exempted from the annual school fees if recommended by the steering committee of the school. In this regard, Principal 1 pointed out:

In my school, I had students from Kunama [3] ethnolinguistic group who usually pay the school fee in instalments. If the annual school fee is 100 Nakfa, they pay 20 Nakfa at a time and clear their due payment in five instalments. When I was assigned to the school where this group of students studied, unaware of the tradition, I demanded the full payment at once. The students began disappearing, and when I consulted my co-workers I came to know that the reason was the cancellation of the instalment payment. From that time onwards, I reinstated the instalment payment mechanism and the dropout started to reduce immediately.

Instalment payments and exemptions are fruitful strategies, particularly for orphans and disabled students. Orphan students and disabled students often need special moral and financial support to continue their studies. Orphan students get regular support from the public welfare institutions, whereas the disabled students depend totally on support mechanisms from schools and community.

Another administrative support for students with dire social problems is placement in the most suitable shift (morning or afternoon). Normally, students are assigned in swapping shifts in the first and second semesters, but such students are allowed to study in either the morning or afternoon shift throughout the year. Afternoon shift is highly favoured because such students engage in different income generating activities from early in the morning until school time. Principal 8 explained this as: “sometimes both the parents might work so they need assistance to take care of the kids at home from the students, thus they ask the school to place their child/children into the convenient shift and we do such a favour for them”.

Working with communities and local administrations

Most of the interviewees noted that in cases of frequent absenteeism and discipline problems, parents and local administrations are consulted to create joint guidance for the students at home and school. Special care is given to students whose guardian is other than the parent, and the school principals take the cases separately. Drop out also occurs due to lack of parental care and guidance. Some families even neglect their children's medical care for curable diseases; especially “when the illness is related to mental sickness” (Principal 8), due to superstitious assertions. School principals communicate with the communities to solve such problems. Principal 10 shared his experience:

One of my students had a swelling on his neck which was painful but his parents did not take him to any health centre. The swell worsened, and the student quitted study. I met the parents to discuss his medical treatment, and the parents said they cannot afford to pay the travel expenses (public medical care is free, except the registration fee which is about [US\$1]. I negotiated with the health centre's administration to allow the student to

get treatment without paying the registration fee, and fortunately, they agreed. After some time, the kid got cured and successfully finished his study.

School principals regularly involve local administrations and community health workers in their activities, to create favourable learning environment for students with social and health problems. Seminars are organised regarding many societal issues, including the importance of girls' education and the consequences of early marriage and thereby minimise early school dropouts. Principal 6 who worked in a remote village in Sen'afe Sub Zone explained as:

I regularly discuss with the local administrators to convince the community to stop under-age marriage, especially for girls, and let them complete at least their secondary school education. Sometimes, I had to invite activists from the women's association to hold seminars about women's rights and the relevance of women's education and empowerment, and the hazardous consequences of early marriage. There are some cases where the school in collaboration with the local administration and women activists' intervention cancelled female student marriages. As a result, many girls have continued their education to the highest level.

This problem was common to all interviewees, and they had to solve the gender disparity and early marriage problem through different approaches. Since this problem is rooted in the social fabric of the host communities, its elimination or reduction needs a high level of commitment. Principal 7 highlighted his approach as:

The effort requires prolonged commitment of the civil societies and government agencies around the school to change the attitude of the people towards girls' education. But if you work relentlessly, you can reap the fruits of your effort.

Challenges of social justice

The interviewees noted that they encountered serious problems in the implementation of their activities for the promotion of social justice. Some of the problems include *scarce resources* compared to the scale of the problem; *conservative attitudes*; and *organisational inefficiency*. These challenges are complex and intertwined with each other, and this section discusses three major challenges outlined by the interviewees.

School related challenges

The principals noted that not all teachers have uniform levels of commitment, willingness, and professionalism in their job, and this poses a challenge in their practice. Inadequate salaries affect teachers' commitment, initiative, and willingness to give extra support to students in need. They further noted that "nearly one-third of the teachers are not trained in education and pedagogy, and hence [are] not professional teachers". They became teachers after completing tertiary education simply due to shortage of teachers in the country. Principal 9 explained:

Our teachers have difficulties to teach in a heterogeneous classroom where students come from different socio-economic backgrounds. They also lack teaching skills and understanding of how children learn and grow.

One apparent manifestation of the lack of professionalism among the teachers is in their treatment of good and poor performing students. One interviewee said, “they applaud the former and openly bully the latter”. Low performing students usually suffer from “repetitive bullying by the teachers, and some teachers go as far as physical punishment” to correct what they call ‘bad performance’. This method is utterly counterproductive and students gradually develop hatred towards the teacher and the subject altogether. This is the result of the lack of effective classroom management skills and interactive pedagogy.

Moreover, resource allocation inefficiency is a barrier of social justice. Schools depend on the government's provision of teaching materials at the beginning of each academic year, and remote schools usually receive this provision late, which poses a serious problem. Delayed distribution of resources by higher authorities added to the shortage of available teaching and learning materials are additional impediments to their leadership. About half of the respondents were in alignment with this response:

We plan our school strategies and activities at the beginning of the year but resources such as books and other lab materials are disseminated late and teachers are also assigned after one or two months after the beginning of the classes. Much of the school's plan faces serious problems in implementation.

Furthermore, the interviewees noted that limited control over school funds use and the need for approval by the Sub Zonal and Zonal branches of MoE created problems. Proposals are delayed, and sometimes their prospective implementation period is past before even getting any reply. As a result, the procedures for mobilising resources are very bureaucratic and time-consuming. Thus, there is not enough space to accommodate and arrange support programs and activities targeting disadvantaged students.

Parents-related problems

The interviewees said that the level of parents’ participation in school activities is low and below requirements. Principal 2 and Principal 5 explained similarly:

Even if parents desire to see their children perform well, they do not come to school to ask about their children’s academic performance. They only come when they are summoned by the school management for disciplinary cases of their children.

Other than their financial and material support for the school, parents’ participation in students’ matters is low. Schools arrange a parents’ day about four times a year, where the homeroom teacher of each class presents the assessment record of the students and informs parents or guardians should any disciplinary issues or poor academic performance. Principal 10 explained his experiences:

Despite its significance, often the parents display gross neglect on the sessions by failing to come themselves to the parent’s day. Instead, they send someone else such as an elder brother, a neighbour or a friend on behalf of them.

Traditional attitude related challenges

Traditional attitudes prevalent in the community play negative roles in the process of realising social justice in schools. The interviewees noted that “some problems such as

disability are perceived as misfortunes and hence irrevocable". Women's education is also seen by conservatives as contrary to the ideals of the society. In remote areas, women need to travel five to ten kilometres to school, and this poses a threat to their security, and inefficiency in their expected domestic roles at home. This results in high female dropouts in senior high schools. Early marriage was also common in some particular communities, and according to Principal 6;

When you tell parents that girls are equal to boys and they should be encouraged to continue their study, some parents oppose and they want them to see girls married.

Similarly, poor performing students are considered naturally dull and retarded and are encouraged to seek other ways of life.

Discussion

Students' active engagement contributes significantly to their academic achievement and retention (Tinto, 2010), particularly in the cases of marginalised and disadvantaged students, who need special attention to boost their engagement in academic and non-academic activities. The principals put collaborative learning as a key strategy in promoting social justice and equity among the students. Although the strategy varied depending on the context, the results showed that group discussions and assignments, participation in co-curricular activities, and storytelling are the main techniques of collaborative learning culture in Eritrea. Storytelling seems peculiar to Eritrea in matters related to social justice. It helps students to actively interact with their colleagues, and develop confidence. Particularly shy, poor and orphan students get opportunities to break their silence.

Principals reshape the culture and structures of their school to create favourable learning conditions for diverse students (Theoharis, 2010), and the interviewees demonstrated that their campaigns bore results in moulding their school, especially for girls' education. They involved their communities, local administration personnel and civic societies in their effort. Earlier, Banks (2010) concluded that creating a culturally inclusive and relevant learning environment supports greater participation, and higher morale and achievement for marginalised students.

Empowering staff by providing professional freedom and involvement in school matters (Theoharis, 2007) is another approach. This allows staff to participate in school planning, which develops a sense of ownership and commitment in plan implementation. This eventually creates a more inclusive school environment. The results demonstrate that circle discussions and collaborative lesson plan developments among the teachers are good approaches to empowering staff. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2008, p.665) concluded that educational leadership should create a warm and welcoming school climate and build relationships to promote social justice.

Nevertheless, teacher readiness for collaborative teamwork is low, which corresponds to Skrla et al.'s (2004) argument about lack of teacher readiness and awareness being serious

obstacles for principals seeking to promote social justice. The results also show that teachers without pedagogical training may fail to accomplish their tasks properly. Inexperience in teachers' understanding of the complexities of social justice (Darling-Hammond, 2002), added to school's shortages and procedural delays in resource dissemination, creates bottleneck to success. This problem needs serious attention to facilitate school activities and programs with regard to social justice and equity. Moreover, lack of teaching materials (Gaudelli, 2001; George, 2004) continues to be a barrier for social justice. Finally, limited parental involvement in school matters, and conservative attitudes, particularly towards disabled person's and women's education, continue to be serious problems.

Conclusions, limitations and further research

School principals' practices of social justice in Eritrean schools are generally based on material redistribution, and the cultivation of mutual respect and recognition. Advocacy on participatory leadership involving community and local administration personnel is also a major arena. Engaging students in group discussions and assignments, participation in co-curricular activities and storytelling are important strategies applied by the principals. Arranging catch-up classes and providing medical support for the underprivileged students are also fruitful practices for social justice. Moreover, empowering school staff is another horizon for successful social justice practices. At national level, the MoE must simplify the bureaucratic procedures of allocating resources and approval of projects.

This study includes a small sample of participants who were selected from a small population of principals who temporarily (2-3 years) resigned from their posts in order to study at the CoE. Taking a larger sample from principals who are actively in duty might generate deeper and slightly different results. Establishing gender parity in the study population may also bring new dimension, because this study is very dominated by male ex-principals and ex-administrators.

This study brings distinct insights regarding the peculiarity and generality of school principals' approaches and challenges concerning social justice in Eritrean schools. Future research needs to survey all components of the system: students, local administration, civil societies and parent perspectives. This will help to establish a more holistic understanding of the current status and emerging trends for social justice practices in schools in Eritrea.

Endnotes

- [1] Examples of Eritrea's market days held during weekdays: Monday, Keren; Tuesday, Ghindae and Elabered; Wednesday, Adi Keih and Adi Tekelezan; Thursday, Mai Dma, Ghindae and Sen'afe; Friday, Himbrti, Serejeka and Massawa.
- [2] Agriculture accounts for 80% of the employment in Eritrea, and this means the same percentage of students in the country are affected by the problem.
- [3] Kunama is one of the nine ethno-linguistic groups in Eritrea who live in the western lowland of the country around the Gash Delta.

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Please cite as: Fessehation, P. W. & Peng, P. (2019). Social justice and equity in Eritrean schools: Lessons from school principals' experiences. *Issues in Educational Research*, 29(4), 1143-1159. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier29/fessehation.pdf>