

Article

Leaders' Social and Disability Justice Drive to Cultivate Inclusive Schooling

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to understand administrators' personal beliefs and experiences related to inclusive education and social justice that are critical to their commitment, the leadership provided, and types of special education services that prevail in their districts. This study is embedded within a conceptual framework centered on inclusive education, and existing theoretical framings of leadership for social justice and disability studies in education. Further, it contributes to the conversation in a recent call to reimagine educational approaches in the United States that challenge systems, focus on racial and disability justice, and serve the public good. A qualitative research methodology with in-depth interviewing as the data collection method was used to understand the lived experiences and practices of seven district-level special education leaders. It specifically looks at the leaders' drive to carry out social justice work and their overall value-based mission of socially just, equity-oriented inclusive education at the district level. It provides a research study on (1) how leaders come to carry out social justice and disability justice work in schools, (2) poignant career events that shape their justice work, and (3) their intentions to prepare under-represented and traditionally marginalized students to engage in society. The overall premise is that since district-level leaders are vital in shaping public schooling spaces, understanding their social and disability justice grounding is critical to disrupt marginalizing practices in PreK-12.

Keywords: social justice; disability justice; inclusive education; leadership for social justice; leadership for inclusive education; disability studies in education; inclusive leadership



Citation: Tracy-Bronson, C.P. Leaders' Social and Disability Justice Drive to Cultivate Inclusive Schooling. *Educ. Sci.* **2024**, *14*, 424. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14040424>

Academic Editors: Lynnette Mawhinney and Jhanae Wingfield

Received: 10 January 2024

Revised: 11 March 2024

Accepted: 1 April 2024

Published: 18 April 2024



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1. Introduction

Current movements in the field of education within the United States (U.S.) include calls for the improvement of special educational services for individuals with disabilities and the whole-school administration needed for equity-based inclusive education [1] and district-wide matters related to inclusion [2–6]. The reason is that decades of research clearly shows that inclusion in general education results in advantageous school and post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities [7–10]. District-level special education leadership plays an integral role in access to general education for students with disabilities [11], yet calls for understanding this pivotal role have not been fully answered [12,13]. Furthermore, research has not explored the internal drive for district administrators who take up the role of cultivating inclusive schools. However, research has explored the leadership strategies and provided practical examples of principals who lead inclusive and socially just schools [14–19]. Limited studies address district administration [3–5], and this study contributes to this gap by building upon the discourse on district administrators who lead inclusive schools by examining their internal values, specifically their social justice and disability justice drive. Further, the field of educational leadership has explored equity, diversity, and inclusion [18,20–28] as goals and actionable ways that school leaders can enact culturally responsive leadership, but this research centers on building-level principal leadership. This study builds on this current momentum as a way to examine the district leadership that has the responsibility for disrupting historically marginalizing practices and reimagining innovative approaches for cultural and disability justice within schools.

A premise of this research study is that, as Theoharis [29] conveys, administrators' conceptualization, or their personal experiences and beliefs, of inclusive educational practices and social justice is critical to their commitment, the leadership provided, and the types of special education services that prevail. As applied to this study, understanding the social justice and disability rights drive that district administrators embody is imperative since this propels their desire to cultivate inclusive educational practices at the district level; thus, this understanding and contribution to the literature is critical for other leaders to emulate. This study examines leaders who articulate their commitment to inclusive education as an enactment of their social and disability justice belief systems as a way to reimagine the educational process for marginalized students within their schools.

2. Conceptual Framework

This research is embedded within decades of literature on inclusive schooling and the leadership needed to engage in inclusive school reform. Research suggests that inclusive school experiences that allow students with disabilities to be educated within general education is a critical predictor of academic, social, post-secondary, living, and employment outcomes [7–10,30–34]. Research shows that increased time spent in general education positively relates to an increase in academic learning outcomes, and this is stronger for students with more significant disabilities who, often, are at a greater risk of segregated placements and educational experiences [7]. In addition, a meta-analysis analyzed 40 studies and a sample of 11,987 students and revealed a positive effect for academic and cognitive outcomes when special education was delivered in general education settings compared to segregated settings [9]. These research studies echo other meta-analyses and cohort analyses that have shown the benefits of inclusive education, especially on the academic achievement of students with disabilities [35–41]. Despite decades of literature offering promising academic, social, post-secondary, living, and employment outcomes that result from inclusion for all students with disabilities, the dismal reality is that there is large variability of inclusion access for students with disabilities, especially those with extensive support needs, in many school districts across the U.S. [42]. Grounded in this inclusion reality within the U.S., this study aims to examine the leaders who understand these benefits of inclusion, and specifically convey social and disability justice roots in their rationale for actively constructing inclusive spaces within their districts.

There is a growing body of literature on the principalship role of leaders who carry out social justice through inclusion [3,14,43,44] and on inclusive school reform initiatives [2,45–47]. However, there has been scant research on district inclusion [3–5] and specifically on where leaders' drive to carry out social and disability justice work originates. Thus, this research seeks to contribute to the conversation on social and disability justice by examining where the drive to enact inclusive schooling practices comes from.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This research is embedded within a conceptual framework of inclusive education, and existing theoretical frameworks of leadership for social justice and disability studies in education. In particular, this study seeks to merge the conversations around social justice and disability justice at the leadership level. This coverage of leadership for social and disability justice is critical since administrators set the tone for practical realities of what happens within public school systems.

2.2. Leadership for Social Justice

Leadership for social justice as a theoretical framework informs this research since it provides a lens to examine the inequities and power differences based on class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability [48], the resulting social inequities based on these identities [49]. The lens of examining these inequities within schooling systems allows administrators to identify and create more equitable learning environments for a range of underserved students across these identities. Leadership for social justice allows

administrators to take up the practice of critically acknowledging these socially constructed differences and the institutionalized practices that lead to inequitable outcomes for historically marginalized students [27,48,50–52]. Aligned within the ongoing conversation of social justice leadership [50,52–54], this research aligns with the definition of leadership for social justice that Theoharis [18] uses in his study of principals who are social justice leaders who:

[Make] issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. Thus, inclusive practices for students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and other students traditionally segregated in schools are also necessitated by this definition.

(p. 223)

Aligned with this definition of leadership for social justice, this study explores the ways that district-level special education administrators discuss their drive to engage in social and disability justice through cultivating inclusive educational practices.

2.3. Disability Studies in Education

The second theoretical framework that informs this research is disability studies in education (DSE). The focus of DSE is on examining elements that impact individuals with disabilities by interrogating the wider institutionalized structures that conform to ableism, exclude people based on their impairments, and unknowingly result in academic oppression. DSE adds to leadership for social justice in that it provides a lens to critically understand the school practices, structures, and programs that inexplicitly and explicitly marginalize, discriminate, and oppress students with disabilities. DSE provides a lens to understand disabilities within social, historical, and cultural contexts [55]. Due to the prevalence of a traditional disability lens in school systems, this study uses a social model approach that centers on disability as a way to contribute to a paradigm shift that transforms how administrators understand disability and use this knowledge to improve the educational experiences of students with disabilities in their districts. Thus, as applied to leadership practice, DSE allows administrators to reject the medical model that situates that impairment and disabled body within the person [56] and acknowledge the social model of disability that sees disability as a “cultural and historical phenomenon” (p. 216) [57]. In other words, disability is not an individual label, but rather a result of the interplay between the student’s impairment and the specific design of the educational context and learning environments. Thus, administrators use the social model of disability to evaluate the ways in which traditional special education practices have discriminated against students with disabilities, ableist practices within their districts, and work toward achieving disability justice for all students. In this research, DSE was a theoretical lens to understand the principles of inclusive schooling, the leadership that promotes the process of inclusion in education, and the ways in which leaders discussed their drive to create inclusive school districts and how social and disability justice contributed to this drive.

3. Research Methods

This project is part of a larger research study that uses a qualitative research methodology to explore the experiences of district-level administrators who are in charge of special education at inclusive school districts. The research question that guided this smaller project was this: Why do district-level special education leaders have a deep commitment to inclusive education, social justice, and disability rights?

3.1. Study Context

The purpose of the larger study was to understand the district-level special education leadership need to implement inclusive practices in public schools across the U.S. In

the U.S., local education authorities (LEA) are the public boards of education that have administrative control to implement the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which is the federal special education law. The LEA has a district administrator who is supervised by the state educational agency and is responsible for providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and providing special education and related services to children with disabilities within their district (§303.23) [58]. In addition to providing services that meet the unique needs of students with disabilities, the purpose of IDEA is to ensure that the rights of such children with disabilities and their parents are protected. The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) states that “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are nondisabled” and “special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment only occurs if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (§ 303.114) [58].

In this study, each of the districts and their leaders were engaged in improving inclusive special education practices, carrying out the intent of the IDEA [58] and the LRE requirement (§ 303.114) [58], and were focused on ensuring all students with disabilities, regardless of extensiveness of support needs or disability label, had access to general education learning environments in their home and neighborhood schools alongside age-appropriate peers without disabilities. That is, students with disabilities attend the schools they would attend if they did not have a disability. The leaders in this study were focused on expanding the amount of time students with disabilities would spend in general education and on the implementation of inclusive educational practices in classrooms and schools. It is important to note that the rate of access to the general education classroom varies greatly when looking across states and districts [42]. The marginalizing practices in PreK-12 that often happen are students with complex support needs (e.g., students with intellectual disabilities, students with emotional behavioral disabilities, students with autism, and students with multiple disabilities) often spend a majority of their school day in more restrictive settings than the general education classroom, such as self-contained buildings, autism program classrooms, and self-contained classroom, that separate their academic and social activities from students without disabilities [42]. This is especially marginalizing when looking at the research on the benefits of inclusion [7–10,30–34]. Further, research shows overrepresentation in special education, or unequal representation patterns, for racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students across national data, states, and districts [59]; these students are overrepresented in high-incidence disabilities, such as emotional behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, and speech and language impairments (United States Department of Education, 2023). For example, “African American learners are overrepresented at the national level in the categories of [intellectual disabilities] and [emotional behavioral disabilities]” (p. 31) [59]. Overrepresentation is a problem because of “labeling effects, segregation of placement, and presumed ineffectiveness of special education services” (p. 68) [60]. The low expectations; lack of access to general education curriculum, instruction, and peers; and poor educational and post-secondary outcomes are the result of the ongoing overrepresentation problem that marginalizes students with disabilities based on disability, race, ethnicity, culture, or language labels.

In this study, although the participants’ districts are typical to other districts in the U.S.—in terms of size, budgetary restrictions, student diversity, geographic locations, and the like—the distinguishing factor is that these leaders were expanding access to inclusive general education learning for students with all types of disabilities, including for those with extensive and complex support needs. These participants were leading inclusive school districts as members of the central office administrative team; were responsible, under IDEA, for district special education services; and were actively working to expand inclusive opportunities using the LRE requirement.

3.2. Recruitment Procedures

Recruitment used purposeful sampling [61] to locate a specific subsection of leaders who held deep personal beliefs about inclusion, social justice, and disability justice and concurrently possess the practical and technical administrative skills to implement inclusion at the district level. Snowball sampling [61,62] was the sampling recruitment method used to identify professionals in the United States (e.g., researchers at Universities or organizations and consultants) tied to inclusive schooling and then recommend administrators who implement inclusion within their districts. Recruitment used the following four criteria:

- (1) Employed in a public school district;
- (2) Member of the district-level administration responsible for special education. Given the range of state special education administration credential requirements [63], it is important to note that participants held a variety of titles;
- (3) Evidence of a strong commitment to inclusive education, as indicated by A or B below:
 - A. Provides leadership for a district that has a publicly stated inclusive commitment (e.g., on a district website, in the district goals or vision statement, or in a district newsletter that is posted in a public online space);
 - B. Demonstrates strong personal commitment for inclusive education, as measured by positive indicators on the Inclusion Survey [64];
- (4) Evidence of Inclusive Education in Action, as indicated by A, B, or C below:
 - A. Provides leadership for a district that is inclusive of students with disabilities, meaning that schools educate students with disabilities in their home school;
 - B. Provides leadership for a district that predominately educates students with disabilities in general education classrooms, with no students placed in separate special education classrooms for a majority of the day, using the principle of natural proportions. This means that students with disabilities should be placed in schools and classrooms in natural proportion to the occurrence of disability in that district [65];
 - C. Provides leadership for a district that is taking tangible steps toward inclusive education.

3.3. Participants

Using the recruitment strategies, 26 administrators consented to participation in the research study and 7 participants met these criteria. The participant demographics are in Table 1, and the district demographics are shown in Table 2. All participant names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Each of the participants of this study were central office administrators responsible for the administration of special education in their district, and the recruitment criteria selection indicated that their drive for advocacy in their leadership practice would offer a unique contribution to the leadership literature. It is important to note that six of the participants self-identify as white and one as Hispanic. One administrator, Sophie, led a large district comprising 132,000 students that included a student population of 46% Hispanic students, and she self-identified as Hispanic. In the initial research design, I intended to recruit and study administrators who were racially and culturally diverse. However, based on the scope of the recruitment criteria for needing to provide leadership in a district with evidence of Inclusive Education in Action, there were no administrators of color who met this criterium. Through their stories, experiences, and leadership actions, the participants in this study did, however, demonstrate evidence of being progressive on issues related to diversity and social justice in education. There is literature that discusses the complexity of school administration focusing on issues of diversity [66] and on issues of inclusion [3,44], but it was difficult to locate district administrators who focused on issues related to both inclusion and racial diversity who self-identify as being racially and culturally diverse themselves.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Leader	Age Range	Race	Gender	Years of Special Education Teaching Experience	Years of Administrator Experience	State	Position in District
1. Kora	51–60	W	F	7–12	20	VA	Coordinator of Positive Behavior Support
2. Mia	31–40	W	F	7–12	6	VT	Director of Student Support Services
3. Sophie	61 or more	H	F	12	20	CA	Director of Special Education
4. Lucy	31–40	W	F	14	9	VA	Supervisor of Special Education
5. Miller	61 or more	W	M	15	>9	AZ	Director of Student Services
6. Charlotte	31–40	W	F	0	8	MD	Associate Superintendent, Education Services
7. Leah	31–40	W	F	4	7	VT	Special Education Director

Table 2. District demographics.

Leader	Total Students	Grades	Percentage of Students with IEPs in the District	Students Who Qualify for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	ELL Students	Students of Color	Percentage of Students with IEPs that are Included in General Education Classrooms at Least 75% of the Day
1. Kora	9533	K-12	10%	38%	2.7%	6% Asian 4% African American 3% Hispanic 1% Other 86% White	81–100%
2. Mia	4052	K-12	11.3%	14%	2.7%	9% as African American, Asian, or Hispanic 91% White	61–80%
3. Sophie	132,000	Pre-K to 12th	11.2%	59.4%	26.5%	46% Hispanic 23.4% White 10.2% African American 5.4% Filipino 4.9% Indo-Chinese 3.3% Asian 0.3% Native American 0.6% Pacific Islander 5.4% Multi Racial/Ethnicity	N/A
4. Lucy	9500	K-12	10%	38%	N/A	6% Asian 4% African American 3% Hispanic 1% Other 86% White	81–100%
5. Miller	34,149	Pre-K to 12th	8.1%	29.97%	1.6%	18% Hispanic 4% Asian 3% Black 1% Native American 3% Two or More Races 71% White	81–100%

Table 2. Cont.

Leader	Total Students	Grades	Percentage of Students with IEPs in the District	Students Who Qualify for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	ELL Students	Students of Color	Percentage of Students with IEPs that are Included in General Education Classrooms at Least 75% of the Day
6. Charlotte	15,963	Pre-K-12	14.7%	43.95%	1.3%	2.2% Asian, 27.3% African American, 12.8% Hispanic, 48.1% White, 9.6% Other	84.5%
7. Leah	1212	Pre-K to 8th grade	13%	20%	3%	3% Asian, 2% African American, 0% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 92% White, 2% Other	89%

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this research occurred across three years and involved interviews, sharing district documents, member check meetings, email debriefing of interviews and transcriptions, detailed field logs, and analytical memos. In-depth interviewing [61] was the data collection method used to understand the ways in which participants make sense of their commitment to social and disability justice. Table 3 outlines interview prompts. Participants had at least three interviews that lasted 60 to 90 min each, and these were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to capture their actual words. At the conclusion of three interviews, data saturation occurred when there was enough information to replicate the study, explicit patterns were repeated, and new information had been attained [67]. Data analysis involved developing coding categories, arranging data, synthesizing common ideas, and searching for patterns [61]. Using a content and theme analysis, each interview was coded line-by-line; a code book was developed of the words, main concepts, and themes; and then the interviews were re-coded in a systematic process using the categories within the code book. Conceptual categories were created based on the reoccurring patterns. QSR NVIVO was the data management software used to organize the transcriptions, field notes, analytic memos, and member check notes and to conduct coding of all documents. “Qualitative analysis is a process that requires the exploration, organization, interpretation, and integration of research materials (data). These four components require that researchers retrieve, rethink, compare subsets, and identify patterns and relationships” (p. 628) [68], and QSR NVIVO was the technological infrastructure that allowed for a deductive data analysis. During this analytical process, it became clear that the administrators in this study conceptualized their overall commitment to leading inclusive educational practices in their districts as being tied to their deeply rooted values around social and disability justice. Although data in the larger project discussed leadership practices related to supporting principals, assisting teachers in building the capacity needed to teach students with extensive support needs, changing community organizations to be more inclusive, and creating inclusive policies, this study reports on the values and core commitments evident in participant leadership practice. Further, their leadership work was a practical way to disrupt current educational practice and reimagine more just schooling for all learners.

Table 3. Interview prompts related to drive to carry out social and disability justice work.

Tell me about your advocacy throughout the district.
 Talk about your commitment to inclusive education.
 Where did your commitment to inclusion come from?
 Can you tell me about a time when you had to take a strong stand on something?
 What are you most committed to as a leader?
 Talk about access and equity, and what it means in your leadership context.
 What were your early experiences with individuals with disabilities?
 How did your early experiences shape your leadership today?
 How would you describe your leadership?

4. Results: Participants’ Drive to Carry out Social Justice Work in the Field of Inclusive Education

This study explores these district-level special education leader’s drive to carry out this work. Through a data analysis, three fundamental elements were found to contribute to this drive: (1) personal family experiences that shaped their values; (2) poignant career events that influenced their future work; and (3) acknowledgement that the purpose of schooling is intended to prepare all students to engage in an inclusive society. This section explores these findings. Table 4 outlines these results.

Table 4. Drive to carry out social and disability justice work.

Findings	Synopsis of Results	Impact on Disrupting and Reimagining the Field of Education
Personal Family Experiences	Leader’s parents brought students with disabilities into their childhood home and had the perspective that people with disabilities had to be treated like everybody else	Early memories of equality of treatment for individuals with disabilities and that various socioeconomic statuses have lifelong justice implications
	Leader’s parents ran summer camp programs for children who were economically disadvantaged Experienced, as a teenager, working at a summer program that focused on “disenfranchised groups of people”: visited an institution where people with developmental disabilities were living	Hands-on experience at community programs that work with cohorts of marginalized people based on economic status, disability, living conditions, etc. at a young age was influential in noticing unjust systems and conditions in schools
Poignant Career Events	A directive from an administrator allowed her to see that how students with disabilities are serviced is a civil rights issue	Knowledge of disability justice as a civil rights issue
	Inclusion is “a civil rights issue intersecting with the social justice issue”; “it’s all about leveling the playing field. It’s all about providing people with free, fair access that is based on what they need”.	Understanding the connection between civil rights, social justice, and disability justice Creating equitable opportunities starts with small changes, using justice as the orienting mindset from which to operate
	Lack of access to general education means “not giving [students] access to what they have the rights of access to”	Access to general education is based on legal rights (LRE principle under IDEA)
	Segregating students with certain disabilities is as wrong as discrimination based on race and ethnicity Self-contained classroom teaching job where students with emotional behavioral disability were not allowed to eat in the cafeteria and instead were mandated to eat in windowless classrooms; let others know that this practice was unfair, unhealthy, and discriminatory Has a social justice perspective about where we are going, bringing the same urgency to disability as the conversation around poverty and the academic gap; very strong collective social justice core	Segregation based on dis/ability should not be widely accepted in schools Understanding the connection between disability and race as sites of segregation and injustice Advocating for injustices within their local contexts The social justice perspective means analyzing the gaps in achievements along multiple identity lines, such as with socioeconomic and disability Collective social justice core guides actions, at the district level

Table 4. Cont.

Findings	Synopsis of Results	Impact on Disrupting and Reimagining the Field of Education
Intention to Prepare Students to Engage in Inclusive Society	Does not believe in segregated programs at all because it does not mirror the real world; all live in the same fish bowl; there’s no special education churches and special education malls	Inclusive settings provide optimal preparation for the real world. Schools should represent the diversity of multiple identities, as should community organizations like churches and malls.

The district-level leaders in this study all described their commitment to furthering inclusive education as stemming from their social justice roots and drive to cultivate educational equity. Three key themes emerge from their statements (see Figure 1). Table 4 outlines the findings and provides a synopsis of the data results. The final column of the table responds to this Special Issue call to examine the corresponding impact for the field of education to “center under-represented knowledge, voices, and experiences in scholarship” [69]. Leaders in this study identified their reason for possessing an overarching commitment to inclusive education. Their drive is embedded within their social and disability justice core values, and this article also seeks to make the connection that this critical social and disability justice consciousness provides the lens needed for the leaders to disrupt and reimagine their districts as inclusive and equitable learning spaces.

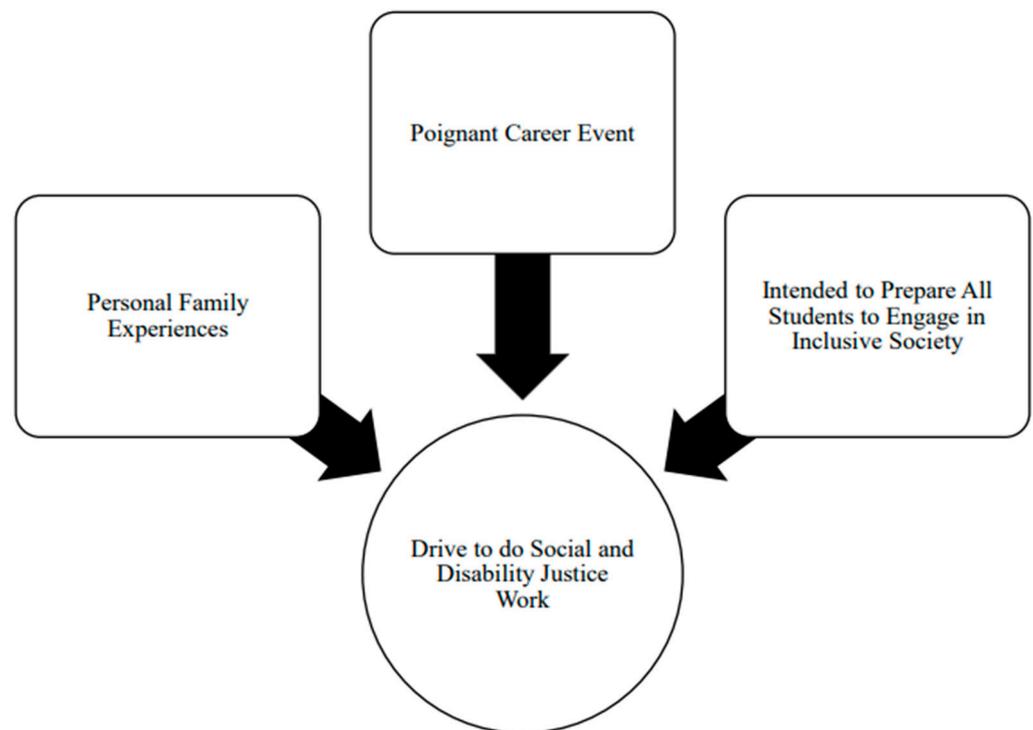


Figure 1. District-Level Special Education Leaders’ Commitment to Inclusive Educational Practices Stem From Their Drive to Engage in Social and Disability Justice Work.

Participants attributed their commitment to educational equity and social justice to various factors in their personal lives. Charlotte has never been a special education teacher. Prior to serving as a district-level special education administrator, she was an elementary educator, an instructional support teacher, and an assessment principal and over the course of five years had served as a principal in two elementary schools. She attributed her mindset to a directive from her boss soon after she began her role as a principal. Because of this, she explained:

[She] had a philosophical shift. . . . A complete change in the way that I saw . . . how I felt philosophically, about how we were servicing students with disabilities. So when I had that philosophical shift and I realized, oh my . . . you know, this is a civil rights issue. We are doing a disservice to these kids. They have rights and we're not giving them access to what they have the rights of access to.

Data related to her district's failure to live up to its obligation to provide education in the least restrictive environment (LRE), that is, students with disabilities receive their education alongside peers without disabilities to the maximum extent possible and are not removed from the general education classroom unless learning cannot be achieved even with the use of supplementary aids and services, in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was scrutinized by the state. Charlotte's boss charged her with leading the inclusive school reform initiative in her district. She described individual students with disabilities in the district whose stories inspired her to develop an intense calling for inclusive educational practices. She connected her drive to be a district-level administrator leading inclusive educational services to a strong calling to oppose discrimination.

This is our generation, my generation's civil rights issue. There's still a large school of thought that we should be segregating students with certain disabilities. I feel very strongly that it is fundamentally wrong. It is as wrong as segregating students with a different ethnicity or by race. I disagree with it. I'm hoping that we're raising a generation of children in our school system that, as they grow up as adults, won't tolerate that any more than our generation would tolerate discrimination because of race. But, it is still, I would say, it is still the minority who feel the way that I do. The majority feel that students [with disabilities] should be separated.

The stories Charlotte told about her progress in achieving her vision for her district echo this connection between disability and race as sites of segregation and injustice. She explained that integration "is a moral imperative" and required tough leadership decisions that involved advocacy, policy change, and going against the educational status quo on her part.

Another administrator traced the inception of her social justice roots back to personal experiences. Lucy described vivid memories of her parents bringing students with disabilities into their home. Her mother was a teacher at a training institute for children with intellectual disabilities; her father taught special education in a self-contained classroom. She recalled:

We met a lot of people with disabilities in and out of our home as a kid. I grew up in the 1970s. My parents were kind of like hippies. Crazy world. They were always bringing home stray dogs and stray kids. So even [when I was] a child, my siblings and I were never really . . . people with disabilities were just welcomed. My parents didn't instill any type of knowledge . . . we were never told they were different. My parents had the perspective that people with disabilities had to be treated like everybody else. So, I was ingrained with that thinking as a child.

According to her recollection, Lucy's parents did not explicitly discuss their principles about individuals with disabilities; this was a value that came out in the way the family interacted with community members. Lucy also described her parents running summer camp programs for children who were economically disadvantaged and her own volunteerism. She credits these learning experiences with her decision to study special education in graduate school.

Lucy began working in the district where she became a district leader during graduate school, first as a substitute teacher and then in an instructional assistant position. The district had been moving toward full inclusion for all learners, and her job was to support students whose Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) classified them as having emotional disturbance disabilities in general education classes. An IEP is the written document

for students with a disability that contains their present levels of performance, the annual measurable goals designed for the student to participate and make progress toward the general education curriculum, a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services, the modifications and accommodations, and other educational information needed as part of their individualized education. She became a full-time teacher in the same district upon graduation before eventually becoming the principal and then the supervisor of special education.

Lucy attributed her desire to be an advocate for inclusive education for individuals with disabilities to her realization that school is about more than teaching facts, that “relationship building” is a crucial aspect of a school’s mission. She said:

My personal perspective is that we all share the planet. I mean school, to me, is just preparation for what is on the other side, which is the real world... I do not believe in segregated programming at all because it does not mirror the real world. But I do think that... because, you know, the bottom line is these people with disabilities... we all are members of the human race. And, we all live in the same fish bowl. So, we all have to learn how to live in the same fish bowl.

In Lucy’s view, the experience of being in inclusive settings is important for all students because this provides the optimal preparation for the “real world”.

Lucy also attributed her incremental successes in working toward inclusive education to the teaching position she assumed immediately after graduate school. She was hired to teach in a middle school self-contained classroom of students who had an educational classification of emotional disturbance. There were twenty students with various emotional, mental, and behavioral needs. They had been placed in a self-contained classroom since their elementary school years. Students were not even allowed to each lunch in the cafeteria; they went there to pick up their cafeteria lunches and brought them back to the windowless classroom to eat. Lucy felt that this practice was unfair and unhealthy, and she let others know. She described her incremental success in convincing the school to change that practice and to find other opportunities for students to be included in general education classes throughout the school day. She remembered one student who was brilliant in math who entered higher-level math classes because of her advocacy. Lucy saw her success in these areas as a driving force behind her leadership.

Lucy frequently connected inclusive education to social justice. She described inclusion as, “a civil rights issue intersecting with the social justice issue. ... It’s all about leveling the playing field. It’s all about providing people with free, fair access that is based on what they need”. In essence, personal experiences that allowed Lucy to develop relationships with students with disabilities, coupled with small-scale changes in middle school where she had taught, gave Lucy an orienting mindset from which to operate.

Kora reflected on her religious upbringing leading her to summer experiences that allowed her to work with individuals who are traditionally marginalized from society.

I think the roots of my interest in educational equity for children with disabilities goes back to my adolescence. I grew up in a Quaker family. And, I had some experiences as a teenager working at a Quaker summer program that focused on disenfranchised groups of people: a visit to an institution where people with developmental disabilities were living, in what seemed to me to be appalling conditions. The fear I felt of the people who lived there and their subsequent kindness and welcome to me were actually life changing. I was also fortunate to attend a university special education program that had a strong social justice focus.

The summer program was a defining moment in Kora’s personal development in becoming a social justice advocate. She explained that the university teacher education program helped her to connect her summer program experiences to a larger social justice understanding.

Kora conveyed that her beginning roots of social justice advocacy were further solidified by career events. She described the priorities and mission of the district where she works:

We accept the responsibility for the success of every student. That's what we are able to do and so we mean every student, you know, literally every student. A big thing for us is that inclusion is a philosophy, it is the way we see our kids. It's not a program. When we say we're fully inclusive, what we mean by that is our students attend the same schools that they would attend if they did not have a disability. They are in the same classes that they would be in if they did not have a disability. It does not mean that students spend one hundred percent of their time in the regular classroom, never leaving there for any specialized instruction. I mean kids, even kids without disabilities, if they need some individualized instruction in something can go out with a teacher to get that. And special education students are no different from that. So for us, it means that everybody has the same access. It doesn't mean the percentage of time that you sit at a desk in a regular classroom.

Kora described the district's mission in terms of access to their home school:

I think for me and for a lot of us is the idea of the neighborhood school that is designed to meet the needs of the children that live in the attendance area. That's the core of it. So the idea is that children should be able to go to school with their neighbors near their homes and it is the responsibility of the school system to provide the resources that the kids who live in the attendance area need to be successful at school. And by doing that, it means our kids all attend their neighborhood schools. And so that that means we're dealing with a natural population of students in our school. So we don't have individual schools who have an overwhelming number of students with severe disabilities or overwhelming number of kids with problem behaviors because they're getting bused here.

The principle of natural proportions is evident when students attend schools that are geographically located near their homes. Research has suggested that the system needs to reflect natural proportions, meaning the number of students with disabilities in any school should reflect the natural population of students with disabilities in the district [70]. Natural proportions are one strategy to achieve educational equity.

Kora also attributed her social justice orientation to her religious upbringing and familial conversations about valuing every person. She described a sense of respect developed during the course of her career in working with families who had children with disabilities.

I am a firm believer that every child needs to be honored, respected, and taught in school. I have a very profound respect for students and their parents, students with disabilities and their parents of students with disabilities. I just came to respect what they were up against. I love all kids. I've never met a kid that I didn't like. And that was just me. But working with families when they had a child with disabilities, I just came to respect them and their hard work and their desires to have their children be respected and honored.

The kids themselves were very inspiring to Kora:

In working with students with disabilities, I realized how they were smart, engaging, and funny. They were typical kids who had to deal with things they had no control over. And why wouldn't somebody respect a kid for that? I mean I saw kids with disabilities doing things that I would not have the gumption to do that had I been in their shoes. And it just made me think they need the very best that we can give them. That is my guiding principle.

Kora expresses a genuine level of respect for every student and a desire to provide the supports they need. She described that working in inclusive schools provided first-hand

accounts of success stories for students with disabilities. Kora had held a coordinating special education position across the state years before. She had joined the large urban district after a class action lawsuit led to the discharge of the district management. In this capacity, Kora had significant communication with the group that had supported the lawsuit as well as other advocates, and she credited this collaboration with shaping her drive. This position had allowed her to put her belief that all students should be respected and taught in school into practice by collaborating with consultants and experts at a state policy level. This collaboration had shaped her underlying orientating framework.

Mia indicated that her vantage point is transparent and inherently connected to the broader district initiatives. She used a social justice perspective as an operational base of thinking. That is, she conveyed a sense of urgency in ensuring that students with disabilities make progress. She explained that the people who lead with her know and understand that public school districts serve all students:

It is rooted in our system of collectively being responsible for teaching all of the students that come through the door. We're responsible for providing access to the curriculum and having an expectation that all kids meet progress levels.

I have a social justice perspective about where we are going. We are going to close the gap between students who struggle and students with disabilities. I think that one of the things that is interesting is that we all pay a lot of attention sometimes to the poverty issue, and when it comes to the disability issue there is still this underlying belief that well we can't really expect those kids to make progress because after all, they haven't the capacity, or something like that. So that's why in my mind, I like the disability piece because I think it's under . . . it's not as big of a focus problem in a lot of districts. Lots of people talk about poverty, everybody knows that we have a poverty gap, and we are and I believe, very strongly, that that is necessary. I try to bring that same level of urgency to kids with disabilities.

According to Mia, other administrators in her district recognize the poverty gap, but they have a certain resignation; they do not believe it can be fixed. By centering her advocacy on disability, she calls both attention to an issue that other administrators are not addressing and one that they tend to believe cannot be addressed. Mia emphasized that her colleagues in the district, including the principals, the superintendent, the director of curricula, and the special education directors have a "very strong collective core" and their core belief in social justice guides their actions.

Miller has two sons who have disabilities, and they provided the roots of his commitment to social justice.

I am fully committed to inclusive districts. I guess I have two sons that tell me. They don't have special education churches and special education malls. I think, why should this be any different? All kids are diverse from each other, and so kids need to learn from each other in inclusive communities.

Miller understands the educational system as a microcosm of society. We live, interact, and work in diverse, inclusive societies. There are not separate businesses for adults with disabilities. Keeping with this line of thinking, Miller articulated the belief that schools support students to interact with individuals who represent a variety of differences. In the next section, a discussion of these findings occurs.

5. Discussion of Social and Disability Justice Roots

This section contains the discussion on the participants' drive to carry out social and disability work. The findings reveal the leaders' social and disability justice roots as the motivating contributor that grounds their commitment to cultivating inclusion within their districts. It discusses the ways in which district-level leaders demonstrated disruption of the field of education to reimagine a more socially and disability just inclusive school district.

The district leaders described their drive to cultivate inclusive education as originating from their social justice and disability rights roots. Three key themes emerge from their statements. First, personal family experiences had an influence on leaders. Second, those who could not credit a family experience indicated a poignant career event that infused social justice and inclusive reform work at the district level. Third, all of the administrators saw their work in the field of inclusive education as a purposeful social justice action intended to prepare students with and without disabilities to engage in the larger, inclusive society.

The effect of personal experiences, as a common finding, results from the development of relationships with individuals with disabilities. Life-changing relationships had been core to administrators' stance on social justice and inclusiveness as they pursued their own education and professional careers. These practical experiences happened through individuals with disabilities being brought to their own childhood home, summer camp experiences with individuals with disabilities and economically marginalized children, seeing institutions and living conditions, and explicit conversations about individuals with disabilities. These beliefs were not let go of or discarded, as they grew educationally and throughout their career. This finding aligns with previous research that these administrators transcended leadership boundaries of merely being managers or instructional leaders [13,71,72]. Rather, the participants were leaders who were committed social justice advocates [18] and, thus, provide practical examples of exhibiting leadership for social justice as members of the central office administration. These early family experiences impact their critical consciousness around equality of treatment, noticing unjust conditions and systems in schools, giving them a threshold of respect for every student, regardless of race, class, or disability, and in turn, these inner justice commitments propel their disruption of the status quo in special education and their commitment to cultivating inclusive education at their districts.

The district-level special education leaders in this study revealed that their deep commitment to inclusive education stemmed from poignant career events. These career related events occurred in their teacher education training, when they were novice educators, and in their work within school settings. These drastically shaped their current leadership convictions and inspired them to commit to social justice work in the field of inclusive education. While the circumstances varied, the common finding was that a situation caused them to examine and question their previously held beliefs critically to construct an educational setting that welcomes diverse learners. These moments aided them in understanding the connection between civil rights, social justice, and disability justice. They allowed the participants to learn about access to general education being based on legal principles; how to problem solve around students with extensive support needs; how to speak up and advocate when injustices are noticed within their local context; about having expectations that every student will progress academically; and that closing the achievement gaps means analyzing along multiple identity lines, such as race, socioeconomic status, and disability. Pivotal career moments shaped their ability to notice and make changes within their local context to provide more equitable treatment and education for every learner. Building on special education administrators as managers and instructional leaders [13,71,72] and principals who are social justice advocates in their school buildings [18], this research study builds upon this discourse to provide an understanding of district-level administrators who are leading inclusive schools with a commitment to leadership for social and disability justice that comes from early career moments.

All of the participants had an explicit focus on fostering an inclusive educational system as a means to further social justice and civil rights for all students. They feel that public schools should prepare all students to participate in an increasingly diverse society. The interactions and friendships that students with and without disabilities form in schools are building blocks for developing respectful citizens who can navigate and embrace the broader inclusive society. An additional articulated belief was that students

needed equitable access to contexts within neighborhood schools with age-appropriate peers. One participant explained:

We're an inclusive system, which to us means that all students should have equal access to programs in their neighborhood schools with their age appropriate peers. So what we believe as a district is that every student should have access to every program that our system has to offer without having to go somewhere else to get it. So they participate in their neighborhood schools with their age appropriate peers.

Within the focus of creating an inclusive educational system as a professional strategy to enact their commitment to social justice and civil rights, district-level administrators clearly articulated that all students should have equitable access to district general educational contexts in order to thrive in our diverse society. This indicates their commitment to an inclusive stance as a model that supports students' transition from student to adult in the larger community more effectively. Participants used eloquent phrases to communicate these points, including, "We all share the planet", "We're living in the same fish bowl", and the school's mission is to provide "preparation for the real world".

The importance of this study lies within understanding the values, roots, and drive in how central office leaders who are responsible for the administration of special education lead districts that disrupt the status quo ways of implementing special education services and instead pave the way for innovative inclusive educational practices in their districts. Armed with disability rights, personal experiences that allowed each to develop relationships with individuals with disabilities and other marginalized social identities, and early career moments that fostered social justice and disability rights lens, the participants in this study use these core values to disrupt the traditionally marginalizing institutional structures and cultivate the provision of inclusive special educational services.

6. Implications for Teacher Education Classrooms and Spaces

In order to inform teacher education, it is critical to understand practitioners in the field of education who enact social and disability justice belief systems as their way of reimagining the educational space for marginalized students. The leaders in this study are practitioners who are district-level teacher-leaders who collaboratively problem solve around areas that matter to social and disability justice, and therefore, it essential for teacher education to understand their experiences.

The findings indicate that both personal family experiences and poignant career events shape the leaders' drive to enact equitable, inclusive educational practices that center on social and disability justice. The data indicated that many of these early experiences came in their initial field experiences as an educator where they saw placements that were segregated, inequitable access, lack of basic civil rights, and lack of integrated social opportunities. Each discussed pivotal moments of conversations they had as educators with directors, supervisors, or principals that helped them step into their identity as an advocate around disability justice, civil rights, and social injustices. In teacher education, it is critical to unpack experiences that novice educators have around schools as sites of injustice, segregation, and marginalization. This has a direct impact on practitioners' ability to see disability justice and social justice as civil rights issues, understand the connection between disability and race as potential sites of segregation and injustice in schools, and use this knowledge to work toward creating equitable opportunities with incremental changes.

This study also points to the need for teacher education to provide training in how to notice and analyze sites of racial, social, and disability injustice. The participants in this study noted moments and events that helped them to see injustices within the status quo, and critique them. Teacher education can teach novice educators to develop critical consciousness and conduct classroom-level equity audits [73,74] as a tool for social and disability justice. Which students are being pulled out for supplemental instruction? Where are students sitting in the classroom, during special classes or electives, in the lunchroom? What can be noticed in terms of access to physical spaces in the classroom

and school that demonstrate racial, cultural, disability, and socioeconomic patterns? Do students have equitable access to school resources? The information gleaned then is used to encourage teachers to act, advocate, and promote changes when they notice an injustice in schools. Teacher education propels novice educators to be reflective practitioners who notice, critique, and transform “not only to high standards for the learning of all students but also to social change and social justice and to the individual and collective professional growth of teachers” (p. 46) [75].

Teacher education programs can ensure that culminating projects are situated within equity-based action research. As Gorski and Swalwell [76] note, this facilitates teacher education candidates’ ability to engage in “equity literacy” to notice inequities and respond to it by creating equitable educational spaces. Depending on the teacher education program, this might mean that portfolios highlight the ways in which candidates have been social and disability justice change agents within field experiences or incremental equity-based changes and adjustments to classroom and school practices. Teacher education candidates can use equity audits to develop their statement of the problem and research question for action research and capstone projects.

Further, teacher education programs can offer ongoing support to graduates of their programs around sustaining the commitment to equity. Dodman et al. [73] suggest that this might include facilitating digital professional learning communities that allow for the development of critical inquiry and consciousness. Further, this might involve collaborative problem solving focused on taking incremental action. Teacher education programs can support the ongoing inquiry of inequities in schools, taking action, and offer the sustained support needed.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study presents results on district-level leaders’ drive to carry out social and disability justice work. However, there are limitations to this research. This study centers on district-level special education leaders who are at the forefront in the enactment of inclusive educational practices, which dictated a small sample size. Nonetheless, a larger sample size might be advantageous for making the results generalizable. A second limitation is the lack of participant racial diversity. Although this is often the nature of administrators in the U.S. schooling system, the participants mainly self-identify as white and one as Hispanic. Although the participants demonstrate evidence of being leadership advocates for social justice, a limitation of this study is that it was difficult to locate district administrators who take up both issues of inclusion and racial diversity who self-identify as racially and culturally diverse. Further, participant observation of the daily leadership practice would provide insight into their social and disability justice drive in action, within the context of the complex district organizations. Additionally, case studies that address the collaborative relationships between the district leaders, building-level leaders, and inclusive educators would be insightful; this would provide information on leadership between district and building levels, and how it is communicated to educators at the classroom level. Another limitation is not learning about the impact of participants’ inclusive leadership impact on the lives of students from the students with disabilities and their families themselves. However, this research provides a solid foundation for future research studies in this area.

There are implications for future research to continue contributing to the body of knowledge around social and disability justice within the field of education. Teacher education programs can create metacognitive opportunities for candidates to reflect on their personal family experiences related to individuals with disabilities and with others whose racial, ethnic, and cultural identities are different than their own. Further, programs (both undergraduate and graduate programs) can offer volunteer, service learning, and internship experiences for candidates as undergraduate and graduate students to gain the hands-on experience and reflective moments needed to acquire consciousness around social and disability justice. Research with and by people with disabilities [77,78] that centers on disability and the experiences of individuals with disability within inclusive schools

is imperative to understanding the critical need for increased disability justice. Further, understanding the practical strategies and challenges of district-level administrators who work toward inclusive practices as a means of furthering social and disability justice is critical.

8. Conclusions

District-level leaders who are responsible for special education play a unique role in disrupting and reimaging education for students with disabilities. In a seminal review of the professional literature regarding the status of special education administration, researchers explained that most special education administrators emerged from special education backgrounds, making them knowledgeable as to the “assumptions, practices, and knowledge traditions of the disciplines of special education” (p. 4) [79]. A more nuanced understanding of general education, educational administration, and social and disability justice is needed for the administration of special education. Thompson and O’Brian [11] asserted, “A strictly special education orientation is too narrow to properly prepare an individual to address many of the most pressing issues associated with contemporary special education administration (e.g., accountability, school reform, and inclusive education” (p. 34). Further, the social justice orientation of participants may give them an advantage, as it goes beyond a “strictly special education orientation”. The field of educational leadership has decades of research that demonstrate engagement with equity, diversity, and inclusion [18,20–22,24–28,76,80,81]. This research builds on this momentum to reflect the district-level leaders’ origins of their deep commitment to inclusive education as a practical way to disrupt the historically marginalizing practices and reimagine innovative approaches for justice within schools.

Since district-level leaders are vital in shaping public schooling spaces, understanding their social and disability justice grounding is critical to disrupting marginalizing practices in PreK-12. The district-level leaders in this study held deep commitments to inclusive education that meant all students, regardless of the nature or extensiveness of disability, had the right to attend the school they would have if they did not have a disability. Their drive to carry out social and disability justice work stemmed from personal family experiences, poignant career events, and acknowledgement that public schools should prepare all students to live in an inclusive society. These had a direct impact on their beliefs and actions that shaped their leadership, and disrupted and reimaged inclusive educational practices within their school districts.

Funding: No funding was provided for this research.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Syracuse University (IRB Approval #: 13-291 on 10/9/2013).

Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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