Working (With/Out) the System: Educational Leadership, Micropolitics, and Social Justice
Edited by James Ryan & Denise Armstrong

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Abstract

This review of Working (With/Out) the System highlights the major themes found in Ryan and Armstong's (2016) compilation of qualitative studies that examine the micropolitical skills used by educational leaders on behalf of marginalized students. The studies contain findings from interviews with teachers and principals that reveal the daily struggles to counterbalance neoliberal policies in public education and the strategies they use to initiate change, while managing fear of reprisal and professional alienation. The voices captured in this text not only call educational leaders to action, they also lend advice on how to act for social justice on behalf of students and offer professional and moral support for those who choose to act.

Keywords: *micropolitics, social justice, educational leadership*

Working (With/Out) the System is one volume in a series of texts that explore issues related to the practice of urban education. For the purpose of stocking educational leaders' social justice toolkits, editors Ryan and Armstrong (2016) compile an impressive sampling of studies that explore the motives for, practice of, and obstacles to social justice in schools. The chapters contain strategies teachers, principals, and educational leaders at all levels rely upon to strike a balance between policy compliance and the needs of marginalized students. The book's title hints at the need for education leaders interested in social justice to be strategic and flexible in their understanding of the system in order to maneuver it. Throughout the text, the selected authors draw upon the scholarship of notables like Blasé, Mawhinney, Theoharis, Rawls, and Ryan, extending an important body of knowledge to education professionals, who will likely recognize themselves in the example behaviors that are described as social justice practice. Each chapter in the text offers wisdom, support, and feasible strategies educational leaders can assemble into thorough application of educational activism.

In Chapter One, Ryan and Higginbottom (2016) explain the history of educational activism, specifically social justice, by citing Rawls (1972) who defined social justice in comprehensive terms around the concept of equal distribution of resources. Other scholars like Fraser and Honneth (2003) assert that equal distribution of resources is unlikely without the equal positioning of marginalized groups of people alongside members of the dominant culture. The strategies involved in

negotiating fair distribution of resources and the struggle to elevate minority populations are referred to as micropolitics (Innaconne, 1975). Ryan and Higginbottom thoroughly explore the history and evolution of the term micropolitics, as well as its connection to macrolevel politics, helping readers to establish full-scale integration of the concept of micropolitics before leading the audience forward in an explanation of the who, why, and how of micro political practice in educational settings.

Ryan and Armstrong (2016) devote considerable attention to the who, why, and how of social justice oriented micropolitical practice in schools by choosing qualitative studies that provide specific answers to the questions 1) Who is working toward social justice in schools? 2) Why, despite the risks, are they working toward it? And, 3) how do they achieve social justice? Running parallel to these inquiries are studies that delve into the ethical practice of social justice in schools and the fear educational leaders must learn to manage if they are to effectively pursue social justice.

To capture a picture of the "who" in social justice work, Ryan and Armstrong (2016) include in Chapter 5 a case study of educators in 13 countries conducted by the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN), which sought to better understand how school leaders, i.e. principles and head teachers give meaning to social justice practice. Angelle, Morrison, and Stevenson (2016), the chapter's authors, make clear that social justice practice in education occurs at all levels and "transcends positional roles" (p. 97), but they add that "the nature of the role, however, places the principal or head teacher as the interface for mediating external policy directives and internal school dynamics."

In Chapter 3, authors Tuters and Armstrong (2016) use qualitative studies to explore educators' internal motivation for risking professional credibility and relationships in pursuit of equitability and fairness. Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber (2006), authors of a study cited in Chapter 3 state that the skills involved in sorting out the educational dilemmas presented in educational settings have become the "bread and butter" of educators' lives; however, shared throughout the book are examples of teachers who act on these educational dilemmas in a manner consistent with social justice outcomes not as a skillful function of their role as teachers, but from a moral and ethical obligation to their economically, socially, academically vulnerable students. The text also demonstrates that teachers who are morally and ethically committed to social justice practice in schools report feeling "perpetually immersed in struggles" (p. 122) but many report their tenacity springs from early life experiences that shaped the values underpinning their commitment to equitable practices.

Working (With/Out) the System reveals to readers the subtle "how to" strategies for social justice work in schools. One teacher describes an instance when she felt compelled to ask a "hard but necessary question" of her director. She asked the question because "it was the right thing to do" (p. 127). However, she adds that by asking the question, she risked being perceived as confrontational and challenging the director's authority. Risk is inherent to micropolitics; therefore, the book cautions social justice practitioners to consciously establish productive working relationships with administrators, other teachers, students, and parents. The teacher narratives suggest that amicable relationships lessen the intensity of conflict or at least improve the likelihood of recovery from conflict when it occurs. One teacher admits that to make social justice progress in her school, she embraces the philosophy of asking for forgiveness rather than permission.

The word courage appears frequently throughout the chapters because teachers who exercise social justice strategies report the possibility of "professional suicide" as a very real component of their reality in public schools (p. 104). It is an unfortunate position they find themselves in, but teachers who act on social justice principles do so at the risk of becoming vulnerable to

isolation and the loss of opportunities for promotion and professional development. Because peer-teachers fear backlash from their association with outspoken teachers, activist teachers endanger their professional networks and much needed collegial support. Educators who are skillful social justice practitioners are characterized as "fear-wise" rather than fearful (p. 129). According to the research, fear-wise micropolitics require self-awareness and self-reflection, "craft-knowledge," and a thoughtful consideration of consequences to actions. Fear-wise micropolitics also involve the foresight to weigh the consequences of action against those of inaction.

Having graduated from a social-justice oriented teacher credential program, I embarked upon my teaching career fully steeped in multicultural pedagogy. My training prepared me to recognize the barriers to equitable education my students encountered; but, I was naïve to the system. I trusted that the educational system, of which I was a part, would give way to the interests of students when challenged. Schools as "arenas of struggle" (Ball, 1987 as cited in Ryan & Higginbottom, 2016) was not a concept I had internalized, nor was I comfortable with the conflict that arose when I advocated for more equitable practices in the school. After two years of unskillful negotiation of the educational system, I was exhausted and felt like a failure so I left the profession altogether.

Students in teacher credentialing programs will benefit considerably from the information contained in these chapters because the interviews are with teachers whose experience in public schools foreshadow the experience of idealistic educators. To improve resilience and longevity in the field, prospective teachers must graduate with a base-line comprehension of the systematic obstacles they will encounter and a set of skills and awareness that will help them navigate sometimes unfriendly terrain. Seasoned teachers and administrators who are committed to social justice will appreciate knowing they are not alone in the fight.

Anyone working in the helping professions will benefit from reading this text and expanding their understanding of social justice practice within public institutions. Unfortunately, because of the omnipresence of neoliberal philosophy and practice in the public sector, organizations and institutions designed to help people may potentially perpetuate inequality. Social workers in organizations that serve marginalized populations suffer from high rates of burn out because they are overwhelmed by the demands of shrinking resources accompanied by higher and higher performance standards. This text will undoubtedly enhance practitioners' awareness of macro-level influences on the system and build the micropolitical capacity of administrators and staff members.

Neoliberal, market-driven policies that prioritize teacher accountability measures and student outcomes over more equitable approaches to education create highly stressful and competitive environments where educators must compete for resources. In these highly competitive environments, teachers, principals and administrators must weigh the needs of their students against mandated compliance with inequitable federal and state policies. *Working (With/Out) the System* offers real-world examples of the skillful use of micropolitics by social justice educators who are committed to advocating for the interests of their students, however cautiously.

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