Principals’ Perceptions of Social Justice in State Primary Education Schools*

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**Abstract:** This research aims at revealing state primary education school principals’ perceptions of social justice. The research uses a qualitative research design and the interview method. The study group was composed of all the state primary education school principals (20) in Çanakkale city centre. The data were analysed through content analysis and continuous comparison techniques. The research has found that a problem of social injustice is available in primary schools in terms of benefiting from educational services. The disadvantaged groups were gipsy children, children with low income and low academic achievement and disabled children; and it was observed that school principals only made attempts at meeting those children’s physical needs.

**Key words:** Social justice • State primary education schools • Principals • Disadvantaged groups

**INTRODUCTION**

Social justice is at the foundation of democratic societies. Social justice in education has been the centre of interest of educational researchers and practitioners since early 21st century and especially the last decade [1-4]. Contemporary educational management has great interest in the issues of social justice [5]. Gewirtz [6] suggests that educational systems, educational policies and the practices in institutions of education could be considered and analysed in terms of social justice. Sisman [4], on the other hand, believes that values such as equality, solidarity and justice should be taken into consideration in all the objectives and policies related to education.

A review of field literature demonstrates that the concept of social justice in education is represented through concepts such as democracy, equality of opportunities and multiculturalism. Equality of opportunities and social justice in education require availability, accessibility and acceptability. However, equality of opportunities is applicable to anyone whereas social justice applications target the marginal and the disadvantaged groups [7].

Furman and Shields [2] describes social justice as the conscious intervention defying the instances of inequality arising due to a large group’s inappropriate use of power on another group. Social justice in education is related with the impacts of students’ race, ethnicity, sexual bias and disability on their educational results [8].

Such conceptualizations of social justice in education are capable of students’ attendance in school and their academic achievements [9]. The problem of social justice in education also reminds the question “for whom is justice?” The answer to that question may vary from country to country, from region to region or from school to school because the demographic structure of each school may differ [10]. Therefore, it is essential for educational leaders to understand the complexity of social justice [9].

Scannan [11] points out that educational leaders have substantial roles and responsibilities in securing social justice in schools and that they should serve effectively to all the students in general and to the disadvantaged in particular. School administrators should provide the disadvantaged students (in terms of religion, race, social class, gender, poverty or disability) with positive educational possibilities [12].

Considering the hierarchical organisation in the system of education and the objections to be raised by teachers or parents, it might be said that securing social justice in education is not always easy [13]. The movement called “No Child Left Behind” in the United States [9] and a number of policies and applications in

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Europe for that purpose are remarkable [14, 15]. Undoubtedly, such developments motivate educational leaders to achieve social justice in the school environment and to struggle with applications lacking justice.

In Turkish system of education, on the other hand, international agreements were signed and several national regulations were made so that every individual could benefit equally from basic education the right of education which was given as a human right. However, although education is compulsory between the ages 6-14, there are still current arguments claiming that not all individuals benefit equally from primary education services in Turkey. For the disadvantaged groups, the availability of problems in terms of having access to the school, attendance and academic success even at the level of basic education are considerable. Therefore, as the people to play significant roles in handling and solving the problems at school levels, school principals’ perceptions of social justice is important.

**The Aim of the Study:** This study aims to demonstrate state primary education school principals’ perceptions of social justice. It also aims to consider principals’ experiences and expectations of the educational system.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Since the research intends to obtain information on school principals’ social justice perceptions, interview method was employed. This research was conducted in all the state primary education schools located in Canakkale city centre and the whole population was accessed instead of taking samples. Gypsy students of differing numbers were available in each of those schools and the schools were therefore multicultural. The study group was composed of the 20 principals of state primary education schools. 95% of them were male whereas 5% were female. Moreover, 20% had experience less than 20 years, 80% more than 20 years.

The research was performed in February and March in the 2010-2011 academic year. A 10-question semi-structured interview form which was developed by the researcher was used in the research. Thus, a literature review was done first and then the expert opinions of three specialists in the field of educational sciences were consulted with regard to the interview form.

A pilot application was conducted in a school located in a county, which was selected a month before the application. Following obtaining the expert opinions and pilot application, the required regulations were carried out in the form, it was was given the final shape. Having recorded through a voice recorder, the data were then written, categorised and were analysed via coding based content analysis and continuous comparison techniques.

In order to represent the reality accurately, the information gathered was summarised and participants’ confirmation was received. Efforts were made to achieve internal reliability and validity by considering such things as the significance of the findings in themselves and according to the context, their consistency with the pre-determined conceptual framework, a comparison of them with the results in literature, the reality of the data in terms of the participants, the use of alternative approaches in explaining the findings and generalisation of the findings into similar contexts or situations [16].

In order to increase the internal reliability and validity of the findings, each participants’ sample responses to the questions in the way they stated were also included. And in order to increase the time-dependent reliability of the research, the descriptive analysis of the data was conducted following the interviews.

**RESULTS**

The research findings were divided into themes in parallel to the questions on the interview form. The themes are as in the following:

**Question 1:** For whom and why is it important to secure social justice in your school? Who should social justice be directed to in your school?

All of the primary education school principals (a total of 20) considered social justice important in their schools and stated that social justice should primarily be directed to students. All students- regardless of gender, race, religious beliefs, economic level, disability and the region where they live- should be provided with the right of education to the extent that health conditions allow. All the school principals’ views in this respect were in favour of students. Some of the views held were as in the following:

"Receiving basic education is, above all, a human right. Therefore, students should be the priority of social justice in terms of receiving this service”. 

Our prior task is to offer this service to the students consulted to us and registered in our school in the best way possible. This is what we and our teachers are for, we are here for this.”
The organisational justice in educational institutions is shaped by employees' perceptions of confidence [17]. Therefore, considering the fact that organisational and social justice applications in schools increase the employees' motivations and organisational loyalty, the finding that school directors are expectant for themselves and for teachers is important. Thus, the majority of the principals (13 of them) stated that social justice should be inclusive of teachers and half of them said that top managers should adhere to the principle of social justice. The views held by some principals considering the inclusion of teachers in social justice are give quoted below:

"Fair implementations should be available in schools so that teachers can perform their duties appropriately. Otherwise, adherence to school and to duties is out of question."

"Social justice should prevail in the whole of an institution. In my opinion, justice should be implemented in a system of education to include all the school administrators."

The finding mentioned above demonstrated that the principals did not consider the applications of social justice in an institution equally important. However, according to the research conducted by Karakošev [18], the behaviours that teachers considered important in terms of school principals' ethical leadership behaviours were related with justice.

**Question 2:** Do you think all the students in your school benefit from primary education services equally?

All of the school principals stated that all students in their school generally benefited from primary education services equally. However, most of the principals (19 of them) said that some students might have problems in benefiting from the services due to individual factors. In this case, it may be said that all students were not at the same level in benefiting from the services. Yet, access to, participation in and perfection in education should not be only for a few students, but it should include all the students [15]. Views in this respect were as in the following:

"We are here to offer educational services to each student equally. However, student-related reasons sometimes influence their school attendance and achievement."

"We, as the school administration, try to do our best; but students' achievement may vary due to their ethnicity, their parents' expectations of education or their economic-cultural levels."

**Question 3:** Who are the disadvantaged groups who cannot benefit justly from primary education services in your school, if there are any? Describe their characteristics.

Most of the principals (that is to say, 19 principals) pointed out that the disadvantaged groups who cannot benefit from primary education services adequately in their school were usually gypsies. International evidence shows that several factors such as family (ethnicity, socio-economic-cultural level), peer groups and the closeness of the school as well as the interaction of all these factors are influential in educational output [19]. Such cases should be struggled with both through the policies of public education at the national level and through precautions to be taken at the school level. Such a struggle would both enable the disadvantaged students to capture social justice and assure students' achievement, parents' interest and sensitivity, an effective school and the formation of a healthy society [15]. The fact that ethnicity is an important factor hindering access to the right of education and attendance is displayed in the following striking statements made by some of the principals:

"In my opinion, being a gipsy is the primary obstacle in education for a child. A look at the records shows that wherever there are gipsy students, inattention, unsuccess and behavioural disorders are abundant in those schools."

"Unfortunately, gipsy children are the students with the most inattention and lowest achievement. It is a common habit for them to drop out when they want."

Besides, some of the principals pointed out that secondarily students with low level of income (according to 15 principals), low level of achievement (7 principals) and disabled students (6 principals) respectively could not appropriately benefit from the educational services. The views in this respect were stated as in the following:

"In our school, the disadvantaged groups are firstly the gipsy children, secondly the children with lower income, then children with lower achievement (having learning difficulty) and disabled children."
“Gipsy children are the most problematic group. After that, poor children, children with learning problems and disabled children form a group with the lowest school attendance and academic achievement.”

Question 4: What are the obstacles hindering students’ benefiting from primary education services in your school? Please specify.

Family’s low levels of socio-economic status, education and consciousness or family’s not attaching importance to education were stated by 18 school principals as the most important obstacles in front of gipsy children in terms of benefiting the educational service. The principals who believed that the greatest obstacle for those children concerning education was their family expressed their thoughts as such:

“Gipsy children come from poor families with low socio-cultural levels. Besides, their educational levels and expectations are very low. This case makes the things more difficult for the students.”

“The living conditions of gipsy children’s families are very hard. They don’t have even a house environment and they live in huts. Therefore, they suffer from economic insufficiency. Basically, they have such problems as nutrition, school uniforms and transport.”

11 of the school principals said that some students had problems in coming to school and in attendance due to illness and their disability. Two of the views stated by school directors were as in the following:

“We sometimes have students with continuous illness and disability. It is a big problem for them to come to school especially in winters.”

“I don’t think disability and continual diseases should be a child’s destiny in receiving educational services. Families don’t desire this case, either. Sometimes they cannot continue their education. They have attendance problems.”

Question 5: How should participation in the decision-making process be in order to secure equality between students in school?

Most of the principals (18) stated that students had a right in many decisions made in their school. Indeed, the disadvantaged students could be made more powerful if their thoughts were really valued instead of being symbolic [13]. Two principals saying that student representatives joined their teacher meetings and that their views were taken into consideration stated their views as in the following:

“We have teachers meetings to make the important decisions in our school and we invite student representatives into our meetings. We also ask for their opinions.”

“We have student representatives in our school, who are selected by votes. We include them in our meetings which we hold to make important decisions concerning our students. We also try to enforce their decisions.”

However, some of the principals (6 of them) said that especially gipsy students claimed they encountered discrimination - though this was not true. Two of those principals said:

“Some gipsy students say you don’t listen to us or you behave unjustly just because we are gipsy. I try to be sensitive to such cases.”

“Sometimes, conflicts may occur between teachers and gipsy students. The 7th and 8th graders, who are mostly gipsies, sometimes claim that we punish them. Yet, punishment is for all the students who do not obey the rules, not only for gipsies.”

Question 6: What does the school administration do so that all the students benefit justly from primary education services?

All the principals stated that clothes, stationery materials were donated to the gipsy students in need and that they were granted scholarships. They also pointed out that local administration as well as school-parents association made great contributions to meeting the needs of such students. A small number of principals (6) mentioned benevolent citizens giving donations to schools. The following statement made by a school director showed that principals were sensitive to that issue, but that the social regulations were lacking in schools:

“We use the funds provided by the governorship and by special provincial administration to meet the stationery material needs and scholarships of those students. Additionally, school-parents association and benevolent citizens’ donations also contribute. We also donate clothes to those students. Unfortunately, we have nothing else to do for them.”
In addition, most of the principals (15) pointed out that they had special classes for those students who need special education. Apart from that, 8 school principals said that they offered guidance services to those students with low achievement as such:

"The number of students who have learning difficulties is more in our school than in others. Therefore, we have three special classes with the contributions of our teachers and of the provincial directorate of education. Besides, the guidance services are given by our guide teachers."

**Question 7:** What do you think of the legal regulations carried out by top managers so that all the students could benefit from educational services?

All the principals stated that a new legal regulation has been enforced by the Ministry of Education since 2010-2011 academic year. Through the new regulation, the drop out students had the opportunity to join the "support class application" in a pilot school with the contributions of teachers. The principals said that 300 out of approximately 900 students at the basic education age (in the 7-14 age group) who were drop outs were returned to the system thanks to the new regulation in Çanakkale, and the documents obtained [20] verified this claim.

All of the primary education school principals stated that they had formed "a persuasion commission" in their school consisting of a guide teacher assigned by the school, an expert teacher appointed by the Ministry of Education (ME) and an officer from the police organisation to return the children who had quit education to the system in relation to the "support class application". They said that the commission monitored those students' attendance and that they often visited their homes and thus made great efforts to return those children to the system.

However, some of those principals (7) said that following the education offered in "support class application", those students were refused by teachers or were accepted into classes with difficult thinking that they would decrease the overall success of the classes. This case may have resulted from teachers' inadequacy in leadership, social justice and their pre-judices against gipsy students. In addition to that, measuring success only with academic achievement in the system of education may have caused teachers to display such negative behaviours and attitudes. Two of the principals made the following remarks to demonstrate that educators' discriminating behaviours led to inequality and injustice [21]:

"We had a drop out gipsy girl. Her family was persuaded by expert educators and she returned to school. Later, while she was experiencing the excitement of returning to her class and meeting her classmates again, she encountered discriminating behaviour and refusal to accept her into the class from her teacher. We handled the problem, but she did not attend school whatever we did."

"Parents usually expect high success of teachers in our school. Consequently, our teacher do not want gipsy students in their classes for the fear that they would cause a decrease in the success of their classes."

A small number of school principals (5) stated that mobile education was an application to secure equality and social justice in education. In a similar way, research studies show that it plays a significant role in the schooling of economically insufficient children and especially of girls [22]. A school principal made the following statement in this respect:

"We have students coming to our school through mobile education. This practice seems to be a positive step for poor village children."

**Question 8:** What other kinds of applications should be made by top managers in our system of education so that all the students could benefit from educational services justify?

A majority of the principals (16) did not talk about this issue whereas a small number (5) made recommendations such as appointing teachers for students with a disability and having attendance problems in school and thus conducting education at homes. Because having a continuous illness or a disability affects a child's school attendance, they may have recommended such a solution. However, the legal regulations made by the Ministry of Education [23, 24] may be said to be a good educational opportunity for disabled students with constant diseases. Two principals stated their views in this regard as:

"I know that the ME has made a legal regulation to offer students with an illness education at home and at hospital. However, those services may be insufficient in practice. Therefore, making those regulations widespread and applying them would be in favour of students."
Question 9: What does the school administration do in your school so that all the teachers could benefit justly from such sources as materials and classrooms, from duties providing financial income, from awards and administrative positions?

All the primary school principals stated that both the duties with financial gains and the sources were distributed in a fair way. They said that the sources were distributed in accordance with seniority, performance and specialisation fields. Considering the fact that the social justice secured within the institution could affect teachers’ loyalty to the school in a positive way and contribute to their performance [25], it is important that principals be careful in establishing social justice and it is also desirable. Two principals’ views were as in the following:

“Duties and sources are distributed in our school by considering expertise, seniority and performance. We pay special attention to this. Otherwise, we would face conflicts.”

“Teacher-teacher relations as well as teacher-manager relations are harmonious in our school. The main reason is, I think, the distribution of awards, sources and duties. If we make mistakes, our teachers inform us.”

Question 10: When you compare your school with others in terms of the sources (teachers and other staff and materials), what can you say?

More than half of the principals (14) stated that sources in their school (materials) were insufficient. Most of them (15) said that the ME would implement a new application called “standards for primary education institutions” and that such an application would offer opportunities for schools with insufficient sources to improve their conditions. Such views as in the following were stated by the principals:

“Of course we have insufficient materials. For example we don’t have projectors in every classroom. Our teachers demand one for each class for the quality of classes.”

“The conditions of our school is apparent. We are trying to offer a better environment. Our labs and library are not sufficient. As a result, we expect the support of provincial directorate of education.”

Besides, all of the principals said that they did not have problems in terms of teacher sources in their school and that their teachers were not transferred to other schools due to displacement within the province. This may have stemmed from the fact that all the schools were in the city centre, easy to reach and had similar conditions.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This research has three significant results. Firstly, it is obvious that the problem of social justice in terms of benefiting from educational services in primary education schools exists. Despite this, the new legal regulations made by the ME are very important in that they offer opportunities to access to education, to re-start education and to secure attendance and completion of education for the disadvantaged students.

Secondly, it is clear that the disadvantaged group is primarily the gipsy students, who are followed by children with lower level of income and achievement and the disabled children. Those children had problems in terms of “equal start”, “equal participation” and “attendance”.

Another result is that primary education school principals make efforts to meet mostly the physical needs of the disadvantaged students. Undoubtedly, it is very important for principals to be constantly in contact with and to benefit effectively from the surrounding sources (donors, municipalities, governorship) to meet the physical needs of the disadvantaged students. Yet, the school directors should firstly be familiar with the school environment and the student profile in the school; because an analysis of the school environment is considered important in activities related to securing social justice in schools [13].

According to the results, it is apparent that other regulations need to be made so that gipsy students- the disadvantaged group- could return to school. For that purpose, schools should no longer be a place where only educational service is provided for gipsy students and more socio-cultural activities should be included, social strategies should be pursued and schools should be made more attractive. Regulations made in other countries were seen to produce positive results in securing social justice [9].

Establishing social justice in primary education schools firstly requires that school principals have a vision in this issue. Thus, extending the educational and life opportunities of minority (gipsy) children and children of poor families, children with illness and disability could be specified as a vision. School directors, as individuals with a vision of social justice, can remove the role of students’ disadvantageous state in their school attendance and achievement.
Because basic education is a legal right for every student, there are regulations which need to be made for teachers and school principals. Thus, sensitivity training as well as a general training could be offered to the administrators and teachers in relation to children’s benefitting from basic education and to the contributions to society. Apart from that, pre-service teacher training at graduate level and management-leadership training at post graduate level should be restructured. Such courses as moral leadership, intercultural leadership and/or social justice leadership and applications should be included in the education programme [26-29]. In this way, teachers and administrators who are also leaders could be more sensitive to the disadvantaged group.

Leaders, who will establish social justice in schools, should make sure the data as to drop-outs, lack of academic achievement, and as to in which groups the certain behavioral problems exist are recorded. Leaders should re-evaluate their roles in cooperation with teachers in school based on those analyses [30].

Schools as institutions of education should prepare both students and the society to a multicultural and global society with various ethnic origins [31]. In this respect, all the students should be offered applied education in social justice and be made to participate in discussions on race, gender and class equality. Social justice and equality should be in the centre of all the courses and applications in school [5]. In this way biases hindering students to understand one another should be avoided.

Thomas-Fair and Hubbard [32], in research conducted with kindergarten students, demonstrated that students’ perceptions in the past, at present and in the future changed through educational activities. Ryan and Katz [33] found in their research called “pedagogical research for social justice” that students were able to define social justice, which they could not at the beginning, that they gained consciousness and that they thought critically in terms of social justice.

On the other hand, legal regulations should be made in order to conduct school supervision by considering social justice activities instead of evaluating only academic achievement. The greatest difficulty in social justice applications in schools is experienced when the system of education focuses primarily on students’ achievement [34]. Therefore, school principals should give up the habit of expecting the same achievement of every student as a strategy [13]. In research performed by Tomul [35], school administrators stated that activities concerning the establishment of social justice were not taken into consideration during school supervision and that only academic achievement and physical conditions were considered important.

Education should be offered to parents in order to stop drop-outs and to assure attendance. The parents should be informed through face-to-face interactions, formal and informal meetings, hand books, brochures and newspapers [36] and sample applications should be shared by using the audio-visual media effectively.

REFERENCES


