Within the last 25 years, the number of students of color and students of poverty attending K-12 public schools has significantly increased compared to white and middle-class students. Current estimates project that students of color will become the majority of students within our public school in 2030 (US Census Bureau, 2010) and nearly 46% of students are classified as low-income (NCCP, 2011). Although the complex connections between race (Delpit, 1996), social class (Knapp & Woolverton, 1995) and the public schools have been exhaustively covered in the literature, the shifting demographics, and historical inequities that disproportionately affect low-income and racial/ethnic minority students within schools are increasingly coming to light. With little in the form of non-stereotypical professional development, educators are left with minimal resources to examine issues of race and social class. Since institutional leadership is highly influential, if not the strongest factor, in the promotion and realization of school success, particularly in championing students of
poverty and color (Mckenzie & Schuerich, 2004, 2007), the principal is responsible for facilitating discussions of oppressive policies, procedures, and practices. There is a paucity of literature describing how the principal unmasks oppressive forces and advocating for more socially just outcomes within the public schools in non-stereotypical ways. As such, the purpose of this paper is to provide an alternative to the small research base by highlighting one principal committed to creating dialogues focused on issues of race and social class. By working with staff members, students, and community members, this principal had vibrant dialogues resulting in action plans to change day-to-day policies and procedures of the schooling effort to create a more inclusive culture for racial/ethnic minorities and low-income students.

**Theoretical Framework**

The intersection of two theoretical frameworks serves as the foundation of this line of research: leadership for social justice and dialogue. A principal leading for social justice makes “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” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Advocates for leadership for social justice reject traditional models of leadership focused solely on the promotion of student learning; otherwise hegemonic forces would still be firmly entrenched within the public schools. There is a need for a school leader to help others make the connection between the sociopolitical forces, and the intersection of race and social class and how those forces are inextricably linked to student learning.

Honest and open dialogues are necessary to build richer and more complex understandings of issues of race and social class. As Burbules (1993) keenly points out “dialogue is an activity directed toward discovery and new understanding, which stands to improve the knowledge, insight, or sensitivity of its participants” (Burbules, 1993, p. 8). Another fundamental property of dialogue is the centrality of the relationship we are entering with another (or more) person(s) (Buber, 1987). There is a general sense of safety and agreed upon “rules”. Breaking down the traditional roles of student and teacher may lead to stronger relationships if the structure is less hierarchal (Freire, 1970). Rather than imposing a viewpoint onto another person, the teacher (or in this case the principal leading for social justice) serves as a facilitator, encouraging others to share their perspective to explore an issue together. Eliminating hegemonic forces that marginalize students of color and economically disadvantaged students cannot happen if principals leading for social justice do not openly discuss them.

Conversations between principals and students, staff, community members, and parents are necessary to create systemic change.

There is a paucity of literature describing how principals leading for social justice can actively engage in dialogues of race and social class. One of the most popular forms of professional development to better serve the economically disadvantaged is the work of Ruby Payne (2005). Payne’s scholarship, however, is highly problematic. Her research is based in the culture of poverty model, steeped heavily in deficit thinking, conflates psychology with sociology, promulgates stereotypes, asserts unfounded claims as science, and is guilty of the fallacy of logic which offers no other considerations or alternative explanations (Bohn, 2006, 2007; Bomer et al., 2008, Dudley-Marling, 2007; Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Gorski, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Kunjufu, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei & Kofi, 2005, Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011).

The lack of professional tools available to address class and racial inequities in non-stereotypical methods is a substantial gap within the literature. The role of the principal in helping staff members examine how the public schools can replicate social structures, and the types of conversations to better understand how social class works between staff and students is relatively unexplored within the literature. An aim of this research is to provide an alternative to Payne’s work. In the previous section, I have illustrated that the principal is an important lever in changing campus culture and climate, promoting student learning, particularly for those students who are traditionally marginalized. Ensuring all staff members have the requisite skill set to work with all populations of students to ensure the best possible outcomes is imperative to mitigate or eliminate the reproduction of social class.
Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative case study (Yin, 2003) conducted during the school year of 2011-2012. The unit of analysis for the case study was the dialogue conducted between the principal and the various members of the educational community. First, I employed purposeful snowball sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) by conferring with professional colleagues—administrators, teachers, directors, superintendents, and professors—familiar with P-12 socially just principals working in public schools. I contacted principals in professional organizations to identify colleagues who may have ideals similar to what I am seeking. I asked these individuals both in person, over the phone, and via email if they knew of any school principals who believe in a) the promotion of high expectations for student achievement (beyond student test scores, holistic learning, citizenship, democracy), b) promote inclusion, c) value diversity, d) expect students to be able to critique power structures and transform society, e) and challenge their staff and students’ understanding of social justice. Moreover, I was interested in studying a principal who has demonstrated the promotion of academic success in the past (under similar criteria). The purpose was to find a principal who believes in and worked toward the criteria established in my theoretical framework. My rationale is that I could not assume that because principals believe in a socially just form of student learning and classrooms would necessarily mean these same principals would lead socially just conversations to demystify differences and support classroom teachers.

The context the principal is working within also is a factor in selecting a participant. The literature is replete with principals leading for social justice at the elementary school levels. For the purposes of this study, I therefore was more inclined to select a high school principal to inform the literature of the successes and challenges of leading for social justice. I compiled a list of all potential candidates and ranked them based on my five criteria. There were three candidates who met all five criteria and worked at small urban high schools. One candidate was chosen at random.

Data Sources

Data was collected in a small urban community located in the Midwest. Over the past 10 years, the school district has experienced rapidly changing demographics (both racial and socioeconomically), an intense pressure to raise test scores, and a history of racial tensions within the community. Analysis of documents, observations, and the collection of artifacts supplement numerous interviews of teachers, students, parents, and community members. Thus far, 15 interviews lasting approximately 45-90 minutes have been conducted. I used these accounts to “locate and trace the points of connection among individuals working in different parts of institutional complexes of activities” (DeVault and McCoy 2006, pp. 18, 19) to better understand the dialogues between the principal and the each stakeholder. Although I observed several professional development sessions where the principal was leading dialogues on race and social with his staff, I assumed it would be highly unlikely or inappropriate for me to observe a potentially volatile conversation of race and social class between a principal and student or parent. In lieu of these conversations, I have supplemented my case study with narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993). Rather than observing delicate conversations, I invited the principal to compose written responses to complex case studies.

I emailed three complex case studies from the Journal of Case in Educational Leadership to the principal. Each case centered on complex scenarios involving race and social class. The question guiding each case was, “How would you begin to have a conversation with this stakeholder?” The purpose of administering the cases first was to gain a stronger sense of the principals’ values and in turn, triangulate data to interviews, observations, and artifact data. Written responses were asked to be approximately 750 words, though this limit was not be strictly enforced. The emphasis was on the quality of responses. All narratives were coded and analyzed using the software NVivo. A thematic analysis was employed to find similarities between the multiple cases to understand the nature of the principal’s dialogues (Reissman, 1993).

Tentative Results
The research is ongoing and the results thus far are general and tentative. The first finding is that the principal leading for social justice would raise issues of race and social class in non-confrontational ways to introduce potentially contentious topics. For example, the principal would illustrate the rising inequality in the United States by playing a game of Monopoly. First, the principal divided the teachers into multiple “families” of 4-5 members. Yet each family would have vastly different amounts of wealth, some families had a few properties and very little wealth; other families had much property and vast amounts of wealth. By playing Monopoly where each member begins with vast differences in wealth, staff members gained a very small glimpse into the lives’ of students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. After playing for 30 minutes, the principal challenged his staff by asking questions about day-to-day policies in procedures. Making the connection between some of the oppressive rules of Monopoly and school, the staff created an action plan to eliminate policies like mandatory school field trip fees, Advanced Placement testing fees, and yearbook fees to create a more inclusive culture for the economically disadvantaged.

Another finding thus far is that community members are reporting a growth in class consciousness (hooks, 2000). Although few participants are using the term “class consciousness” in responses to surveys and interviews, language is essentially aligned to hooks (2000) definition, of better understanding the interworkings of classes; awakening to the invisible barriers and contradictory values of our society. During one professional development session, the principal presented to his staff what a bi-weekly check of someone living at the poverty line looks like and how this check struggles to support monthly grocery, utility, rent and gas costs. Given the challenges of the nearly two-thirds of students who qualify for free and reduced-lunch prices, many teachers reported that they were “shocked” at the struggles of many of their families. One teacher reported, “It never occurred to me just how much $10 dollars really meant to some of families. I’ll never see $10 the same way ever again.”

Significance

Socially just principals engaging in dialogues of race and social class may lead to the elimination of oppressive forces, and create more inclusive spaces for learning. To this end, this paper connects to the conference theme of education and poverty by raising cultural competency, exploring ethical issues, and advocating for traditionally marginalized families. But more so, not only does this paper explore one leader’s mission to discuss issues of poverty it describes how one leader made meaningful changes within his school.

References


