

## Mentoring School Leaders through Cultural Conflict

Thomas Hughes

*Northern Arizona University, Arizona, United States*

Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>This article advances compelling information about deficits in training for inclusive school leaders, and presents viewpoints along with options intended to help support their efforts to lead others through cultural challenges and conflicts. It asserts that social justice on a whole and related values and norms have increasingly been caught up in added complexity and challenge that inclusive leaders may not have been prepared to lead through. The article also presents a rationale and supporting data for better developing overlooked administrator abilities. Finally, noting a lack of currently available resources to expedite training and foster important growth in key skill areas, this article ultimately advocates for expanded informal but qualified mentoring support being offered to inclusive school administrators.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b> <i>Received</i> September, 30, 2018  <i>Accepted</i> August, 30, 2019</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Social justice, Mentoring, Educational leadership preparation, Conflict.</i></p>

**Cite as:**

Hughes, T. (2019). Mentoring school leaders through cultural conflict. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, 4 (3), 591-622. DOI: 10.30828/real/2019.3.6

## **Introduction**

Mentoring is probably not the solution for every challenge school leaders face. Still, when dealing with the unfamiliar, there are likely few better available resources to draw upon than guidance from capable and successful leaders who have already navigated through similar situations. Challenges associated with social justice offer a clear and important example of situations where school leaders could likely benefit from experienced insights. As the complexity of leadership issues intensify (Hughes, 2014; Miller, 2018), and principals find themselves on the front line of some of society's toughest challenges, having a mentor or two to call upon might just be the best alternative that leaders have available to them.

The initial impact and lasting influence of social media provides a contemporary example of the complexity just referenced. Twitter campaigns urging consumers to boycott businesses that align themselves with controversial organizations, programs or individuals already create turmoil that regularly leads to escalating tensions and wide-spread retaliation (Sakoui, 2019). In as much as social media is incredibly convenient and accessed by choice, Gray and Gordo (2014) contended that it is already poised to take on seemingly endless targets including businesses, social norms, and even schools and governmental institutions. The impacts of social media are real and alarming in that they are as immediate as the touch of a smartphone. School administrators leading in the age of social media regularly mediate critical issues between schools, community and society (Miller, 2018), and often need the immediate and personal guidance that can only come from someone with experience.



---

## Social Justice

Social justice was mentioned as a potential area of disagreement. To a caring and inclusive educator, there is nothing controversial about the topic. Social justice is about maintaining high expectations for all students and focusing on their learning instead of locking in to a one-size-fits-all lesson or way of delivery. It is about acknowledging what students know, and building upon who they are instead of changing them (Belle, 2019). It is about encouraging them to persevere when they struggle instead of accepting less just to get by, or looking the other way when things get uncomfortable. Social justice in education is about supporting the unique person so they can excel in their own unique path as a learner, instead of insisting on conformity and limited choices already identified for them (Delpit, 2006).

Many educators would hold that what was just described is just the way education was always meant to be. While the important work carried out by inclusive educators in the classroom triggers plenty of challenges, it would seem that struggles outside of the classroom are also settings where school leaders can expect to find future complexity (Strom & Martin, 2017). Though America has historically been called the great melting pot (Napolitano, 2019) and public schools were originally intended to be the vehicle for shaping an educated, productive and diverse citizenry, we are increasingly and more forcefully hearing quarrel from segments of society that would prefer to marginalize people who do not look, worship or fall within family structures the way they expect them to. The escalating tensions associated with ongoing marginalization is indicative of greater discord than may commonly be perceived, and the lack of training inclusive educational leaders to address these challenges (Murray-Johnson & Guerra, 2018), is the focus of this article.

## Culture Conflict

According to Merriam-Webster (2019) the noun culture conflict describes discord that results when different cultures are incompletely assimilated. In as much as the term applies to social justice, this conflict is not linked solely to different ethnicities, but rather references quarrels surrounding differing identities, principles and values. A quick return to the classroom may provide the clearest illustration of how cultural conflict is viewed in this article. If we picture a classroom setting we can expect to find students representing differences with respect to race, economic standing, sexual orientation and other often marginalized characteristics. While efforts are regularly made to classify students according to only one of these discrete characteristics, the truth is that they overlap just like they do across society, and were therein referenced as being “cultural” differences in *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (Delpit, 2006).

Cultural conflict is a concept that was purposefully introduced into this article because of the increased complexity schools and their leaders are already encountering and the visible discord tied to differing identities, principles and values. Davies (2004) indicated that the very pluralism schools have been expected to nurture has helped trigger conflict over cultural difference and priorities found within schools and across society. We are becoming increasingly aware of this growing discord, in part at least, due to the transparency of social media which both informs us and fuels many of the growing rifts in society. These rifts are often indicative of purposeful alliances and large-scale strategic agendas that can dwarf the institutions’ commitment to ending marginalization and providing an inclusive education (Spring, 2011).



## Conceptual Background

As the complexity of leadership issues increases (Hughes, 2014; Miller, 2018) administrators invested in social justice and creating inclusive schools can expect to contend with additional variation and intensity from the challenges they face (Davies, 2004; and Ross, 2013). Recent history has supported this line of thought. In 2000, the topic of principal preparation focused on creating a safe and positive instructional setting in which theoretical discussion and self-reflection about racism as a system of oppression could be facilitated (Young & Laible, 2000). Almost a decade later the focus was expanded to include the development of critical consciousness (McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantley, Gonzalez McCable, & Sheurich, 2008).

Around this same time, Theoharis updated the literature concerning the emerging types of strife inclusive of what principals were facing. Detailing expanding internal and external sources of discord that included bureaucracy, lack of resources, and lack of investment in the cause, the longstanding term “barrier” was updated to include an understanding of “resistance” that could be expected by advocates for social justice (Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2008). After an additional ten years of cultural history, Strom and Martin (2017, p.8) identified “shifting global social norms and political trends” which lend credence to earlier referenced predictions concerning future complexities and challenges facing social justice. Noting the election of a conspiracy theorist who rose to notoriety contending his predecessor was a Muslim born in Africa, they asserted that:

*Collectively, these global events are underscored by xenophobia, racism, and religious intolerance-expressed as anti-immigrant rhetoric that is wrapped in the guise of ensuring national safety and preserving culture – and anti-globalism,*

*which has been fueled by the extreme wealth inequality across the world (Strom & Martin, 2017, p. 5).*

This article extends the point of view that in 2019 there is deeper, more visible as well as more unified and more forceful “objection” to the type of progress sought and realized by inclusive school leaders. A decade after Theoharis advocated for an intensification of training efforts, this article is doing the same in advocating once again for principals to receive better skill training in the areas of conflict resolution, problem-solving and hiring for change due to escalating tensions and trajectories that are consistent with predictions of increased conflict and complexity (Hughes, 2014; Miller, 2018).

Working, then, from a societal level and “cultural conflict” point of view, and embracing the call from Strom and Martin (2017) for new ways of thinking about training to combat increasing tensions, this article attempts to address three practical considerations. (1) That predictors of increased challenge and complexity are being realized. (2) To document skill deficits limiting administrator ability to lead through greater complexity. (3) To identify practical and immediately available approaches to improve administrator preparation to lead others through challenge and conflict.

### **Related Literature**

#### **Social Justice Leadership**

Celoria (2016) defined social justice leadership as being invested in eliminating marginalization. Theoharis (2007, p. 223) held social justice leadership as a condition of leadership where “principals 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”.



Challenges presented to inclusive leaders can be more intense and more complicated than the norm, and according to Strom and Martin (2017), these leaders, along with members of marginalized groups, need to unite to confront social and economic agendas that are threats to equity and even democracy itself.

### **Social Justice Leadership Preparation**

The preferred approach for training American administrators into social justice has long been to nurture and promote self-reflection and individual enlightenment in a safe instructional setting (Young & Laible, 2000). McKenzie, et al (2008) further advocated that administrator training programs only accept candidates already personally and professionally invested in supporting marginalized groups. Singleton (2014) established a framework for conducting “courageous conversations” about social justice. Furman (2012) observed the important work aimed at training for social justice, but considered the literature was especially thin with respect to specific skills school administrators needed and how to best develop them. Similarly, Bettez and Hytten (2013) spoke to the need to address additional skill areas. They called the literature vast and growing, but largely academic and theoretically based. Ultimately, they also identified a need for successful leaders in social justice to have critical thinking and analysis abilities to draw upon.

### **Escalating Leadership Challenges**

According to Miller (2018, p. 22), “Ongoing changes in a school’s internal and external environments require school leaders to find new ways of doing leadership”. Along with Hughes (2014), Miller predicted escalation in the intensity and complexity of leadership issues. In no way were social justice concerns removed from that

prognostication. During the past ten years there has been ample evidence of expanding challenges for society, social justice, and subsequently school leaders. Not all of it has to do with the most recent presidential election in the United States, but plenty of it does according to Strom and Martin (2017). And, as former Superior Court judge and longtime friend of the president, Andrew Napolitano (2019) related, there is plenty of reason to be concerned about long-term consequences of positions taken by the president.

A frequently cited issue is the Trump campaign and administration's predilection to push feelings ahead of science, research or established facts, which Strom and Martin (2017) indicated only fuels reactionism. An example that directly impacts education, and demonstrated the way the reactionism spreads is the way all teachers were branded "socialists" by the president's son, and national media very friendly to the Trump administration has continued to champion that message ever since (Klein, 2019).

Another example of similar appeal to negative feelings took place when the president took issue with four female members of congress who are also persons of color. "Go back" along with "Love it or leave it" is not merely hyperbole, but instead "implicates a racial or nativist superiority according to his friend Judge Napolitano (2019, para. 10). According to conservative commentator Jennifer Rubin (2019, para. 8) this was business as usual, as the president's very clear agenda is to convince white males that they are the victims, and legitimize their claims to being the "real Americans" all while promoting hatred and racism.

Napolitano (2019, para. 8) went on to say Trump has "unleashed a torrent of hatred" with the deliberate intent of dividing the nation and destroying peaceful dialogue and all the while making it very clear





that dissenting opinions will not be allowed. Strom and Martin (2017) agreed with Napolitano's position that this type of behavior is a very serious problem for the United States, and more pointedly linked these growing challenges with the administration's daily efforts to dominate, alienate and eliminate members of marginalized groups in American society. These efforts have been so pervasive that White Nationalism has clearly become the cornerstone of current American immigration policy (Srikantiah & Sinnar, 2019).

Without question, barriers and resistance to social progress and equity continue to present themselves daily, but Ross (2013) stated that conflict is also part of the work of social justice. Recent events, though summarized only very briefly, are incredibly alarming and paint a troubling picture for both equity and democracy in America according to Napolitano (2019), Rubin (2019), and Strom and Martin (2017). They also affirm observations about ongoing change, increased complexity and the need for school leaders to "find new ways of doing things" (Hughes, 2014; Miller, 2018; Murray-Johnson & Guerra, 2018; Ross, 2013; and Strom & Martin, 2017). Murray-Johnson and Guerra (2018) have also made it clear that there is not enough attention directed toward how to make things work in school settings. That focus is addressed next.

### **Missing Skills**

The world educational leaders' function in is becoming increasingly challenging and continually requires them to better comprehend the life changing events taking place outside their immediate setting (Miller, 2018). Whereas they formerly enjoyed widespread support and a level of autonomy thirty years ago (Fullan, 2014), government domination has set in around the world (Miller, 2018), and has left educators with a compliance first mentality (Hughes

& Davidson, Forthcoming), that often limits their inclination to think critically, be able to solve problems or effectively address conflict (Goodwin, 2015; Mercer, 2016; and Sogunro, 2012). The compliance mentality also limits emphasis on developing important skills like these, and while it has been dominating K12 education for decades, it is now finally catching up with higher education as well. Professional training programs for school administrators typically have national standards to follow and accreditation hurdles to clear. Therein, local control over programs and courses is evaporating just as it did in K12 education.

Scholarship has widely been attentive to realities in the lives of educators at all levels, as well as to the national standards that have been promulgated over the years to help guide and define them. While pointing out that tremendous attention has long been directed toward study of the official role and responsibilities of administrators, Miller (2018) noted that leadership is incredibly personal, and that the way administrators “interpret and navigate” through challenges is less studied.

Fairly recently the literature has referenced the need for added skills to deal with the challenges surrounding social justice. Bettez and Hytten (2013) articulated the need for developing critical thinking abilities and problem-solving abilities. In addition, Laura (2018) and Theoharis (2008) tied into the need to hire more effectively. Noting that there are no easy answers for the conflict that will be encountered, Theoharis (2008, p. 33) indicated:

*Preparation programs and current administrators are naive if they embrace the idea that leading for equity and social justice is straightforward and easy work. Therefore, the in-service and preservice development of administrators needs to include the ugly and hard aspects of this kind of resistance to leadership.*



National standards play a critical role in designing and evaluating administrator preparatory programs. Celoria (2016), and English before him (2006), have been critical of standards-based influences on educational leadership training, with Celoria having called for the development of cutting-edge approaches to solving problems as opposed to continuing to debate wording in standards that produce few direct benefits. Since leveling those criticisms, the National Educational Leadership Preparation “NELP” Program Recognition Standards have been adopted and disseminated by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2018).

Analysis of the NELP Standard reveals two things. First, there is repeated reference made to the keywords of equity and inclusiveness and these terms are consistently integrated into training expectations. The two words appear in virtually every standard and also within multiple components. Celoria (2016) would perhaps still find limitations to these efforts as repeatedly including keywords in a document probably does not ensure the creation of the practical cutting-edge skills he called for. However, there were multiple places where components within the standards directly addressed the need for developing important skills which should be viewed as eventually providing some level of support.

Standard 2 “Ethics and Professional Norms” Component 2.2 establishes an expectation that administrators be effective in their work with ethical and legal decisions. This emphasis ties into conflict and critical thinking/problem-solving by encouraging school leaders to be well grounded in both moral and legal realities. With a focus on community and external leadership, Standard 5 has Components 5.2 and 5.3 which place emphasis on working collaboratively and then communicating effectively with external stakeholders. Both place

emphasis on skills that support conflict and critical thinking/problem-solving skills once again. Standard 6 “Operations and Management” and Component 6.3 spells out expectations about implementing laws and policies, which impacts hiring along with the other two skills (conflict and problem-solving). Finally, hiring is directly addressed in Standard 7 “Building Professional Capacity” in Component 7.1 specifying expectations for being able to effectively recruit, select and hire staff.

### **Defining the Problem**

Furman (2012) has also drawn attention to the need for developing and refining additional skills among principals. While there is perhaps some “minimally mentioned” support within the literature for providing inclusive leaders with critical thinking skills, the larger body of scholarship really does not identify this as a skill area that truly receives any form of preparatory instruction. Similarly, despite the references that were already made in this paper concerning the importance of hiring in this paper, (Laura, 2018; Theoharis, 2008), it has also been established by Hughes (2014) and Hughes (2018) that training for hiring is a largely overlooked area for administrator preparation. This neglect contributes to teacher retention and student achievement concerns (Hughes, 2014, 2018); and school climate as well as trust and conflict resolution considerations (Hughes & Davidson, Forthcoming). Ultimately, even being skilled in “dealing with conflict in general” does not appear to be an area of emphasis articulated in national standards or made available in training programs according the professional literature. Therein having already been framed as important skill areas within the social justice literature, methodology



including survey administration and resulting data concerning skills to deal with conflict, problem-solving, and hiring are discussed next.

### **Methodological Considerations**

This study evolved from the need to move beyond personal observations and secure confirmation from hard data that demonstrated administrator training has long been lacking in critical areas including dealing with conflict, to critical thinking, and problem-solving, as well as improving capacity for change through hiring practices. Though valuable for any administrator, these should be considered to be critical skills for school leaders who advocate for change in important but frequently challenged areas like inclusive education.

Directors from every state-level principal association across America were contacted by personal letter contained in an email. The potential for participation in the study was based on self-selection for state associations. Ultimately local decisions concerning participation were based on differing levels of interaction, and data collection became drawn out. Therein information from the first phase collected in Arizona was utilized for this article.

The survey instrument was developed to be as streamlined and efficient as possible. This was done knowing school administrators are busy people. It was also done having repeatedly heard up front that a simple survey that was not followed with repeated prompts reminding principals to complete it would go a long way to securing initial cooperation and improve the likelihood of continued collaboration during other studies concerning this topic.

In all, 127 active school principals in Arizona completed the survey. Records indicate the response rate came in slightly higher than

the 20 percent level. In an ideal world where there would be a request coming directly from an association or governmental entity, that return could have been higher. Still, considering there were association directors who were extremely interested in resulting data but still declined to participate in deference to the busy lives of their members, 127 responses are viewed as providing a worthwhile sample.

Sticking with conflict, critical thinking and hiring practices, the questions targeted for this study focused on: A) Determining how important principals viewed specified skills to be; B) Understanding the extent of their graduate-level preparation for each skill area; C) Ascertaining the administrators' beliefs about professional development options for a given skill; and finally, D) Securing administrator preferences for how initial training in a given skill area should ideally be carried out. Data was collected using "surveygizmo" and analysis was completed using their online analysis tools. Findings from the returned surveys are presented next.

### **Findings**

As the purpose of the study referenced here was primarily to confirm the importance of skills traditionally overlooked in administrator preparation programs and to introduce this information to the dialogue on social justice, descriptive analysis was considered sufficient. The information in each table is organized according to the three skill areas described earlier, (conflict, critical thinking, and hiring practices) with a first table indicating A) how important the skill area was perceived to be, and a second table reflecting B) participants' levels of preparation during their graduate training. Immediately following these two tables are summaries also in table format for C)



beliefs about professional development offerings and D) preferences for how each of the three skills should be instructed.

### Are Overlooked Skills Important?

Recent attention has been directed toward addressing the development of specific practitioner skills, above and beyond the tried and true practice of focusing only on general cultural awareness training and favorable dispositional factors (Furman, 2012). The line of questioning initiated through the survey sought to better understand if specific skills having to do with conflict, problem-solving and hiring were valued enough by administrators to stand out.

The three skill areas just referenced and represented in Table 1 were identified within the literature. A Likert Scale was utilized for this part of the line of questioning, with options ranging from Very Strongly Disagree up to and including Very Strongly Agree.

Table 1.

#### *Importance of Working Knowledge*

Variable	Conflict resolution (N=126)		Critical thinking (N=125)		Hiring practices (N=127)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very Strongly Agree	60	47.6	47	37.6	47	37.0
Strongly Agree	49	38.9	49	39.2	51	40.2
Somewhat Agree	4	3.2	15	12.0	12	9.4
Neither	-	-	2	1.6	2	1.6
Agree/Disagree	-	-	-	-	1	0.8
Somewhat Disagree	4	3.2	4	3.2	3	2.4
Strongly Disagree	9	7.1	8	6.4	11	8.7
Very Strongly Disagree						

Results show that the sample group thought through their responses, as the ratings covered the entire range of possible choices available to them. As much as someone researching conflict would be shocked to see anyone very strongly disagree that conflict is important to a principal, 7.1% of the practitioners responding did just that. Sticking with conflict, the single most telling finding was that there was little to no “middle ground.” Only 3.2% of the sample selected the most neutral responses of somewhat disagree, neither agree/disagree, and somewhat agree.

What is most striking considering there are no “neutral” or “somewhat” responses reported, a total of 86.5% of the practitioners strongly and ultimately very strongly agreed that being able to deal with conflict was an important skill for school leaders to possess. Numbers like that clearly need no further analysis or explanation.

Critical thinking, which would be expected to have direct implications on the ability to solve problems and address conflict, netted almost identical response, earning almost as many top scores and a still arguably significant 76.8% strongly and very strongly agree rate. Hiring practices and associated skills came in almost identical to the critical thinking results which is somewhat surprising in that Hughes (2014) reported that the literature still suggests hiring is not viewed with the importance it deserves.

### **Graduate Preparation**

Furman (2012) broadened the conversation among advocates of social justice training to include a greater focus on leadership skills that could include learning how to more effectively deal with conflict. In addition to asking practitioners about the skills they need, the Arizona principals were questioned about the types of training they had





already received on the way to their administrative posts. Questions about training were again specifically targeted toward dealing with conflict, critical/creative thinking and problem-solving, and finally the development of updated hiring skills. Information corresponding to that line of questioning is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Extent of Graduate Preparation*

Variable	<i>Conflict resolution</i> (N=127)		Critical thinking (N=127)		Hiring practices (N=127)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Devoted Course	3	2.4	1	0.8	5	3.9
Work Within Course/Program	15	11.8	6	4.7	11	8.7
Occasional Work/Mention	69	54.3	78	61.4	70	55.2
No Direct Preparation	40	31.5	42	33.1	41	32.3

Results summarized in Table 2 revealed little in the way of specially designed or even thoughtfully designated coursework was offered to better equip future leaders to contend with conflict, critical thinking, or even hiring practices that could better equip educators to meet future challenges. However, in each instance half to even slightly more than half of the practitioners indicated having at least “occasionally” come across all three skill/topic areas during the course of their preparatory training. Sadly, and consistently, a third of all responding principals shared that they received no training in any of the three important skill areas brought up in the literature.

It is not uncommon for school leaders to regularly voice how important local hiring decisions are. However, as Hughes (2014) pointed out, training related to this important function has historically

been lacking. Rather than benefitting from planned instruction, skills associated with making the best hire often come from “hand-me-down” learning experiences that are generally left to happenstance (Hughes, 2018). The paucity of integrated instruction in this area is particularly alarming considering the direct daily impacts of these hiring decisions on student learning organizational climate, and that as much as 75% of a school’s budget is dedicated to the outcomes of any given search (Hughes, 2018).

Conflict is complex, and not something that a novice administrator can even begin to understand by way of a quick mention, an observation on the side, or a quick “how to” book aimed at getting them through the first tense moments of a face-to-face altercation. If managers get us through the moments and leaders get us to the places we need to be, how can it be acceptable to keep instruction about conflict in the “occasional mention” category? All the other standards we are expected to uphold and learning we are entrusted to advance fall by the wayside under the weight of everyday conflict. All too often we do not equip administrators with the skills to address everyday challenges let alone the deep-seated conflict that arises from disagreements at the cultural level.

### **Professional Development**

The options for the survey prompts in this section were again more descriptive in nature, and ranged from professional development that is quickly and loosely pulled together all the way up to targeted and comprehensively developed successful continuing education. This approach was employed as the study itself was intended to start the conversation about missing skills, and allow for a more in-depth statistical examination at a later point in time.



Table 3.

*Perceptions of Professional Development*

Variable	Conflict resolution (N=127)		Critical thinking (N=127)		Hiring practices (N=127)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Comprehensively addresses	-	-	1	0.8	2	1.6
Systemically addresses needs	11	8.7	8	6.3	18	14.2
Addresses isolated needs	49	38.6	46	36.2	62	48.8
Mirrors what teachers get	19	15.0	17	13.4	6	4.7
Is largely an afterthought	48	37.8	55	43.3	39	30.7

Responses shown in Table 3 suggest the “help” administrators get for hiring correctly can be as much as or even more than “double” the help they get for conflict resolution or critical thinking. However, 15% of practitioners getting anything close to what they need for help in hiring is a totally unacceptable reality, especially if this is the high point for all skills considered in the survey. Administrators are often thought of as leaders, and therein are trained from a leadership orientation. For each of the three skill areas, there is far too much “afterthought” being reported. How can it be acceptable that the principals who did not receive appropriate training end up reporting on professional development that is at best an afterthought when they are expected to lead everyone through increasingly challenging situations?

**Timely Instruction**

For the fourth and final area of focus descriptive terminology was used to document how and just as importantly “when” practitioners believed the overlooked skills in question should be

taught. Participants were given options both during graduate training and following formal education to select from.

Table 4.

*Preferred Time to Learn Skills*

Variable	Conflict resolution (N=125)		Critical thinking (N=125)		Hiring practices (N=126)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
In Depth Grad Training	67	53.6	59	47.2	48	38.1
General Exposure Grad Training	33	26.4	42	33.6	31	24.6
Professional Dev New Admin	22	17.6	20	16.0	41	32.5
Professional Dev As Needed	3	2.4	4	3.2	6	4.8

The information in Table 4 provides a roadmap for addressing the preferred means through which training for overlooked skills could take place. Roughly 80% of respondents chose graduate training of some sort as the best option for introducing conflict resolution and critical thinking skills. By comparison, slightly more than 60% indicated a belief that training on hiring was best when covered during original graduate training.

There is far more information to cover than there is time to teach in educational leadership programs. The data in Table 4 help us to prioritize according to practitioner perceptions. They suggest conflict resolution is an important topic for coursework, critical thinking skills appear to have received more of a blended response, and that there was twice as much support for addressing hiring skills with newly hired administrators than support for following the same path with conflict resolution and critical thinking skills and including it as a major graduate topic.



The movement toward social justice in America has run into intensified resistance at the very least, and appears to have been drawn into a culturally-based level of conflict according to reasoning set forth in this article. School leaders who have invested their time, energies and leadership into creating inclusive schools have long faced tremendous barriers and ongoing resistance which only appear to be intensifying. According to Fullan (2014), many of these same school leaders struggle to address conflict, and data shared in this article provide confirmation that they lack important training in skill areas vital to success in leading through it.

Dispositions and social awareness are critical considerations, though the literature is only beginning to touch on the need for broader, deeper and more extensive skill development for school leaders who face one of the toughest challenges around – advocating for and delivering social justice in their schools and their communities. The focus of this article now shifts to direct application of findings from survey results to the broader topic of inclusive leadership and social justice.

### **Discussion**

This section is organized according to three themes that emerged from the survey, and each is considered in terms of how they relate to social justice leadership. Three themes emerged instead of four as reflection associated with topics represented in Table 2 and Table 4 had similar origins and similar endpoints. The themes presented here include the significance of overlooked skills, available training and its timing, and finally the rightful place for professional development. All three skill areas (conflict, critical thinking, and hiring) are among those that can be considered to be overlooked by professional standards and

by training programs (Furman, 2012) though each was highly valued by practitioners.

Understanding conflict helps to keep the inclusive leader effectively focused, and is of tremendous benefit when dealing with growing discord. According to Hughes and Davidson (Forthcoming), critical thinking and problem-solving ability is a complimentary underlying skill that strengthens the inclusive leaders' vision and overall understanding of conflict. Being able to contend with increased complication (Hughes, 2014; Miller, 2018) and potential conflict will require the ability to think adaptively about challenges we can expect to encounter with marginalization and social justice. While conflict resolution skills are vital for an inclusive leader, the ability to think critically will help the successful leader navigate challenges more effectively.

Conflict is not always resolved in a short time, which makes hiring the right people vitally important for long-term success because of the need to find those with dispositions that are more tolerant and committed to investing in organizational goals (Hughes, 2014). Thinking more globally, we also need to be finding future leaders, not today's followers. Therein again, hiring is of the utmost importance (Hughes, 2014), because we are not hiring only for the classroom but also for the future of the social justice movement (Theoharis, 2008).

When considering the delivery and the timing of training for the three skill areas, it is once again the long-term nature and the inherent heightened complexity associated with cultural conflict that drives the thought process. As important as hiring is, it was the skill area that was considered to be most appropriate for training just as an administrator starts a new job. Assuming the organization one works for is prepared to effectively address this topic, there are two distinct



benefits to offering training on hiring approaches after employment. First, the topic will be far more relevant to someone who is on site and can talk through the process and experience it instead of merely read about it and think “save it for later”. Second, and even more importantly, from process to priorities we should expect that leaders invested in sustaining social justice would be more interested in dispositions and training good people than they would be inclined to shop for training and certifications as most of the profession is obsessed with doing (Hughes, 2014). Novice administrators will care more when these lessons take place at work, and they will get the right lessons when leadership is invested in the right priorities and the right dispositions working within those priorities.

Finally, the realities of professional development and how it relates to social justice leadership deserves mention. A lot of general criticism is often directed toward professional development opportunities. People often say they are more managerial in focus and are focused in almost a compliance manner on “what” people will be expected to do rather than provide insights into “how” people can do the important things better. It was noteworthy how principals viewed professional development more favorably when it addressed the more concrete “specific” and procedural skills (hiring) than with the more abstract abilities like critical thinking.

When considering the interests of social justice, it makes sense for the critical thinking skills to be introduced earlier through coursework and supported throughout the administrator’s career in keeping with priorities established by Young and Laible (2000), and McKenzie, et al (2008). The same case can be made for conflict resolution skills, with hiring being addressed at the start of employment. Finally, organizations invested in social justice need to

become the lighthouse institutions for others. They need to be the training grounds for the development of crucial skills examined in this article just as much as they can serve as the training grounds for future leaders preparing to take on challenges in other organizations.

The skills reviewed in this article are often overlooked in training but hold tremendous value for inclusive leaders. When viewed primarily from a social justice standpoint, the significance of these abilities takes on more of a lasting leadership development orientation where leaders can better recognize long-term situations and bring respectful and tolerant people together to build a culture centered around equity and inclusiveness. Inclusive organizations can and should actively seek to serve as lighthouses for specific skill training and to broaden the type of understanding that can hopefully help promote increased tolerance and respect across society. National standards are not prioritizing the skills discussed in this article, but lighthouse organizations can do so by providing training and even providing mentors for aspiring leaders.

### **Mentoring Inclusive School Leaders**

There will always be gaps in leadership training. Just as there is a place for lighthouse organizations to provide resources aimed at improving skills for inclusive leaders, there is also opportunity for mentors to help guide them as has been done successfully for centuries. This mentoring does not have to be part of a structured program in order to be effective (Hughes & Mouw, 2017). According to Roofe and Miller (2015), successful mentoring is far more about sharing insights through a genuine trusting relationship. The critical focus is a commitment to developing others, which Roofe and Miller viewed as being a crucial part of a transformative institution.





Bettez and Hytten (2013) have criticized social justice training as being too theoretical, and Fairhurst (2005) has questioned the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking and problem solving skills through a structured course. Conversely, the emphasis on reflective dialogue and problem solving that is a common trademark in mentoring relationships makes it a natural and practical option to nurture leadership skills vital for inclusive administrators. Mentoring does not need to wait for standards revision and does not have to come to an end at the completion of a course. It could involve current practitioners, retired leaders, or faculty – and if so inclined a single mentor can even support more than one administrator.

### **Proposed Social Justice Mentoring Framework**

The framework proposed here draws from the emphasis on relationship building advanced by Roofe and Miller (2015), along with practicalities highlighted by Hughes and Mouw (2017).

**Keep It Simple:** As mediators often caught in the expanding differences between competing groups, inclusive school leaders are not typically called upon to dabble in a lot of theory. While their positionality may have resulted from considerable introspection, their work is typically practical and applied, and their challenge is often one where they have to communicate complex ideas with everyday words.

**Identify Limitations Early:** According to Roofe and Miller (2015), mentoring is about relationship. As shared earlier in this article, inclusive leaders can expect to face a multitude of intense situations. Everyone has limited experience, insight and time to support others. Identifying limitations early on can help maintain efficiency and effectiveness, and could even prompt the mentee to look elsewhere for assistance when needed.

**Multiple Mentors:** Issues connected with equity and putting an end to marginalization are often overwhelming individuals, organizations and even governments. No “one person” has all the answers. The novice administrator described by Hughes and Mouw (2017) actually had three regular mentors. Two of the mentors covered very specific aspects of the job, and the third provided a broader form of guidance. Inclusive leaders could similarly benefit by drawing on multiple forms of specific expertise, and by perhaps also having more general guidance available as well.

**Don’t Gear Up Too Much:** Inclusive school leaders face a lot of immediate feelings and interactions through “touch of a button” social media. Their communications and their approach to mentoring relationship needs to be fluid and efficient (Hughes & Mouw, 2017), and not become bogged down with unnecessary formality, documentation, or complex communication apparatus when a simple text message will do.

### Summary

Inclusive school leaders are on the front lines of some of the most important and most challenging issues facing education and society as a whole. They are called upon to mediate the tensions that develop both within and from outside the school setting (Miller, 2018). Their cutting-edge work is complicated by escalating challenges (Hughes, 2014; Miller, 2018), that are increasingly the topic of daily coverage in the news and round-the-clock discussion across social media.

Joining Strom and Martin (2017, p. 4) who stressed the need to “engage in new modes and thought,” scholars including Bettez and Hytten (2013), Furman (2012) along with Murray-Johnson and Guerra (2018) have called administrator training for social justice into question



and have indicated that it needs to be less theoretical and better able to address needs in schools. Investigation into specific skill areas including critical thinking, conflict resolution and even hiring educators better suited to deal with change (Hughes, 2014; Laura, 2018; Strom & Martin, 2017; and Theoharis, 2008) has been suggested, with results reported in this article revealing a lack of coverage by leadership programs.

In the absence of training or national standards placing sufficient emphasis on developing the unique needs of inclusive school leaders, mentoring stands out as a viable support for social justice advocates. According to Roofe and Miller (2015), successful mentoring is about developing a trusting and genuine relationship where important insights can be shared. Its impact can be felt immediately, and can last a lifetime as it places emphasis on reflective dialogue and problem solving, instead of heavily linking itself to theoretical contemplation. The critical focus in mentoring, according to Roofe and Miller, is a commitment to developing others. It only makes sense that successful champions of social justice would be ideally suited and highly motivated to mentor next generation inclusive educational leaders who are expected to face future challenges that cannot even be imagined today (Hughes, 2014).

**Recommendations.** Practitioners need to reflect on their own personal connection to the broader concept of social justice. If they lack clarity, they should seek insights from others who can mentor them. If, in contrast, someone is experienced and able to help an emerging leader create opportunities for increased tolerance and cooperation in education and across societies, they should offer their service as a mentor to one or more administrators inclusively. Resources such as the book, *Nature of School Leadership: Global Practice Perspectives* by

Paul W. Miller can help leaders at all skill levels to refine vital leadership outlooks, and also provide a platform for dialogue on equitable leadership that broadens understanding and collaboration.

Instead of assuming that an advanced degree automatically qualifies anyone to weigh in on any subject, trainers need to be honest with themselves when determining the role they play in the area of social justice. They should be available avenues for improving their own contributions to this critically important subject. Faculty with experience and insights concerning social justice, cultural conflict, and leading through conflict should strongly consider making mentoring available to others and coordinating outreach efforts to bring young leaders together with experienced practitioners who could also potentially serve as informal mentors to them.

### References

- Belle, C. (2019). What is social justice education anyway? Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/01/23/what-is-social-justice-education-anyway.html>.
- Bettez, S., & Hytten, K. (2013). Community building in social justice work: A critical approach. *Educational Studies*, 49, 45-66.
- Celoria, D. (2016). The preparation of inclusive social justice education leaders. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development*, 27, 199-219.
- Davies, L. (2004). *Education and conflict: Complexity and chaos*. New York, N.Y: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York, NY: The New Press.



- English, F. (2006). The unintended consequences of a standardized knowledge base in advancing educational leadership preparation. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42 (3), 461-472.
- Fairhurst, G. (2005). Reframing the art of framing: Problems and prospects for leadership, *Leadership*, 1(2), 165-185.
- Fullan, M. (2014). *The principal: Three keys to maximizing impact*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Furman, G. (2012). Social justice leadership as praxis: Developing capacities through preparation programs. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48 (2), 191-229.
- Goodwin, B. (2015). *The road less traveled: Changing schools from the inside out*. Report. Denver, CO: McREL International.
- Gray, C. & Gordo, A. (2014). Social media in conflict: Comparing military and social-movement technocultures. *Cultural Politics*, (10) 3, 251-261.
- Hughes, T. (2014). Hiring at risk: Time to ensure hiring really is the most important thing we do. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 8 (1), 90-102.
- Hughes, T., & Mouw, J. (2017). Getting more than was registered for: Reciprocal benefits from post-graduate faculty e-mentoring. *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education (IJCDSE)*, 8 (1), 2944 – 2953.
- Hughes, T. (2018). Have we outgrown hand-me-down hiring practices? *School Administrator*, 8 (75), 16.
- Hughes, T., & Davidson, F. (Forthcoming). Leading through conflict with credibility. In R. Papa (Ed.), [Oxford] *Encyclopedia of Educational Administration*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, A. (2019). Trump Jr.: Don't be indoctrinated by 'loser teachers...trying to sell you on socialism. Retrieved from

<http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2019/02/donald-trump-jr.-socialism-teachers-rally.html>.

- Laura, C. (2018). Enacting social justice leadership through teacher hiring. *Urban Review*, 50, 123–139.
- McKenzie, K., Christman, D., Hernandez, F., Fierro, E., Capper, C., Dantley, M., Gonzalez, M., Cambron-McCabe, N., & Scheurich, J. (2008). From the field: A proposal for educating leaders of social justice. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44 (1), 111-138.
- Mercer, D. (2016). Who is building the leader: Commentary on educational leadership preparation programs for the future. *Educational Considerations*, 43 (4), 6-10.
- Merriam-Webster.com (2019). Culture conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture%20conflict#h1>.
- Miller, P. (2018). *The nature of school leadership: Global practice perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murray-Johnson, K., & Guerra, P. (2018). Ready for change? Emotions and resistance in the face of social justice leadership. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 21 (3), 3–20.
- Napolitano, A. (2019). Trump has unleashed a torrent of hatred. Fox News. Retrieved August 5, 2019 from <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/judge-andrew-napolitano-the-longest-pleasure>.
- NPBEA. (2018). National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Standards–Building Level. Retrieved from: [www.npbea.org](http://www.npbea.org).
- Roofe, C., & Miller, P. (2015). Mentoring and coaching in academia: Reflections on a mentoring/coaching relationship. *Policy Futures in Education*, 13 (4) 479–491.



- Ross, S. (2013). Examining the role of facilitated conflict on student learning outcomes in a diversity education course. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 7 (1), Article 9. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsofl.2013.070109>.
- Rubin, J. (2019). Americans in the age of Trump: Less tolerant. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved August 5, 2019 from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/06/25/americans-age-trump-less-tolerant/>.
- Sakoui, A. (2018). Tucker Carlson boycott worsens tension between. *Fox, Twitter*. Retrieved June 22, 2019 from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-19/tucker-carlson-ad-boycott-worsens-tension-between-fox-twitter>.
- Singleton, G. E. (2014). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Sogunro, O. (2012). Stress in school administration: Coping tips for principals. *Journal of School Leadership*, 22 (3), 664-700.
- Spring, J. (2011). *The American School: A global context from the Puritans to the Obama era*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Srikantiah, J., & Sinnar, S. (2019). White nationalism as immigration policy. Retrieved June 22, 2019 from <https://stanfordlawreview.org/online/white-nationalism-as-immigration-policy/>.
- Strom, K. & Martin, A. (2017). Thinking with theory in an era of Trump. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 26 (3), 3-22.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43 (2), 221-258.

Theoharis, G., (2008). At every turn: The resistance that principals face in their pursuit of equity and justice. *Journal of School Leadership*, (18), 303-333.

Young, M., & Laible, J. (2000). White racism, anti-racism, and school leadership preparation. *Journal of School Leadership*, 10 (5), 374-415.

**About the author**

**Thomas Hughes** is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Northern Arizona University. He is a former school psychologist, director of special education and school superintendent. His teaching and scholarship address education law and conflict resolution, and employ a capacity building focus to help practitioners prepare for increasing complexities and discord in school leadership.

Email: [thomas.hughes@nau.edu](mailto:thomas.hughes@nau.edu)