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Standards, Accountability and Democracy

Addressing Inequities through a Social Justice Accountability Framework

Paul R. Carr

FOR A NUMBER of years, and especially since the introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), educators have been centrally focused on achieving high academic standards. The frenzy around the need to improve educational achievement has arguably forced educators to concentrate almost exclusively on raising grades. Increasingly, education in the United States is being reshaped to remunerate high-achieving schools while punishing those that do not meet the proverbial grade.¹ This article discusses the other side of the standards debate, and proposes a framework to develop and implement social justice in education.²

With the heightened emphasis on academic outcomes, it is unclear how education systems consider and deal with social justice in its broadest sense. Should public education address the notion of democratic education, focused on reinforcing and building a citizenry immersed in strengthening social cohesion, equity, anti-discrimination, and, ultimately, a critical reflection on the human condition (Guttman, 1999; Portelli, 2001)? A key question, therefore, is: what is the function of education in contemporary society? Some have suggested that it is intended to reproduce the social order (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), creating an able workforce to support capitalist exploitation (Bowles and Gintis, 2001). Freire (1973) envisions an educational experience that strives for liberation and transformation, which is complemented by McLaren's (2003) analysis about the

need for a critical pedagogy in support of marginalized forces. In this paper, I argue that, for education in the United States to meaningfully respond to society's needs, a critical, comprehensive social justice framework, supportive of democratic education, must form the base of all aspects involved in the educational enterprise.

What is the function of education in contemporary society?

Advancing such a position that education needs to be centered as much on social justice as it does on academic achievement would likely face little resistance from marginalized and progressive sectors. One review of a range of studies found that an emphasis on social justice supported and helped increase academic grades (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2003). However, the neo-liberal educational reform movement has been successful in its attempt to force educational decision-makers to quantify and measure education. Standardized testing is the order of the day, and the notion of accountability has been infused into what many decision-makers consider to be a prerequisite to achieving excellence in education (Kim and Sunderman,

2005). These are realities that influence the public mind-set, and, significantly, promote and craft legislation, policies and trends in education. Therefore, in constructing a Social Justice in Education Accountability Framework, this paper argues in favor of a democratic citizenship, one that explicitly addresses the multitude of issues that characterize long-standing social concerns and problems within a multicultural society (Guttman, 1999; Osborn, 2001).

Key Considerations for Social Justice Education

How should social justice be conceptualized in contemporary times? Social justice considers the human condition, discrimination, equity, racism, and other forms of oppression and difference, and, within the educational policy context, is concerned with inclusion, representation, processes, content, and outcomes from a critical perspective. The term “equity,” although there are some nuanced interpretations, is used as a complement to social justice herein. Vincent (2003) focuses on identity in her definition of social justice, and this is also to be considered pivotal to understanding how social justice takes shapes. While the social construction of race, with a key focus on whiteness, is a critical aspect to social justice, equally important is the notion of the intersectionality of identity, including gender, class, sexual orientation, and other markers of identity.

For this article, I wish to extend and amplify the meaning of social justice in education, bringing into the fold the dynamic nature of institutional culture, including decisionmaking processes and inequitable power relations. This conceptualization of social justice in education includes four pillars, all of which center around, and support, the notion of democratic citizenship. Appendix 1 provides a visual representation of the key considerations for understanding social justice education and social justice in education, which underpin the Social Justice in Education Accountability Framework to be presented later.

The first pillar concerns the need to make, and highlight, linkages with the broader socioeconomic and political context, given the myriad, intricate relations and inter-dependen-

cies that infuse local experience. The values, philosophy, relations, and workings, as well as the commitment of societies, institutions, and individuals to work toward social justice, must all be factored into the equation. Klein (2005) has critiqued the organization of, and impact on, labor and the circulation of capital in the globalized world, stressing the inequities, impoverishment, and corruption that characterize the international drive for profits. Giroux (2005) provides a similar analysis on the corporatization of public schooling, arguing that “Schools are an important indicator of the well-being of a democratic society” (p. 143). How we understand social justice locally must, therefore, be considered within the confines of international events and movements, including wars, famine, conflicts, and the migration of peoples. An example of this might be the need to contextualize such events as the September 11 tragedy; September 11, 1973, is commemorated in Chile as the day when a democratically-elected government was overthrown by a right-wing military dictatorship, with backing from the United States.

A second pillar relates to societal understanding and commitment to social justice. What are the culminating features that define a society? How do minority rights figure into the constitution, laws, conventions, and history of a given society? What events shape the destiny of the inhabitants of a geographic space? Is it just and reasonable to consider English to be the one and only national language of the United States if indigenous peoples spoke their languages here for over ten thousand years before the arrival of Europeans? Henry and Tator (2005) have developed a theory of “democratic racism,” which serves as an important critique of how society accepts, enshrines, and cultivates racism in democracy. Sleeter (2000) complements this concept with her analysis of how white teachers are disconnected from their largely diverse classrooms. In sum, it is necessary to determine how the formal society—its institutions, the media, and the elites who have access to power—as well as the disparate forces representing diverse communities and interests, understand, and are engaged in, social justice.

A third pillar relates to identity and identity formation, and an appreciation of how identity is socially constructed. Social justice for whom? If there is discrimination, marginalization, oppression, and different experiences in society, what are these experiences based on? How does identity shape one's location, voice, salience, opportunities, impact, and meaning in society? Whiteness is an important consideration in understanding privilege and power in society (Feagin and O'Brien, 2003). Tatum (1992) writes about the complexity of racial identity formation, and how it is difficult to transcend levels of sensitization. Similarly, Applebaum (2005) has demystified the traditional myths used to propagate white privilege, including the merit

How we understand social justice locally must be considered within the confines of international events.

principle and the strongly-held belief that individualism always trumps collective identity. For there to be social justice, citizens, educators, students, and decision-makers must be able to understand identity and difference, common and differing and values, the problematic nature of finding a terminology to discuss issues, and also, importantly, the context to deal with issues of identity in a fair and just way.

The fourth pillar of this conceptualization of social justice concerns the decision-making process. Who is involved in decision-making, how, when and where? Is the process inclusive, representative, and responsive to the needs of marginalized groups? Is accountability taken as seriously for social justice as it is for academic achievement? Are systemic issues identified in addition to individual situations and phenomena? How is funding collected and distributed? Schugaransky (2003) highlights broad community involvement in education as a way of

reducing individualism, which would then diminish conflicts. Lipman (2004) critiques the notion of accountability in education, arguing that the mainstream conceptualization does not serve to cater to the interests of marginalized groups. In effect, social justice is not only about outcomes but also deals with processes that strive to inculcate values of equity, human dignity, and fairness. Moreover, it is critical to diagnose and monitor both the formal and informal realities framing institutional and societal behavior (Carr, 1996).

These four pillars function in a dynamic and critically inter-dependent way. Each pillar has an intimate relationship with the other, with a central focus on the notion of democratic citizenship, which is the manifestation and application of the values, theories, philosophies, laws, policies, and commitment to a society not only supportive of but also engaged in democracy. Are citizens engaged during and, more importantly, before and after elections? Are diversity, equity, and human rights enshrined, codified, and implemented as guiding principles in society? Is patriotism countered by a critical reflection of problems and issues? Westheimer and Kahne (2003) have questioned the linkage between citizenship and educating for democracy, emphasizing the unique role that schools can play in supporting and promoting social justice.

To have democratic citizenship, the appropriate conditions must be established so that teaching and learning can be a liberating process, not a reproductive one (Freire, 1973). Gutmann (1999) views democratic education as being "political education", which can de-center traditional approaches to learning. Rury (2005) further expands on Gutmann's (1999, p. 47) analysis by arguing:

Within schools, democracy cannot be reduced to a topic in the academic curriculum or an object of extracurricular activities. Gutmann suggests that it must permeate the institution, infusing relations between teachers and students, affecting the students themselves, and extending outward to the larger community. Democracy demands diversity and requires deliberation and discussion to flourish. It also enjoins authority, particularly in schools. Democracy is not license, and it entails a responsibility to community and humanity.

Therefore, the broad conceptualization of social justice in education presented herein largely surpasses the notion of elections supporting democracy, freedom of the press, laws that are codified but may not be enforced, and, in general, the tradition of maintaining that politics has no place in education. Portelli (2001, p. 280) makes a useful distinction between “participatory, public, and critical democracy, on one hand, and representative, privatized and managed/market democracy, on the other hand.” He further elaborates that the former is “associated with equity, community, creativity, and taking difference seriously” and “the latter is protectionist and marginalist, and leads to an extreme form of individualism and spectator citizenship.” In sum, the vision of social justice within democratic citizenship presented in this article is intended to be broad and inclusive, supported by critical engagement and education, and responsive to diversity in society.

Constructing a Social Justice Accountability Framework

It is unclear how the central focus on accountability through NCLB and in contemporary education, in general, has captured the essence of social justice in education. In tandem with mainstream accountability policies and measures, I propose a comprehensive framework for entire education systems, which aims to reinforce democracy, address concerns raised by marginalized groups, improve social cohesion, ameliorate and render more responsive decision-making processes and the allocation of resources, and also lay the foundation for a more critical, inclusive, and relevant educational experience for all students. It is necessary to simultaneously consider the educational experience as well as the process of constructing education, the classroom as well as the institutional experience, and the pedagogical as well as the policy experience.

Despite various, disparate efforts, it is apparent that formal, institutional social justice accountability frameworks, where they exist, face significant challenges. Where some semblance of a strategy might exist, it is often undermined, under-played and under-emphasized. It would seem that there is always another

priority, another set of circumstances, another funding imperative, or another election that will change and peel back the momentum and resources gained to promote a strong, comprehensive, supported social justice framework.

This proposed Social Justice Accountability Framework can be visualized and operationalized in the form of a matrix (Appendix 2). On one side, there are eight substantive content components (strategic policy, leadership, curriculum, extra-curricular, service-learning, community involvement, training, and evaluation), complemented by eight functional criteria along the top of the matrix (inclusion, representation, decisionmaking process, communications, funding, data-collection and analysis, accountability mechanism, and monitoring and review).

It is important to accept, from the outset, that any given accountability framework requires careful, strategic planning, resources, and (political) commitment. Therefore, if this proposed Social Justice Accountability Framework seems complex and burdensome, we must also consider the costs, not only in relation to finances but, more importantly, in human terms, of not moving forward, past the rhetorical commitment, to achieving equity and social justice. One could also argue that it would be equally as complex and problematic to avoid establishing a comprehensive social justice framework in education.

How is the Framework made operative? The evaluation of each of the components, along with standards and targets established for each, provides a roadmap for further reflection, analysis and restructuring in order to foster a more equitable and democratic educational system. If we are able to set targets for graduation rates, literacy levels, academic achievement, class size and spending, why should we not be more dedicated to establishing formal measures and procedures to guide us in achieving social justice in education? It is worth reiterating that this framework is for the entire education-system of a given jurisdiction, as there are innumerable connections and linkages between the highest and lowest levels representing a State Department of Education, school boards and the schools. Appendices 3 and 4 provide some of the

questions that each of the Content and Functional areas address.

Phases in the Accountability Review Process

This accountability framework will function best when there are intersecting reviews and input taking place in a cyclical manner. In rotating Review Teams, involving diverse and inclusive representation of key stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, parents, marginalized groups) from the entire education system of a jurisdiction (schools, school boards, and state department of education), a detailed analysis and rating for each of the content areas, juxtaposed against each of the functional criteria, contained in the framework matrix, would be undertaken. The Review Teams would draft reports containing qualitative and quantitative information, as well as recommendations, on all of the variables and configurations having a connection to the Social Justice Accountability Framework. The chief objective during this Phase is to engage the sector through outreach, dissemination of information, public forum, and action research. The Review Teams would attempt to establish a benchmark from which targets and goals could be measured. The State level might be more preoccupied with policy development, resource allocation, and leadership while the school board level would focus more specifically on program delivery, processes, and educational outcomes. At the school level, local issues of concern as well as teacher and parent perspectives could come to the fore. All of the school reports for a district would subsequently be rolled up to enhance the school board-wide review. If there are no objectives, targets, standards and measures for social justice, are education-systems likely to achieve a high level of social justice?

To illustrate the type of work required using the Social Justice Accountability Framework presented here, committees would critically and comprehensively assess each of the component-areas in the social justice matrix. For instance, for the Content component related to Curriculum, a systematic review would be undertaken using each of the functional criteria in the matrix (Inclusion, Representation,

Decision-making Process, Communications, Funding, Data-collection and Analysis, Accountability Mechanism, and Monitoring and Review). In practical terms, this would mean determining how inclusive the curriculum is, how representative it is, whether or not the decision-making process employed to formulate and develop the content of the curriculum was mindful of social justice considerations, if the communications around the development and implementation were appropriate, whether the funding required was allocated to ensure that there would be an engaging social justice core to the content, how data were collected, managed and analyzed in support of social justice, what accountability mechanisms permeated the entire curriculum process to enable high quality as well as critical teaching and learning, and, finally, what monitoring and review mechanisms are in place, and are used. The review process would focus on quantitatively and qualitatively addressing all of these items, establishing targets, measures, objectives and standards, and then working through the process of striving for, and, ultimately, achieving social justice.

Both the decision-making process and the institutional culture are, therefore, considered as indispensable as the program content and academic outcomes. In this Framework, accountability is, thus, dismantled from the Total Quality Management lock on profit-margins to become a tool of empowerment for marginalized groups and for systemic change in relation to social justice. One of the chief barriers to achieving accountability is the quandary of exposing problems (for example racism and/or academic underachievement for minority groups), for fear of being blamed, labeled, or saddled with the problem. By extension, are school administrators normally rewarded for indicating that their schools did not meet the “standards?” What are the implications for school enrollment, teacher retention, funding, etc., if such problems and issues are exposed?

The overall expectation is not to magically eliminate racism, discrimination, inequity, marginalization, inappropriate and ineffective learning programs, and systemic barriers of all sorts. As McGinn (1994) has argued, in relation to the pitfalls of educational policy development,

there are at least three reasons that plans for progressive change encounter significant challenges: the process used for implementation, the failure to mobilize a focused and sustained political commitment, and the weak content of the initiative. This is the social justice goal, however, toward which great energy would be concentrated, based on the presented framework. With the mobilization of collective action and resources, such goals would become more attainable than the present splintering of efforts have been, however well-intentioned. To have *bona fide* democracy, in which meaningful, participatory citizenship is a functioning reality, a multiplicity of diverse, inclusive, critical approaches, initiatives and individuals is required.

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Discussion

This article has argued for a broader understanding of the purpose of education within the standards debate. Strong academic achievement is important but it should not preclude the need to have a healthy and invigorating effect on the human condition, on the notion of social justice in society, and how citizenship is cultivated in a democracy (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Compatible with the social justice accountability framework presented herein, Alexander (1999, p. 191) suggests that:

The key to peaceful and successful growth and transformation in the emerging global and transnational society is to embrace the strengths

of the growing diversity and to anchor change in our oneness, realizing that, as individuals and as a global society, we are in a constant state of becoming.... The ability to learn throughout our lives, and to make our own sense of meaning, are concepts both cliché and profound, as they hold the key to our survival.

In sum, understanding how citizenship is becoming a multicultural concept (Kymlicka, 1995) as well as the role of diversity in transforming our reality is pivotal to appreciating the place of standards and accountability in education. Meaningful participation and political enlightenment, as outlined by Guttman (1999) and Schugaransky (2003), is required for education to achieve a sense of democracy.

The present neo-liberal reform-agenda has not appropriately or effectively considered accountability for social justice. Hoover and Shook (2003, p. 8) make a distinction between the types of standards that are driving educational policymaking:

Current reform-based accountability policies ignore the diversity of communities and deny the wisdom of allowing a multi-factored approach of assessment to accommodate and pay respect to the differing needs both within school districts and across school districts.... Authentic accountability, properly framed and requiring multiple indicators, serves the democratic ideals of public schools that embrace inclusion as a key focus of their vision, unlike government schools that have exclusion as their primary purpose and effect.... Today, with the reforming of public schools into government schools through the powerful hegemony of the accountability movement, the threat to teaching, experiencing, and realizing democratic ideals has never been more real, especially as teaching convention is driven almost entirely by invalid proficiency tests and pseudo-accountability mechanisms.

Kim and Sunderman (2005, p. 3) argue that the

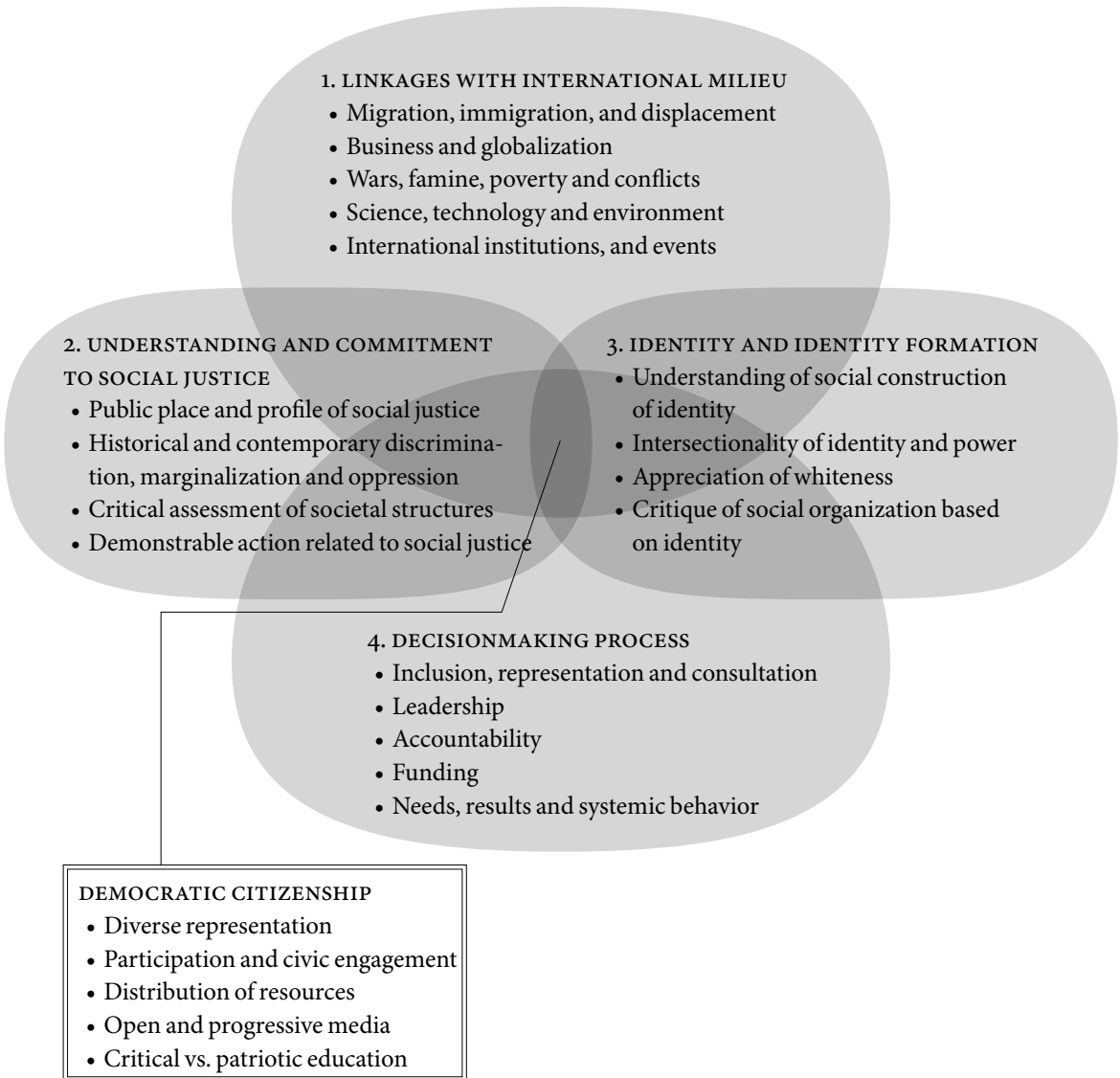
...accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 place high-poverty schools and racially diverse schools at a disadvantage because they rely on mean proficiency scores and require all subgroups to meet the same goals for accountability."

Accountability hinges, in large part, on leadership. As Fullan (2005) has suggested, it is critical to develop targets and measures in order to strategically position an educational-system. Bjork and Alsbury (2005) have focused on normative expectations for democratic leadership in the superintendency, and have found that educational leaders face a number of challenges and conundrums within a political environment. What is pivotal, however, is that leaders understand, and are capable of, connecting and working with social justice (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). Accountability will not be achieved if education-leaders are not able to immerse themselves into the institutional culture of their

school-systems in such a way as to reverse passive resistance and intransigent behaviors that will not allow for democratic transformation (Carr, 1996).

Politics is part of the educational equation. Decisions on resources, process, program content, evaluation, staffing, and school climate all involve politics. For the proposed Social Justice Accountability Framework to be meaningful, decisionmakers would have to acknowledge this fact, and also be prepared to become genuinely engaged in democracy. It would be counter-intuitive to introduce this Framework into a jurisdiction, and then not provide the direction, support, authority and

APPENDIX 1: Broad Conceptualization of Social Justice Education



APPENDIX 2: Social Justice Accountability Framework

	1. Inclusion	2. Representation	3. Decision Making Process	4. Communication	5. Funding	6. Data Collection Processes	7. Accountability	8. Monitoring/Review
1. Strategic Policy								
2. Leadership								
3. Curriculum								
4. Extra-Curricular								
5. Service-Learning								
6. Community Involvement								
7. Training								
8. Evaluation								

resources to solidify the required systemic change. This process would be most effective when the schools, school boards and the State Department of Education are all partners in diagnosing issues of concern, setting targets, establishing standards, and reviewing progress on education from the classroom level on through the decision-making processes, which design and prescribe the quality, content and substance of education. The cost of implementing this framework, it could be argued, would be minimal compared to the cost of not having accountability for social justice. Social justice is not a cancer bringing down high academic achievement; it is the medicine needed to push all of our children toward the notion that learning can be a liberating, not alienating, process.

APPENDIX 3 Content Components for a Social Justice Education Framework

1. STRATEGIC POLICY (What are the explicit policies, directives, and pronouncements directly and indirectly articulating a vision, direction, and administrative and legislative framework

regarding social justice? How does the institutional culture influence the shaping of strategic policy?)

2. LEADERSHIP (How are senior levels perceived throughout the system, and what do leaders do to inculcate and support behaviors, attitudes and actions bolstering social justice education? What are the requirements—moral, legislative, administrative and institutionally—for leaders to provide ethical, effective and accountable leadership concerning social justice?)

3. CURRICULUM (How does the curriculum—Social Studies and all other courses—effectively address social justice? How is Civics dealt with? What quality assurance mechanisms are in place to ensure the most effective teaching and learning of the curriculum?)

4. EXTRA CURRICULAR (What extra curricular activities exist and why? Are there clubs, associations, student governments, sports, etc., and how are they managed and connected to the curriculum and service-learning? Are there student exchanges, school-twinning arrangements, and activities of a broader national and international flavor?)

5. **SERVICE LEARNING** (What programs, policies, and activities are in place to promote, support, and ensure effective service-learning? Is there an explicit linkage between service-learning and the curriculum and extra-curricular activities? Who is involved, and what is done to prepare them to understand and support social justice and democracy?)

6. **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT** (How is the community involved in shaping and supporting social justice? How is this involvement evaluated? How does the system ensure that the appropriate segments of the community have been involved, and how does it rectify the lack of participation in some quarters, including among parents?)

7. **TRAINING** (What type of training is provided, how is it determined, and how is it evaluated? How is the connection to leadership, policy, curriculum, community involvement, and other areas ensured through training? Is there a self-reflective critical social justice component attached to training?)

8. **EVALUATION** (In light of the social justice framework, how are students, teachers, administrators and Department of Education staff evaluated? What processes are in place to ensure that this evaluation is effective, and supports social justice in education?)

APPENDIX 4

Functional Criteria for a Social Justice Education Framework

1. **INCLUSION** (What processes, guidelines and strategies are employed to ensure that there are no barriers, systemic or otherwise, excluding groups and/or individuals, and what is the result? How is inclusion defined and understood by diverse stakeholders, and how do educational institutions continually strive to align their interests with the broader community?)

2. **REPRESENTATION** (Who is represented in various spheres of leadership, policy development, program delivery, teaching, training, consultation, etc. in relation to gender, ethno-cultural origin, race, social class, and other identifiers, and what is the result?)

3. **DECISION-MAKING PROCESS** (How are decision-making processes structured and implemented, and what is the result? What rights to appeal and review exist for decisions, and are

there legal/budgetary/policy limits placed on decisionmaking processes?)

4. **COMMUNICATIONS** (How are communications planned and delivered, and what is the result? How does the system ensure the effectiveness of communications? Is there a bone fide link between what is publicly said, and what actually takes place?)

5. **FUNDING** (What, and how, is funding provided? Are “value for money” and “cost-benefit” analyses undertaken to ensure the effective use of funding? Is funding provided directly and indirectly for social justice activities?)

6. **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS** (What, and how, are data collected? How are the data analyzed, and what is the utility of this analysis? How are social justice implications considered regarding the collection of data?)

7. **ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM** (What mechanisms are explicitly in place to ensure fairness, effectiveness, and accountability? Are students, teachers, administrators, state department of education and others permitted and encouraged to question accountability processes and results?)

8. **MONITORING AND REVIEW** (What are the policies and processes in place to ensure oversight and follow-up? How are diverse constituencies involved in monitoring and reviewing of social justice?)

NOTES

¹Two common features of this trend are: 1) the propensity to advertise widely about how a given school board has met the required standards, thus affecting and shaping the public perception; 2) and the institutional policy response to the conceptualization and promotion of standards, which involves ranking—often without providing a significant sociological context—and rewarding schools.

²Many of the concepts that I have formulated in this article were cultivated during my tenure as a Senior Policy Advisor in the Ontario Ministry of Education, where I worked on, and co-coordinated, a number of equity issues in education.

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