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SCHOOLING AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS THE MAIN PROTAGONISTS IN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE SCRIPT? UNVEILING THE SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSES FROM AN ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY LENS*

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ABSTRACT

Educators have had good reason to be concerned with social justice in a context where diversity has become more pronounced in both our schools and communities, with widening divisions between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Internationally, increasing

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emphasis has been placed on utilizing the role of school leadership to address issues of social justice and equality, within a scenario where comparative studies of the performance of educational systems dominate the policy imagination globally, thus leading to increased pressure on school systems. This chapter presents a problematization of the social justice concept within education as presented in the literature, while setting out to critique this concept as an educational goal, as well as the role educational leadership is expected to play in the promotion of equity and social justice discourses through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This theoretical chapter has implications for theory, policy, and practice.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory; educational leadership; equity; OECD-generated performance assessment; policy discourses; schooling; social justice

INTRODUCTION

Diversity has become more prominent in both our schools and at a wider society level, with widening demarcations between the haves and the have-nots (Ryan, 2006) and with the school consequently being held solely responsible as the agent of change to close the attainment gap by addressing inequities in educational outcomes (Mowat, 2018). Concern about social justice is therefore high on the agenda of educators and education practitioners at various hierarchical levels. Moreover, mounting emphasis has been focused on employing, or rather exploiting, the role of school leadership to address issues of social justice and equality on a global level (Bogotch, 2008), issues that are undeniably endemic within society. Francis et al. (2017) highlight that the advancement of social justice in state education is complicated and contested in multiple ways both due to the distinct definitions of social justice, in addition to the fact that its meaning in practice is not straightforward either in terms of educational purposes and content, nor in terms of modes of organization and delivery. Notwithstanding,

> *If the school system is dealing unjustly with some of its pupils, they are not the only ones to suffer. The quality of education for all the others is degraded … The issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is about. (Connell, 1993, p. 15)*

There is a growing research literature on social justice as a key concept in current education policy and practice, as well as educational leadership

in relation to discourses of equity and social justice, that I contributed to as author (Mifsud, 2021a, 2021b), instigated by my high-level leadership position at the triage of theory, policy, and practice as I observed leadership performances, policy perceptions, and subsequent enactments by the head-teachers as the appointed social justice agents in schools. The enactment of leadership for social justice depends on the leaders' perceptions of the social justice concept, that translates as the provision of equality, as well as the facilitators and hindrances (in this case teachers) present within that particular school context and local education policy scenario (Mifsud, 2021b). This led to further critical reflexive research (Mifsud, 2021a), where I sought 'to transgress and unsettle social justice leadership discourses currently positioning [local] school leaders, through which they simultaneously re-position themselves as social justice leadership actors and the stakeholders under their responsibility' (p. 75) by illustrating the ways in which issues of social justice and equity are enacted through dysfunctionalities and contradictions emerging in the juxtaposition of policy and practices via leadership performances within various state schools in a small nation-state in the Mediterranean region.

This chapter presents a problematization of the social justice concept within education as presented in the literature, while setting out to critique this concept as an educational goal, as well as the role educational leadership is expected to play in the promotion of equity and social justice discourses through the lens of Actor-Network Theory [henceforth referred to as 'ANT']. ANT offers concepts that trace the dynamics of educational reform, in this case, schooling for social justice and equity, including the emergence of actors within the play of heterogeneous linkages among humans and non-humans, and how these actors are performed into being by these connections. An ANT reading of educational reform thus highlights insights about the material practices and fluid spaces that simultaneously inhabit and lead to the dynamics of change (Fenwick, 2011). As Law (1992) explains, an ANT sensibility focuses on

> *a concern with how actors and organizations mobilize, juxtapose and hold together the bits and pieces out of which they are composed; how they are sometimes able to prevent those bits and pieces from following their own inclinations and making off; and how they manage, as a result, to conceal for a time the process of translation itself. (p. 386)*

The following section presents a brief outline of the main concepts of ANT and how this assemblage relates to an exploration of social justice and equity discourses within compulsory schooling. The social justice concept within the schooling context as presented in the literature is problematized, while tracing the influence of neoliberalism in the global promotion of social justice. The chapter then critiques social justice as an educational goal, while

problematizing the foreseeable and taken-for-granted role of school leadership in addressing diversity and equity issues.

This theoretical chapter has implications for theory, policy, and practice in its aim to transgress social justice discourses as presented in the literature and policy documents in order to instigate a critical and reflexive dialogue around the conceptualization and enactment of social justice discourses among academics, policymakers, and education practitioners. The themes that emerge are mainly valid due to the increasing globalization of education policy (Ball, 2008) and the global extension of practices of policy borrowing widely established among Western nations (Lingard, 2010; Whitty et al., 2016).

EXPLORING SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSES IN EDUCATION FROM AN ANT-ISH PERSPECTIVE: AN OVERVIEW OF ANT SENSIBILITIES

Latour (1999) outlines the agenda of ANT as comprising: the *attribution* of both human and non-human characteristics; the *distribution* of properties among them; the *connections* generated; the *circulation* of these elements; as well as their *transformation*, thus incorporating both relational materiality and performativity (Law, 1999). I adopt Law's (2007) stance in regarding the ANT approach as a 'toolkit', a 'sensibility', rather than a theory, for the exploration of relations and their assemblage. ANT traces the ways in which human and non-human elements are enacted as they become assembled into collectives of activity. These complex, interwoven 'networks' can spread across space and time, and produce policies, knowledge, and practices. ANT-inspired studies trace the micro-interactions through which diverse elements or 'actants' are performed into being: how they come together – and manage to *hold* together – in 'networks' that can act. These networks produce force and other effects: knowledge, identities, rules, routines, behaviours, new technologies and instruments, regulatory regimes, reforms, and so forth (Fenwick, 2010). ANT sensibilities are useful particularly for following these relational strategies. An ANT approach notices how things are invited or excluded, how some linkages work and others don't, and how connections are bolstered to make themselves stable and durable by linking to other networks and things.

I now proceed to present a brief outline of the central concepts of ANT that will be adopted in this conceptual chapter. ANT allows researchers to explore the assembling, disassembling, and re-assembling of associations, empowering all actors with a voice to speak their sociologies, being especially concerned with the discursively and materially heterogeneous 'world-making' activity of

actors (Baiocchi et al., 2013). One of the central concepts of ANT is that of symmetry as human entities are treated in an equal way to non-humans, both regarded as relational effects (Latour, 2004). ANT traces how these entities assemble and hold together, being both capable of 'translating' each other. A non-human is regarded as a mediator, providing added value to an association, while simultaneously being regarded as 'gatherings' where action is always 'interaction'. ANT has been described as a 'sociology of translation' (Latour, 1987) where entities assemble and connect, with the working entity being an '*actor*' and the worked-upon entity being an '*actant*', with the 'action' aspect being emphasized. Nothing lies outside the network of relations. '*Punctualization*' involves aligning actors to be considered as a sum of other, smaller actors while there are '*ordering struggles*' by actors to translate one another and thus appear to become stabilized, that is '*black-boxed*'. Network elements are converted to '*immutable mobiles*' by being defined and ascribed roles. Actors are connected into a network through '*intermediaries*' which are actors translating their intentions into other actors, while '*mediators*' are entities that multiply difference. Callon (1986) proposes a four-stage typology of network growth by which networks assemble and extend themselves through 'moments' of translation. Through '*problematization*', an entity attempts to establish itself as an '*obligatory point of passage*', in the meantime attracting other entities to join the network in the moment of '*interressement*'. Those entities to be included experience '*enrolment*', while the moment of '*mobilization*' reveals network durability as its translations have been extended to other locations.[1]

Landri (2020) proposes a reinvigoration of the critical studies of educational policy and leadership studies with ANT, regarding the latter as a 'virtual cloud', a 'sensibility that refuses to be enclosed in fixed theoretical cages' (p. 34), thus inviting diverse translations, leading to an ecological understanding of educational leadership. An ANT sensibility highlights the 'vitality and the politics of the materiality' (Landri, 2020, p. 35) of leaders and educational leadership. I choose to employ the all-encompassing definition given by Fenwick and Edwards (2010), to employ 'ANT as a marker – understood to be a contingent and conflicted signifier – for approaches that share notions of symmetry, network broadly conceived, and translation in multiple and shifting formulations' (p. 3). I demonstrate how ANT could therefore function as a valuable lens when researching the contested, diffuse field of education, leadership, and policy – sensible to what is explicated, amplified, and linked. ANT thus helps researchers reflect on the different kinds of connections and associations created among things; the networks produced through these connections; in addition to the different transformations and sometimes twisted ends served through these networks. ANT can demonstrate how assemblages in

educational practices can be simultaneously made and unmade, with unconventional forms and spaces taking shape and developing strength (Mifsud, 2020). Notwithstanding,

> *Literature reveals that ANT is still relatively under-utilized in in the ELMA field in general, and in policy issues in specific – in fact, one may safely state that it has barely reached its stage of maturity since its inception in the 1980s. (Mifsud, 2024, p. 3)*

Consequently, in this chapter, I regard Social Justice (and social justice discourses) as THE ACTOR-NETWORK, and attempt to trace this network, thus assembling all the elements that impinge on the unfolding of social justice and equity in compulsory schooling, while simultaneously highlighting how social justice discourses attract, assemble, and translate educational leadership and policy in order to mediate educational reform. While admitting that writing about ANT and its application is extremely difficult due to its messy, fluid, disorderly, dynamic, chaotic, and ambivalent nature, it is the very 'messiness', 'fluidity', and 'chaos' of this 'sensibility' that offers invaluable insights to researchers in the education arena (Mifsud, 2014, 2020).

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SCHOOLING: IS SOCIAL JUSTICE THE 'DRIVING ACTOR' OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING THEORY, POLICY, AND PRACTICE?

The term 'social justice' is appearing in numerous public texts and discourses within the education field, thus becoming a key concept in current education policy and practice (Clark, 2006; North, 2006). Moreover, the concept of social justice is crucial to theorizing about education and schooling, consequently being considered by politicians, policymakers, and practitioners in their thinking about the nature of education and the purpose of schools. Regrettably, education practitioners, researchers, and policymakers often utilize this umbrella term (social justice) while leaving out salient details about its social, cultural, economic, and political bearing. Notwithstanding the unanimous agreement on the desirability of social justice as an educational goal, this is complemented by a parallel contestation over its actual meaning and application in relation to schooling, that is, in relation to the formulation of policy and how it is to be included in practice.

From an ANT-ish perspective, social justice can thus be regarded as the 'driving' actor of education and subsequently compulsory schooling, in terms of steering theory, policy, and practice. Using Latour's (1999) reasoning, this

unfolds via the attribution of social justice discourses to both humans (e.g. policymakers, school leaders, and education practitioners) and non-humans (e.g. policy documents, leadership practices, standards, and resources); the distribution of properties (in both equal and not-so-equal measures) among them; the generation of connections among these human and non-human elements; their circulation within schooling, leadership, and policy networks; and their transformation as they are simultaneously acted upon and act upon each other in a constant, fluid assemblage of the social justice network.

According to Cambron-McCabe and McCarthy (2005), 'The prevalence of social justice language in educational settings and scholarship portends a new movement with as many meanings as actors on the scene. This visibility is cause for celebration as well as unease' (p. 202). Despite the centrality of social justice issues in education, not enough prominence has been attributed to the precise meaning of social justice discourse (Gewirtz, 2002), with social justice being regarded as 'an *old* but not an *old-fashioned* concept' (Arar et al., 2017, p. 192, original emphasis). Literature refers to the elusive meaning of social justice and the lack of clarity of the term. The 'conceptual plurality' (Liasidou & Antoniou, 2015, p. 348) of this ambiguous and contested notion derives from one's 'epistemological commitments and theoretical preferences' (Johnson, 2008, p. 310). These plural conceptions of social justice have implications for policy sociology in three distinct and simultaneously interlapping ways (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002). This is mainly due to the enlargement of the social justice agenda which has incorporated more comprehensive models; tensions within and between diverse facets of social justice; as well as diffusion for the responsibility of social justice whose promotion is no longer solely done by the state, but by all those operating within educational institutions, thus collapsing the distinction between action and evaluation. The conceptual plurality of social justice discourse, or should I say discourses, and the lack of precise meaning of the term (Gewirtz, 2002) is a tactic, or technology, utilized by social justice to 'enlarge' the network via the assembling, disassembling, and re-assembling of associations that come into being due to the multitude of social justice versions and their inherent ambiguities and contradictions.

Ryan (2006) attempts to explore the difficulties behind the definition of the concept. This is due to the multitude of versions that exist, coupled with inherent ambiguities and contradictions within these definitions. Moreover, many of the approaches are simply unreasonable and unfeasible. Most social justice commentators concede that it revolves around legitimacy, fairness, welfare, and inclusion. Clark (2006) outlines the philosophical constituents of the social justice concept as the 'perfect world argument', 'just society', 'educated citizens', 'just schools', and 'school instrumentality' in enabling these social justice

interests. ANT sensibilities empower all actors, human and non-human, hereby referring to the various issues falling within the social justice network, to 'speak' their sociologies, being especially concerned with the discursively and materially homogeneous 'world-making' activity of the actors. Educational reform has been comprehended as both the *problem* and the *solution* in addressing the new work order demanded by the constantly complex social change, with education itself identified simultaneously as a gatekeeper of opportunity and a powerful distributor of life chances. Notwithstanding, education reform unfolds for and is instigated by the social justice agenda *and* social justice is *the* driver of education reform, with social justice often positioned as a panacea for the leadership of successful educational reform (McNae & Barnard, 2021). How does education reform assemble, hold, and translate in the social justice network? Are education reform and social justice actors that achieve by '*scaling*, *spacing*, and *contextualizing* each other?' (Latour, 2005, p. 184, original emphasis). ANT encourages questions about the kinds of worlds we are helping to make and legitimate in our accounts, and the ways in which we are helping to compose and reconfigure the very communities, processes, and actors within the social justice network. Why is social justice positioned as the 'elixir' to leadership of successful education reform? Isn't this a reversible and symbiotic relationship? This is perhaps evidence of ANT's 'relational epistemology' (Parker, 2017) where the social justice network is constantly made and re-made, and where both social justice and leadership assemble and hold together as entities, both being capable of translating each other; where action is always 'interaction'. School leaders are tasked with the ordeal of assessing potentially inequitable consequences of these reforms to eventually embark on educational change to generate fair outcomes. On the other hand, school autonomy functions in complex and contradictory ways as both a facilitator and an obstacle in the unfolding of social justice practices. School autonomy can thus be regarded as both a push and pull factor in its function of simultaneously being able to assemble and disassemble the social justice assemblage. Holloway and Keddie (2020) notice a distinction between local and system levels of social justice where the micro does not necessarily translate into the macro. In relation to school autonomy policy discourse, this signifies that principals are '*notionally* empowered' (p. 798, original emphasis) for self-governance to improve their school performance. However, school autonomy may reinforce the competition climate among the stratified and discriminatory school system with access to different resource levels by negotiating policy endeavours for redistributive justice at individual school level.

Francis et al. (2017) highlight that the modus operandi of social justice in state education is complicated not only because of the various definitions

of social justice, but also because of the complicated nature of its policy to practice trajectory. They sketch a number of dichotomies that haunt issues and debates pertaining to social justice in education, which are presented below:

- Locally relevant/engaging curricula versus national entitlement to 'high status knowledge'
- Future outcomes versus engagement (student experience of schooling)
- Teacher professionalism and autonomy versus accountability
- Teachers making *a* difference versus teachers making *the* difference
- Mandatory education versus democratic choice
- Local democracy versus universal principles
- Diversity of provision versus comprehensive equality
- Social diversity versus recognition of difference (choice)
- Public provision versus private provision

When applied to educational policymaking, ANT reconfigures the policy terrain, and in the case of this particular issue under exploration, provokes questions about how actor-networks constrain or enable the performance of social justice and how it is presented in policies and subsequent translation/enactment expectations. The policy-to-practice dichotomies presented above represent the struggle between two network types as identified by Latour (1992) the 'spaces of prescription' in stabilized, convergent networks in relation to the 'spaces of negotiation' in provisional, divergent networks. This constitutes the messy network of social justice in education, while concurrently contributing to its fluidity.

In a perfect world, social justice is not a relevant consideration – it can only be invoked as a ground for policy and practice if the difference leads to an inequality which offends against a principle deemed to be constitutive of a fair society. At the heart of a just society lies equality as a regulatory principle. It is debatable which form this equality ought to take: (1) equality of opportunity, (2) equality of treatment, and (3) equality of outcome (Clark, 2006). Do we regard equality, or rather, the equality principle, as an 'intermediary' and/or a 'mediator' of the social justice actor-network? Is it 'worked-upon' by social justice in order to be utilized as the 'language of the network', thus communicating with schooling, school actors, and related entities, thus translating its intentions into other actors? Or is it the 'mediator', the non-human entity that multiplies the difference of the network? Citizens are not naturally endowed with a spirit of social justice, hence its importance as an aim of

education. Schools must subsequently be so arranged as to achieve this end. Consequently, the school as a social institution may be regarded as an instrument to be used in the interests of social justice, with instrumentality being both internal and external.

Ryan (2006) explores the use of inclusion/exclusion as a lens for addressing social justice issues. Students can be excluded from school premises, learning processes and activities because of their ability, age, race, class, gender, sexuality, and poverty. This approach shifts the blame away from individuals, thus uncovering the taken-for-granted role of institutions and systems in shaping the unequal human relations, and the unjust distribution of goods, rights, and responsibilities. Barad (2007) argues convincingly that justice

> *is not a state that can be achieved once and for all. There are no solutions. There is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly. (p. x)*

Thus, the presence of tensions within social justice categories. North (2006) depicts the three social justice categories of redistribution/recognition, sameness/difference and macro/micro level forces as multidirectional, intersecting spheres, in that these seemingly dichotomous categories often overlap and remain in tension with each other, with the possibility of friction and contradiction within and among spheres. These complex, fraught interactions that emerge when various conceptualizations of social justice collide aid in the promotion of continued dialogue and reflexivity on the aims and potential of education for social justice. The next section traces the role of neoliberalism in the assemblage of the social in/justice network in schooling and education.

ACTOR-NETWORKS OF THE STATE TRANSLATING SCHOOLING IN THE NAME OF THE GLOBAL POLICY CLIMATE?

The politics of the later part of the 20th century have been denoted by the emergence of neoliberalism (Doherty, 2007), which has thus become the dominant political and ideological paradigm of our time (Pinto, 2015). Peters (2001b, pp. 143–144) offers a very succinct outline of the main elements constituting neoliberal governmentality. I will not elaborate on each one due to chapter length constraints, but will briefly mention those relevant to the issues being explored in this section. Neoliberalism fosters a critique of state reason, thus constituting a permanent appraisal of the activity of rule and government.

A current iteration of this is the neoliberal critique of the welfare state. Government is conceived as the community of free, autonomous, self-regulated individuals with an emphasis on the 'responsibilization' of individuals as moral agents. It also incorporates quasi-autonomous individuals and entities through the promotion of self-management, as well as 'degovernmentalization' of the state. 'Government at a distance' is developed through new forms of social accounting, simultaneously with increasing decentralization, 'devolution', and delegation of power, authority and responsibility from the centre to the local institution. Social justice operationalizing through educational leadership and school reform may be regarded as the state's way of 'governing at a distance' and ensuring its welfare state agenda permeates the schooling system by turning it into an education goal.

In this context, neoliberalism may be deemed as the overarching actor-network within the state, that in the sake of network growth, assembles and extends itself through Callon's (1986) four-stage typology of 'moments' of translation. It recruits social justice through 'problematization', by establishing this as a must for successful and equitable school reform, thus attempting to establish itself as an 'obligatory point of passage'. In the meantime, social justice attracts educational leadership and policy in the moment of 'interressement' as they are enrolled to generate school reform. These mobilization moments reveal network durability, in terms of the translations of neoliberalism and neoliberal discourses being extended to other locations beyond the state as the actors and actants from heterogeneous networks aligned by common interests and engaged in convincing others to 'enrol' in the interests defined by the neoliberalism actor-network. The concept of network assemblages draws attention to the 'nodes of action', in this case, schools as social spaces, where the power of the state is enacted and performed through and for the interests and furtherance of social justice.

According to Dean (1999), however, 'The notion of freedom and the free conduct of individuals once again becomes the principle by which government is to be rationalized and reformed' (p. 155). Accordingly, Joseph (2007) describes neoliberalism as 'a political discourse concerned with the governing of individuals from a distance' (p. 7), further stating that it 'gives the pretence of freedom while acting in a coercive way' (p. 8). Government may have become 'more multiple, diffuse, facilitative and empowering', but it is also 'more disciplinary, stringent and punitive' (Dean, 1999, p. 171). This hegemonic neoliberalism has been portrayed as 'the closest thing to a global metanarrative' (Peters, 2001a, p. viii). We have thus witnessed social justice principles integrated in education policy for school leaders to enact in their individual and diverse micro-settings within the meso and macro often socially

unjust systems. These leadership standards, under the guise of social justice principles, might function as 'obligatory points of passage', or critical network channels, in the translation of policy into practice. These become the central assemblages through which all relations tend to flow, for example, leadership practices, school vision and mission, teachers' pedagogy, school textbooks, parents and other stakeholders, the outside community, etc. The power of these obligatory points of passage, in this case standards, can be seen in how these frame the context for policy reception and enactment, while simultaneously influencing leaders' (or leadership) engagements and translations.

Consequently, the global policy climate is 'now impregnated by the tenets, assumptions, ambitions and operational technologies of a neoliberal ethos of government' (Doherty, 2007, p. 202). Neoliberalism can be thus regarded as a set of accountability practices, 'paradoxically re-assert[ing] the State's role … centraliz[ing] and decentraliz[ing] the State' (Webb, 2011, p. 736), with the intention of developing 'governmentality constellations' (Webb, 2011, p. 735). Neoliberal policy tends to be centrally conceived, imposed, and reproduced in the absence of democratic practices and the involvement of the potential perpetrators (Pinto, 2015). Such policies, often propelled by narrative in the form of educational crises, provide governments with a rationale to hastily implement reform in a rhetorical move to provide constancy and manipulation of the crisis situation (Pinto, 2012; Sonu, 2011). Rigorous neoliberal control embedded in policy layers, constructs and performs educators as regulatory tools of the State (Ball et al., 2012; Honan, 2004), besides eroding their professional autonomy. Neoliberal policy within the education system is often characterized by the desire to do away with local government and control, thus allocating more independence and self-management to the schools. Notwithstanding, 'neoliberal public policy quite often runs in tandem with neo-conservative attitudes' (Gillies, 2013, p. 76), as evident in top-down leadership and prescribed curricula.

Ranson's (2008) model of governance seems to be contradicted by the seemingly wider international trend for school autonomy *and* novel forms of state control. This trend, according to Helgoy et al. (2007), incorporates both accountability and 're-regulation' where the 'centre reclaims control, often in an indirect manner, through target setting, performance measurement and the use of quality indicators' (p. 198). For Ball (2003), this simply leads to the appearance of freedom in a 'devolved environment', as he further states that 'it is a misrecognition to see these reform processes as simply a strategy of de-regulation, they are processes of *re-regulation*' (p. 217, original emphasis). According to Lingard and Sellar (2012), a government's agenda which ties in decentralization and autonomy with accountability is a veiled effort to steer schooling

policy from a distance, as 'such governance is strictly regulated through policy setting … and holding providers to account' (Keddie, 2015, p. 2).

ACHIEVING EQUITY AND A SOCIALLY JUST EDUCATION SYSTEM: A PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN POLICY SCRIPT ACTING THROUGH STUDENT DIVERSITY, SCHOOL SUCCESS, AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS DISCOURSES?

Educators have had good reason to be concerned with social justice in a context where diversity has become more pronounced in both our schools and communities, with widening divisions between the advantaged and the disadvantaged (Ryan, 2006). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that educators, policymakers, as well as the general public are increasingly conscious of the fact that in spite of the numerous well-intentioned restructuring, reform, and curricular efforts, many children who are in some way diverse from the previously dominant and traditionally most successful white, middle class children are not achieving school success, with 'success' being translated in terms of access to a wide range of teaching, learning and achievements related to the development of an 'educated citizen' (Shields, 2004). We can observe social justice 'translating' student diversity discourse in relation to school success in order to fit the school effectiveness agenda required by the neoliberal state. There is 'punctualization' at play, with the actor social justice being considered as a sum of other, smaller actors, in this case student diversity, school success, and related discourses. Do these 'ordering struggles' by actors to translate one another become 'black-boxed'? Are student diversity and school success to be regarded as 'immutable mobiles', functioning as the delegates of social justice discourse/s?

Mowat (2018) states that 'the quest to address inequities in educational outcomes associated with socio-economic status is not new, is enduring and is of global significance' (p. 300). She puts forward the case that the problem cannot be tackled via a primary and exclusive focus on the school as the agent of change, but on addressing endemic inequalities within society. Income inequalities have been growing steadily within most OECD countries, being at their peak within the last three decades (OECD, 2016). Social class is closely associated with student and school characteristics, thereby wielding a powerful influence on learning outcomes and student achievement (Schleicher, 2014). OECD highlights the salient attributes of top-performing education systems as having high expectations of all pupils with a specific prominence on equity. This data is derived from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), within a culture of performativity in which nation states

are fuelled by international league tables (Ball, 2003, 2015). The ANT-ish concept of 'symmetry' brings to the fore the relations and forces of 'non-human' actors in the social justice network where income inequalities, social class, the OECD, educational outcomes, and complex school systems 'assemble' and 'hold' together, while simultaneously translating each other. This also constitutes and contributes to the 'assemblage' of the 'blame culture' where the school, which is 'acted-upon' by social justice, is then expected to move from 'actant' to 'actor' state in order to mobilize all the related entities (teachers, students, parents, policies, outcomes, diversity, school success), while connecting them and eventually circulating them in the name of social justice. Harris et al. (2015) question the viability of such comparative international reports that seem to suggest that the replication of strategies in new contexts will automatically result in better outcomes. The complexity of school systems together with the contextual and cultural boundaries in which they function are thus disregarded. How is equity being perceived in OECD reports? (Boyum, 2014). Furthermore, Schleicher (2014) critiques the OECD which frames the problem in terms of what education systems, schools, and teachers can do in order to redress inequalities in society, rather than how redressing inequalities in society can lead to more equitable educational outcomes. This leads to a 'blame culture' in which the entire school community is held accountable and responsible for the circumstances in which it finds itself and for solutions to the problem (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013). Notwithstanding, the OECD does seem to be veering in the other direction of relating educational equity to equity more broadly in society, 'Education's powerful role does not mean that it can work alone. Reducing inequality also requires policies for housing, criminal justice, taxation and health care to work hand in hand with education to make a lasting difference' (OECD, 2016, p. 10).

Francis et al. (2017) argue that research on issues of social justice in education has often failed to engage constructively with education policymaking, which is partially attributed to a lack of precision about what a socially just education system might look like and the means to achieve this. Recent international neoliberal policy trends such as the marketization of education, the increased blurring of the public and private in education provision (Ball, 2013a, 2013b; Hogan, 2014), and the diversification of education for the sake of consumer choice (Mills et al., 2014) have been positioned as challenging and unjust. Notwithstanding, an interest in social inequality in educational outcomes has featured in succeeding global policymaking, especially in Global North countries, in the 21st century. This interest can be partially credited to the findings and influence of the OECD (Francis et al., 2017) via the growing influence of the international league tables enabled by PISA testing

(Sellar & Lingard, 2014; Whitty et al., 2016). Despite receiving critiques for the generation of competition and encouragement of New Public Management techniques (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009), the OECD has promoted the investigation of social inequalities in educational outcomes as part of their PISA research agenda (e.g. OECD, 2010, 2013) via the provision of statistical information frequently drawn upon by those interested in promoting social justice in education. Therefore, while it is acknowledged that social inequalities in educational outcomes need to be addressed in most countries of the Global North, the political question of *how* remains (Francis et al., 2017). These international league tables stabilize themselves as an 'immutable mobile', travelling around education spaces, dictating terms and even shaping the actualities of knowledge and action that are set as the 'standard' for acceptable educational competency and performance.

Comparative studies of the performance of educational systems govern the global policyscape, thus leading to increased pressure on school systems. One particular example is the PISA assessment regime (OECD, 2014) that steers schools to focus solely on an improvement agenda in order to reduce the achievement gap between the groups of high-attaining and low-attaining learners, especially targeting those groups who continue to be marginalized in school education. Thus, within the context of globalization, nations increasingly turn to policy borrowing as a solution to identified problems, with the current policy focus being actively concerned with closing the attainment gap. However, the relationship between policy generation and enactment is not linear, with various points of translation, and mistranslation, of policy intentions (Reeves & Drew, 2012). Forde and Torrance (2017a) consequently deem that,

> *There is a danger that unidimensional and politically expedient solutions will be generated that are short term and largely concerned with targeting individual pupils to improve their examination scores rather than looking at systemic change to address the needs of diverse learners. (p. 117)*

It becomes a case of actors mobilizing politically effective networks and heterogeneous possibilities embedded within any formal iteration of educational standards brought about by these international league tables. It is a matter of these standards, generated by the OECD in the form of PISA results, attempting to create comparability by controlling conduct across space and time, instantiated via the assemblies of texts, objects, bodies, practices, and desires.

Ward et al. (2016) draw attention to the neoliberal hegemony that has come to dominate policy discourse globally while considering the potential for policy compliance and contestation within such a scenario where education

policy serves as an arena for the playing out of political control and authority over the purpose and nature of education, as well as its structures and practices. Governments seek to persuade acceptance of policy by embedding novel ideas within the existing discourse (Harvey, 2009), driven by the policy technologies of marketization, managerialism, and performativity (Ball, 2008). This widespread endorsement of neoliberal beliefs ensures that policy consistent with neoliberal common sense is embraced. Thus, 'specific education policy discourses are deliberately and constructively (re)used, (re)emphasized, and (re)iterated until they enter the public consciousness and become reified' (Ward et al., 2016, p. 46). This is illustrated in their small-scale qualitative study of the implementation of the leadership standards for social justice in Scotland (GTCS, 2012), reified by a documentary analysis of the interpolation of leadership into policy development in Scotland following the OECD (2007) report. How can policy debate about neoliberal policy unfold if a neoliberal consensus and policy ownership have been pre-established?

The under-theorization of social justice in education policy is acknowledged by Gewirtz (1998) who attempts to sketch out a framework for conceptualizing social justice in the context of education policy research. Despite the passage of two decades and the developments in the field of education policy, the following questions are extremely relevant, especially within the hegemony of neoliberal policy discourses globally. Gewirtz (1998) invites us to consider five issues within educational institutions and the wider education system, to investigate the rationale and extent of education policies supporting, interrupting, or subverting: (1) exploitative relationships; (2) processes of marginalization and inclusion; (3) the promotion of relationships based on recognition, respect and mutuality rather than the production of powerlessness; (4) practices of cultural imperialism; and (5) antagonistic practices. This framework is not intended to provide an absolute conceptualization of social justice but to generate scepticism among researchers as to their (un)successful contribution to a social justice agenda. Consequently, applications of ANT add to the ongoing dialogue about written policy versus enacted policy (Colston & Ivey, 2015) by positioning standards as prescriptions that are staged and deliberated across strenuous relational ties and scales of influence (Saldanha, 2002).

Gewirtz (2006) thus argues that social justice in education is both level- and context-dependent, outlining that cross-national or other comparative assessments of social justice cannot be made without considering the various modes in which justice is enacted in practice. Indeed,

> *What criteria can we use to judge whether an educational policy or practice is socially just? How do we make comparative assessments of social justice in education? In other words, how can we tell*

> *whether one national or local education system or one educational institution or one educational policy or practice is more socially just than another? (p. 70)*

The significance of justice can only be properly comprehended within particular settings of interpretation and enactment.

Shields (2004) argues that

> *difference is normal. It is neither to be celebrated nor denigrated. The differences in our schools provide a rich tapestry of human existence that must be the starting point for a deeply democratic, academically excellent, and socially just education. No one is defined by a single factor or characteristic … Difference is an inescapable and foundational quality of our society and our education system. (pp. 127–128)*

The notion of social justice in education has been established within the prevailing neoliberal discourse that has achieved the status of 'an unquestionable orthodoxy that operates as if it were the objective truth' (Patrick, 2013, p. 149). In this light, Newman (2020) regards the various meanings of the term social justice as language games, with this perspective aiding him to argue the fact that he is not averse to the criticism of the use of 'social justice' and related terminology as little more than 'buzz words', but the flexibilities that have been taken advantage of by politicians who attribute different meanings to terms with established meanings in one language game in another. Therefore,

> *It thus seems inevitable that the notion of social justice in education will be a matter of debate and discussion, whereby the different criteria or rules of the different groups and language games are advanced, asserted, and explicated in various ways, (Patrick, 2013, p. 227)*

with each party trying to justify its fixture. So what role is educational leadership expected to play in this game?

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: AN 'INTERMEDIARY' OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND/OR A 'MEDIATOR' FOR NEOLIBERAL RATIONALITIES?

Several Western countries around the world, have experienced unparalleled levels of social, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity that have resulted in increasing discussions around the need for schools to both 'embrace' student

diversity and 'manage' resulting lack of equity issues, in order to serve the common good under the guise of cultural integration and social justice. Few would therefore contest that school leadership has a central role in addressing issues of cultural diversity and equity, with education regarded as a direct social justice contributor both in the provision of equal life opportunities and in imparting students with the responsibility for the perpetration of such opportunities (Waite & Arar, 2020).

Recently, the concept of social justice leadership has emerged within the literature and policy discourse to describe the work of school leaders seeking to enhance the educational experience of all learners (Torrance & Forde, 2017b), in a bid to reduce inequalities in education systems (King & Travers, 2017). In such a context, educational leaders are regarded as vital social justice agents, with the headteacher playing a significant role in shaping the conditions for learning at the micro level (Forde & Torrance, 2017b), exerting influence both across the school as an organization, and at the individual classroom and teacher level (Torrance & Forde, 2017a). 'How socially just leaders make sense of their leadership overall is an essential part of *being* a socially just leader' (McNae, 2017, p. 268, added emphasis). Internationally, increasing emphasis has been placed on utilizing the role of school leadership to address issues of social justice and equality in terms of educational policy, theory, and professional practice (Blackmore, 2009; Bogotch, 2008). An emergent significant factor is the achievement gap between groups of high-attaining and low-attaining learners (Forde & Torrance, 2017b). Niesche and Keddie (2011) identify three productive leadership practices that work 'towards realizing the equity mandates of education policy and disrupting the narrow managerial approaches to equity that currently predominate in schools' (p. 75). These involve fostering a common vision and purpose about equity; supportive social relations between staff; and dispersed leadership (with a distinction from 'distributed' leadership). This also implies the importance of context *for* and *on* social justice leadership (Torrance & Angelle, 2019). School leadership thus acts as an 'intermediary' of social justice (communicating with the other actors while 'translating' its intentions) to serve the broader neoliberal rationalities, while also acting as a 'mediator' for the latter (in terms of acting as an entity multiplying difference) and in turn promoting the social justice network growth.

Consequently, there has been particular concern with how issues of social justice and equity are shaped by broader neoliberal rationalities, regimes, and practices, including new managerialism, high-stakes testing, and accountabilities. These have been enacted within discourses of growth, marketization, competition, choice, improvement, standardization, meritocracy, performativity, managerialism, and school autonomy. Accordingly, these powerful global

reforms have reshaped social justice priorities in schools to a very narrow focus on the 'private' goals of education (social efficiency and social mobility) at the expense of 'public' goals (democratic and citizenship goals) (Niesche & Keddie, 2016). Educational leaders have been targeted as the key players in the promotion and enactment process of social justice in education, expected to foster a just and culturally responsive school environment while increasing the achievement of all students in their attempts at school improvement (Khalifa et al., 2016) in a global setting where the neoliberal agenda has exacerbated social justice issues. Lumby and Moorosi (2022) note that the social justice notion has permeated educational leadership discourse to such an extent that it has been embedded in leaders' roles and expectations (e.g. National Standards for Leadership in Scotland, GTCS, 2012). They detect

> *a kind of unspoken collusion whereby standards are set out for school leadership to rectify inequality, ignoring the limitations of leadership in the face of deep societal inequality … [adopting] a* private matter *perspective … look[ing] inwards to schools, where leadership is to achieve social justice irrespective of the wider political and social context, cuckoo-like shouldering aside radical critiques of who is running education and, in whose interests. (pp. 237–238, original emphasis)*

Literature thus contends that 'educational leadership and social justice are, and must be, inextricably interconnected' (Bogotch & Shields, 2014, p. 10). Middlewood (2007) further explains that for educators, leadership for social justice comprises the confrontation of 'major issues, such as those of equity, diversity and inclusion, in stimulating the changes needed for the embedding of social justice' (p. vii). It is also acknowledged that the concepts of leadership and social justice are discursive constructs present in specific economic, political and social realities, as such being highly contested notions (Niesche & Keddie, 2016). Consequently, Sarid (2021) proposes four principles that are prevalent in social justice leadership discourse, that is being (1) disruptive; (2) collaborative; (3) dilemmatic/tense; and (4) emergent-contextual. Social justice leadership disrupts the status quo in its pledge to exposing and eradicating social norms, practices, and structures responsible for engendering inequity and injustice. Social justice leadership is considered highly dilemmatic and paradoxical due to the conflicting dimensions composing the notion of social justice combined with conflicting considerations of implementing social justice policies (Bogotch & Kervin, 2019), with a growing perception that 'the ends of social justice should be seen in the plural, and that these ends are not necessarily complementary: implementing one end comes at the price of other,

no less significant, ends' (Sarid, 2021, p. 11). Social justice leadership fosters collaboration and decision-making in addressing issues of power and entitlement via the promotion of democratic processes. Social justice in practice being 'messy, complex, and fraught with contradictions' (Sarid, 2021, p. 12), leaders react to everyday social needs and issues in schools without following any prescribed models. From an ANT-ish approach, we may understand this social justice leadership within the network of education reform (for the sake of equity and social justice) as an attempt at 'school change' via the mobilization of school practices and the connections and linkages made as they move.

Educational leaders with a deep understanding of social justice leadership are crucial in stemming the reproduction of disadvantage through schooling in underprivileged areas (Niesche, 2017; Smyth, 2012). In the words of McNae and Barnard (2021),

> *exposing injustices is* part of the job *for socially just educational leaders who are* required *to move from their theorizing to action through dialogically respectful but active pursuit of revealing, disrupting, and subverting policies, procedures, and practices which are exploiting, marginalizing, or recycling unjust positions of power. (p. 209, original emphasis)*

Within an increasingly globalized educational setting, school effectiveness and performance discourses dictate the various facets of social justice and how these are addressed in schools. Thus, the voices calling for 'measurement, assessment, accountability, and performance' are vociferous, seeking to dominate the attention of leadership (McNae, 2014). These discourses epitomize educational reform premised on a logic of implementation and measurement, directed at transforming pedagogy and other school structures to increase student achievement. From an ANT approach, this attracts critical questions about hegemonic reform purposes, agendas, and exclusions embodied in state-initiated reform efforts.

Is the Western Notion of the Leadership for Social Justice Concept Universally Applicable? Reversing the 'Obligatory Point of Passage' and 'Un-translating' the Social Justice Actor-Network Emanating from the Anglophone Nations?

Oplatka and Arar (2016) in turn problematize the notion of leadership for social justice as constructed in dominant Western ideologies, reaching the simple conclusion that 'traditional societies need a particular conceptualization

of leadership for social justice that is based on entrenched social norms giving unique meanings to issues of justice, respect, interpersonal relations, equality and equity in education' (p. 366). Any attempt to impose Western-based concepts of social justice and leadership on the educational systems of diverse societies is a foregone conclusion, with these concepts being too normatively remote from local interpretations of life and the 'apposite' structure of the society. Oplatka and Arar (2016) highlight plausible incongruities between the principles constituting leadership for social justice in its 'Western' meanings and rudimentary features of traditional society by focusing on four major elements that vary widely between these two dichotomous societies. These relate to: (1) decreasing achievement gaps; (2) intensifying social justice in school; (3) incorporating democratic/ethical values; (4) stimulating critical dialogues and consciousness. These contradictions are present in the dichotomies of individual versus collective orientation; ascription versus achievement; particularistic versus universalistic relationships; autocracy versus democracy; and maintenance versus innovativeness. Why are educational leaders who live and work in traditional societies constrained to follow leadership for social justice constructs embedded in Western ideologies, rather than local ones? The Western, often taken-for-granted and unproblematized concept of social justice evokes various 'ordering practices', with Western-based meanings and values functioning to have a stabilizing effect on school leadership in traditional societies. Notwithstanding, the 'different emerging ontological forms' of the same ('universal') social justice standards and values across actor-networks highlight the fact that these are not universally performed. Consequently, entanglements between prescriptive forces and actual performances spawn a 'local universality', that results from actors assembled in mutual contexts. 'Networks of prescription and negotiation' materialize from this interplay of acquiescence and defiance, with these tensions being re-performed across various network assemblages.

The universal applicability of the Western leadership for social justice concept is re-visited by Gumus et al. (2021) in their review of international research on school leadership for social justice, equity, and diversity via the identification of three clusters. Social justice leadership research focuses on (1) social justice, diversity, equity, and cultural responsiveness; (2) inclusive education; and (3) ethnicity, race, religion, and gender (presented in order of co-occurrence frequency). The distinction of this research stream is attributed to the broadening of social justice leadership research in distinct and differential nations, potentially due to intercultural collaboration between educational leadership scholars and the staid social justice tribulations emanating from the social and political upheavals in various global regions (Arar et al., 2017).

Notwithstanding, Lumby and Moorosi (2022) contest this by articulating that

> *the persisting dominance of literature from Anglophone nations evidences the asymmetrical power structures in how knowledge is produced and consumed … [with] those who do find a voice through publication contribute to equality by their presence, while simultaneously detracting from it … [thus] create[ing] a form of epistemic injustice wherein relations of power and lack of access to resources created by colonialism constrain the Global South community from making their own values understood and accepted. (pp. 240–241)*

They also question Hallinger and Kovacevic (2021) decision not to classify research on social justice leadership as a canon, disregarding its potential to be classified as a coherent school of thought. These notions of global geographical location, voice, and canon constitute 'an equality double bind whereby, like a Trojan virus, parameters limiting change are embedded in the very work that seeks to promote it' (Hallinger & Kovacevic, 2021, p. 233), albeit 'an illustration of the law of unintended consequences' (p. 246). An ANT-ish outlook leads us to comprehend the mechanics of power at play, with this particular necessity for social justice in education concerning itself with the stabilization and reproduction of some interactions over others, the construction and maintenance of network centres and peripheries, and the establishment of hegemony. May this indeed be regarded as a 'persuasive' rather than 'possessive' power (Crawford, 2004), obtained through the number of entities networked and generated in a relational and distributed manner through 'ordering struggles'?

Despite international interest in social justice leadership, there is the need to explore its meaning in different contexts (Bryant et al., 2014), as well as the contested nature of leadership itself and its relationship with the discourses of social justice and equity (Niesche & Keddie, 2016). Ryan (2006) sums this up very aptly when he implies that,

> *Leadership and social justice are not natural bedfellows; nor are leadership and inclusion. The extent to which leadership meshes with social justice or inclusion depends on the way in which leadership is conceived, that is, in the way that relationships are envisioned among members of institutions, in the roles that are prescribed for individuals and groups, and in the ends to which leadership activities are directed. (p. 7)*

Gewirtz (2006) advocates a contextualized approach to social justice in education that considers the specificity of local contexts and levels of enactment impinging on the practices being implemented as 'different histories, social, and cultural configurations and different sets of constraints mean that different justice dimensions are relatively fore-grounded – or alternatively neglected – within different national contexts' (p. 80). This is reinforced by Newman (2020) in his call for the *re*contextualization rather than the *de*contextualization of social justice issues in education as, 'An approach which attempts to decontextualize social justice can be seen as an attempt to impose a particular meaning of the term onto others' (p. 228).

CONCLUSIONS

ANT gives space for a multi-sited approach analysis of the various ways and means by and through which social justice is enacted and performed in compulsory school settings, via the tracing of assemblages of both human and non-human actors/forces and the eventual establishment of roles and scripts. ANT affords fruitful questions for considering educational reform (Fenwick, 2011), with leadership for social justice hereby considered a panacea for such successful school reform processes. How does social justice work over time and place? How do different actors respond? What rhetorical and material struggles ensue, and what actually changes?

ANT examines the micro-negotiations that continuously unfold to enrol and mobilize all the human and non-human elements into common practices and understandings that begin to resemble a stabilized 'network' of social justice in compulsory schooling. ANT readings ask: How did this network come to extend itself? How did the various entities come to be combined? What connections are continuing to hold, and what is holding them in place? What changes occurred and what remained stabilized? Where did resistance emerge, and what happened?

ANT approaches generate unique analysis of educational reform by tracing the rich material trajectories of the actors being followed by the researcher. Moreover, ANT's language can open up new questions, following an approach that enables the researcher to 'discern the difficult ambivalences, messes, multiplicities and contradictions' (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 1) entrenched in numerous educational matters. Education is viewed as an assemblage, 'only becoming possible through its own enactment as a separate domain' (Fenwick & Landri, 2012, p. 2). As a result of this,

> *Socio-material studies shift the conversation from issues defined by the personal and the social to questions about these assemblages,*

> *how they move, and how they produce what may appear to be distinct objects, subjects, and events. How and why do certain combinations of things come together to exert particular effects? … How do some assemblages become stable, and what force do they wield? How can more oppressive assemblages be interrupted and weakened? (Fenwick & Landri, 2012, p. 3)*

Problematizing the notion of social justice in education as presented in the literature via ANT is meant to generate scepticism and critique among the policy makers, academics, and education practitioners who are concerned with issues of social justice and equity in schools. The issues raised in this conceptual chapter are legitimate across the international context, especially due to the increasing globalization of education policy (Ball, 2008) and the global extension of practices of policy borrowing widely established among Western nations (Lingard, 2010; Whitty et al., 2016), moreover when combined with the expansion of social justice leadership research across various global regions (Arar et al., 2017).

NOTE

1. For further details on the use of ANT in education research, kindly refer to Mifsud (2014, 2020). Only the basic information in relation to ANT concepts was included in this section due to word length constraints.

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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. *Does education reform act as a help or a hindrance for the social justice agenda?*
2. *How does the global policy climate contribute to socially just schooling?*
3. *To what extent do you consider school leadership to act as an 'intermediary' for social justice as both a schooling and society outcome?*
4. *How can Actor-Network Theory help us be critical of educational policy and leadership theories/practices in order to foster social justice and equity in schools?*

FURTHER READING

1. **Fenwick, T., & Edwards, R. (2010). *Actor-network theory and education*. Routledge.**

This book offers an introduction to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) for educators to consider in three ways. One mode is the introduction of concepts, approaches, and debates around ANT as a research approach in education. A second mode showcases educational studies that have employed ANT approaches in classrooms, workplaces, and community settings, drawn from the UK, USA, Canada, Europe, and Australia. These demonstrate how ANT can operate in highly diverse ways whether it focuses on policy critique, curriculum inquiry, engagements with digital media, change and innovation, issues of accountability,

or exploring how knowledge unfolds and becomes materialized in various settings. A third mode looks at recent 'after-ANT' inquiries which open an array of important new approaches. Across these diverse environments and uptakes, the authors trace how learning and practice emerge, show what scales are at play, and demonstrate what this means for educational possibilities.

2. **Landri (2020). *Educational leadership, management, and administration through actor-network theory*. Routledge.**

This book presents how actor-network theory (ANT) and the related vocabularies have much to offer to a critical re-imagination of the dynamics of management in education and educational leadership. It extends the growing contemporary perspective of ANT into the study of educational administration and management. This book draws on case studies focusing on new configurations of educational management and leadership. It presents new developments of ANT ('After ANT' and 'Near ANT') and clarifies how these 'sensibilities' can contribute to thinking critically and intervening in the current dynamics of education. The book proposes that ANT can offer an ecological understanding of educational leadership which is helpful in abandoning the narrow humanistic world of managerialism, considering a post-anthropocentric scenario where it is necessary to compose together new 'liveable' assemblages of humans and nonhumans.

3. **Mifsud (2020). A critical review of actor-network theory and its use in education research. In E. Idemudia (Ed.), *Optimizing social and organizational dynamics in the digital era* (pp. 135–156). IGI Global.**

This chapter, which expands on a previous publication (Mifsud, 2014), presents a critique of actor-network theory as a sociomaterial concept. Furthermore, the author problematizes the relative under-application of this 'sensibility' in education research, while simultaneously exploring its contribution as an analytical framework through its central concepts of 'actor-network', 'symmetry', 'translation', and their constituents. This chapter zooms on the concepts of networks and power relations. The author questions the prevalent notion of the 'network' metaphor promulgated by globalization discourses, setting it up against the network conception in actor-network theory, where the main principle is multiplicity. Actor network theory is analysed as a theory of the mechanics of power, concerning itself with the setting up of hegemony. This chapter is especially targeted for researchers of education reform who are as yet unfamiliar with the concepts of Actor-Network Theory and somewhat wary of the validity of sociomaterialism in the analysis of education issues.

4. **Mifsud, D. (2021). (Mis)leading for social (in)justice and (in)equity … (un)following a script? In D. Mifsud (Ed.),** ***Narratives of educational leadership: Representing research via creative analytic practices*** **(pp. 73–113). Springer.**

This chapter presents a narrative dramatization of leadership for social (in)justice from the author's own experience within a Maltese society welcoming an ever-increasing influx of migrants and a local economic reality with identified skills shortages. It is within such a de-stabilized socio-economic reality created by the arrival of migrants that this chapter seeks to explore how issues of social justice and equity are addressed through a juxtaposition of policy and practice via leadership performances within two primary schools, with a specific reference to migrant learners and students from poor social backgrounds. This particular leadership narrative is presented in a semi-fictionalized narrative dramatization made up of various characters in which the author employs the 'triple' use of narrative (Mifsud, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). The three scenes of 'The Script' enable her to draw out the absurdities, inconsistencies, and inherent contradictions where (dys)functional leadership is not necessarily unfolding as set out in the policy documents that purport social justice and equity. The findings of this small-scale case study have implications for other national systems, particularly those that are concerned with addressing issues of social justice and equity via schooling.

5. **Mifsud (2024). (Guest editor). Editorial: Exploring educational leadership and policy through Actor-Network Theory: On being ANTish in the ELMA field.** ***Journal of Educational Administration and History****, 56***(1), 1–6.**

The editorial of this guest-edited special issue highlights the main features of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and how these can be applied in the educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA) field, where this theory has been under-utilized so far. The six contributors in this special issue apply ANT to explorations of ELMA and education policy by framing 'educational problems' indifferent education settings and distinct contexts, involving a variety of human and non-human actors, in disparate ways.