Enhancing educational leadership and pedagogy for social justice at schools: Applying action research to develop capacity

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The content of the presentation

1. Description of an action research project for the promotion of social justice at the micro-level of school

2. Share and exchange ideas regarding the promotion of social justice at school

3. Reflection on what we can achieve for the establishment of democracy at schools

It is difficult to define social justice!

Definitions about social justice in education focus on the undermining arrangements at schools that allow or even promote marginalization and exclusion among students.

Social justice in education

The prevalence of social justice scholarship and conversation in educational settings and studies has to do with a consciousness about the impact of social background, gender, race, social class, poverty, sexual orientation, disability and other marginalizing factors on students' learning and success.

What do scholars say …

- "Social justice can only be invoked as a ground for policy and practice if the difference leads to an inequality which in fundamental ways offends against a principle deemed to be constitutive of a fair society" (Clark, 2006).

- Action for social justice is "the exercise of altering these (institutional and organizational) arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions" Goldfarb & Grinberg (2002).

What about leadership for social justice

Social justice leadership means that principals advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions

(Theoharis, 2004, 2007, 2008)

What do we perceive as social justice in our research?

Pedagogy and **Leadership** for social justice are defined as the

deliberate pedagogical and organizational action to improve learning for all children and halt marginalization and exclusion, through a conscious sensitivity to the diversity among school community members and by taking over oriented action based on the value of social justice.

Question 1

- Priorities for social justice action at school level

The purpose of the study

- "The realization of equal opportunities in schools today is above all, dependent on the implementation of practices and beliefs at the micro-level" (Koutselini, Trigo-Santos & Verkest, 2004).

Departing from this position,

- The purpose of this study was to explore the potential ways in which educational leadership, as pedagogical praxis, facilitates the access of all children to education.

The results of the study unveil

1. teachers' perceptions about justice in taking over oriented action towards social justice,

2. examples of action related to certain aspects of everyday practice,

3. multiple forms of resistance towards the effort to promote social justice,

4. in what ways action research process contributed to the co-development of teachers and head teacher in their effort to promote social justice at a certain school.

A study from leadership's perception

In this study, educational leadership emerges through the overall pedagogical praxis and it is examined through the personal experience and perspective of a specific school head teacher, who also had the role of the principal researcher and data collector

Research Methodology

- Participatory action research was chosen as the appropriate methodology. This specific approach allowed reflective and deep understanding of the conditions that determine school practices.

- During data analysis both qualitative and quantitative techniques were recruited.

Defining action research

"Action research is an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners. Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders" (Bradbury Huang, 2010, p. 93).

Key Features of Participatory Action Research

- The process of participatory action research is generally thought to involve a spiral of self-reflective cycles of the following:

- *Planning a change*

- *Acting and observing*

- *Reflecting*

- *Replanning*

- *Acting and observing again*

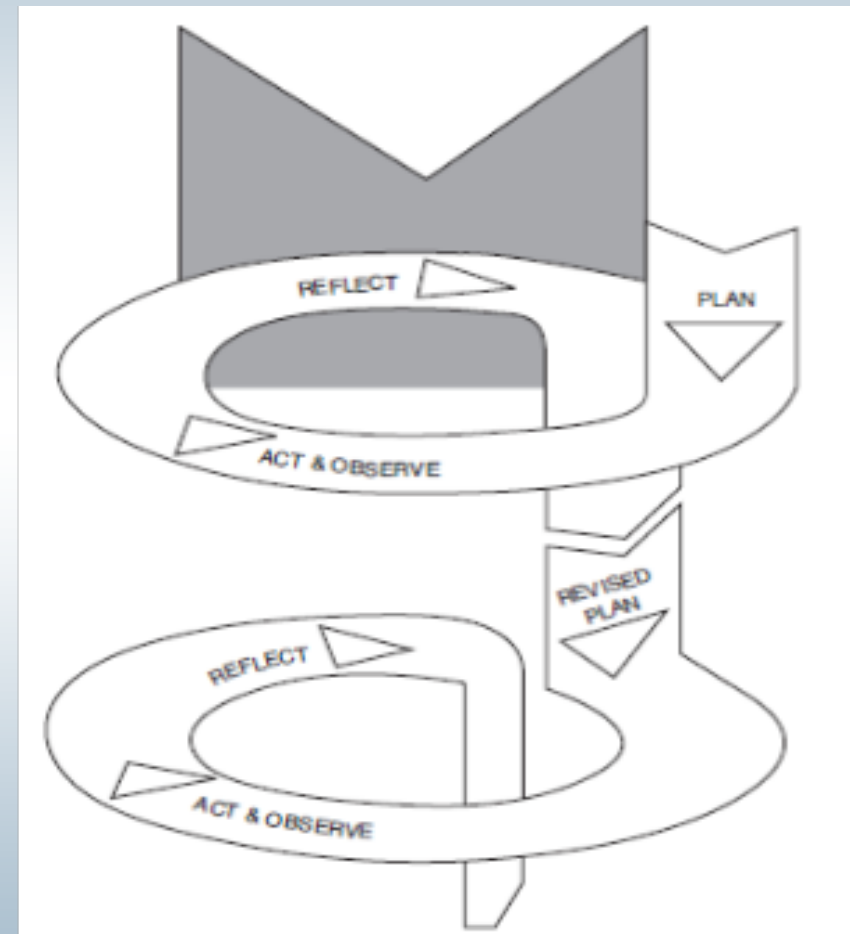- *Reflecting again, and so on . . .* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000)

Figure 1: The Action Research Spiral

Source: Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000

Brief description of the research project

- The research took place at a public elementary school in an urban area of Cyprus

- A full school year

- Teachers implemented an educational intervention

- Action research was coordinated by headteacher (individual and participatory perspective)

- Triple role of the principal researcher facilitated the firsthand understanding of data.

- Autobiographical character of the study

- External critical friend supported the project

Distinctive phases and reflective cycles of action and reflection

Initial design of phases

- a) Setting Direction - Introduction of the idea,

- b) Realization of initial status and identifying high-risk students,

- c) Development of pedagogical intervention, and

- d) Evaluation and Reflection

Three successive cycles

- *First cycle*: Initiating action – Seek of orientation,

- *Second cycle*: Intermediate evolution of action - Focus on in-school activities,

- *Third cycle*: Mature implementation of action - Extension to actions beyond school life

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1st cycle: Initiating action – Seek of orientation

2nd cycle: Intermediate evolution of action – Focus on in-school activities

3rd cycle: Mature implementation of action – Extension to actions beyond school life
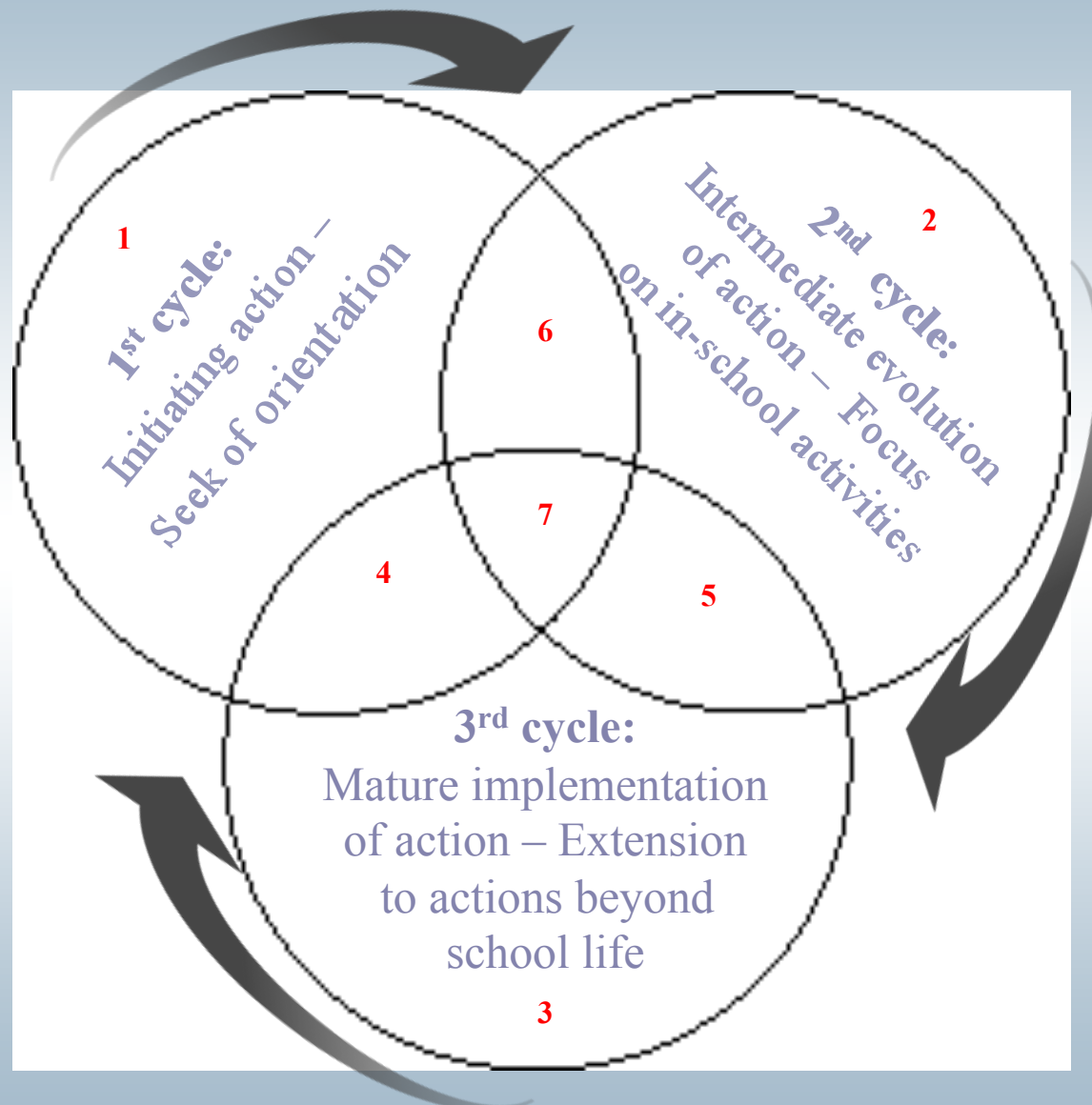
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Figure 2: Three Successive Cycles of Action and Reflection

1st cycle:
Initiating action – Seek of orientation

- **The problem (1st cycle):** To define a consensual practice orientation

- **The plan (1st cycle):** Flexible planning process. Formulation of a shared vision and identification of high risk cases among students.

- **Action (1st cycle):** My own perceptions were notified. Reflective process to articulate a consensual shared vision. Identification of high-risk cases. Implementation of assessments. Emphasis on Teaching and Learning.

- **Reflection (1st Cycle):** Realization of the difficulties we encountered

2nd cycle: Intermediate evolution of action – Focus on in-school activities

- The aim was to enrich practice for the interruption of disadvantage and marginalization. Suggestions focused on:
  - Teaching and learning process,
  - Emphasis on practical individualized support for students
  - Opportunities in school life for success
  - Pursue of greater involvement of families

3rd cycle: Mature implementation of action – Extension to actions beyond school life

Teachers realized that the effort could be strengthened if action was extended outside school in order to connect action with community and institutions.

1st cycle: Initiating action – Seek of orientation	2nd cycle: Intermediate evolution of action – Focus on in-school activities	3rd cycle: Mature implementation of action – Extension to actions beyond school life
Seek of shared consensual orientation - hesitations, doubts.	**Open communication with families**	Revival of reluctance.
The identification of high risk cases	Practices of individualization	**Knowledge of the personal history of each child.**
Focus on teaching and learning	**Individual remedial teaching and special education**	Emotional support.
	Training demand	**Care beyond school life**
Systematic observation of progress	**Environment of acceptance that promotes success**	Additional support.
		Elimination of practices of separation
	Differentiation of teaching and learning	Support beyond school
		Staff development
		Organizing care

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In practice, the transition to each subsequent cycle of action did not mean termination of activities from previous cycle.

The importance of a successive conception of cycles

- Simultaneous activation of professionals - even if it happened in the same workplace – does not imply identical and absolutely synchronized development for the participants. The presence of multiple growth and development of persons and events has been a key component of the overall action

- Capturing action in successive cycles, results multiple areas of potential stages of development for the participants individually and collectively.

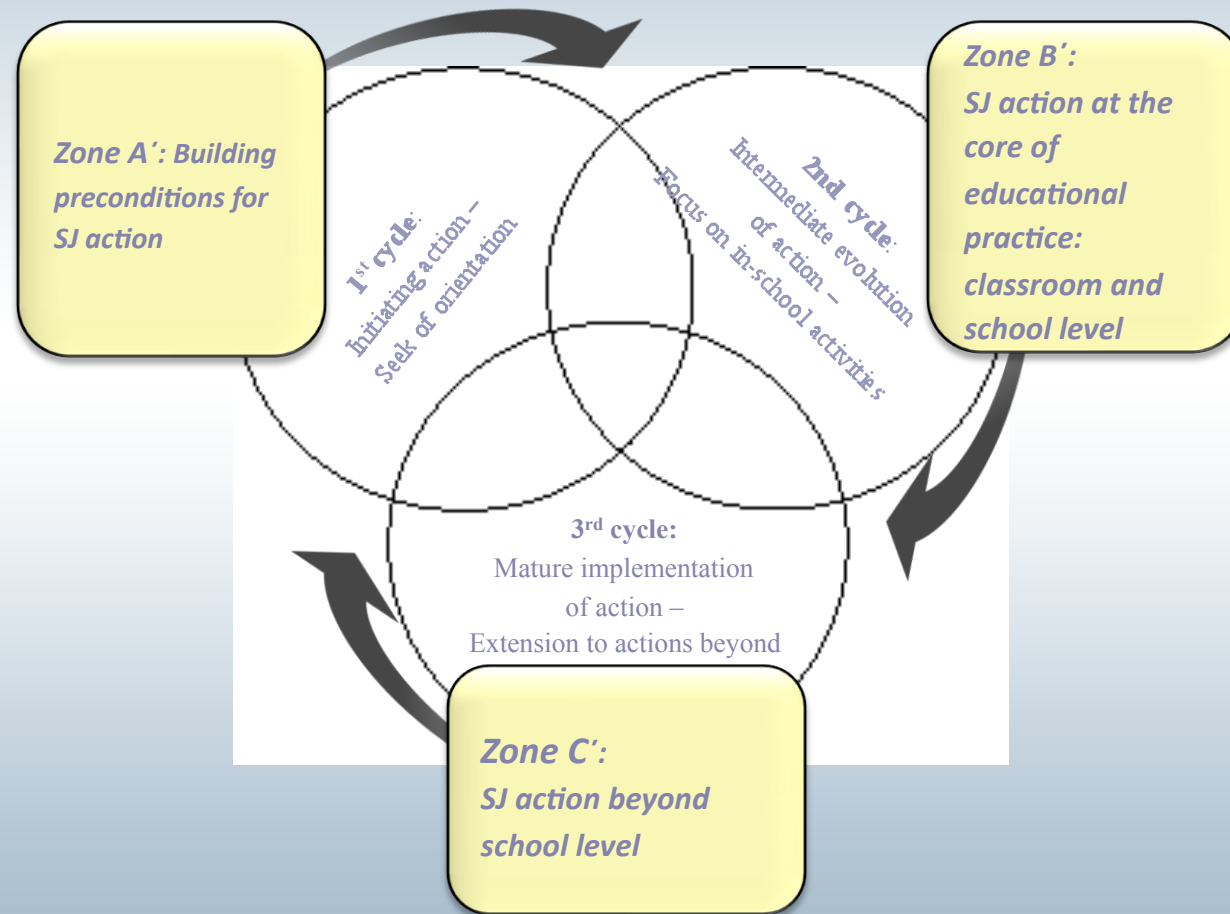# Three cycles of action concluded to multifaceted action in three broad zones

Zone A´: Building preconditions for SJ action

Zone B´: SJ action at the core of educational practice: classroom and school level

1st cycle: Initiating action – Seek of orientation

2nd cycle: Intermediate evolution of action – Focus on in-school activities

3rd cycle: Mature implementation of action – Extension to actions beyond

Zone C´: SJ action beyond school level

Figure 3: Zones of Action for Social Justice at School - level

Multi-level reflective framework of action for social justice in three zones

- **Zone A´**: Building preconditions for SJ action (ethical and cultural base)
- **Zone B´**: SJ action at the core of educational practice: classroom and school level
- **Zone C´**: SJ action beyond school level to connect the effort with community and institutions

Multi-level reflective action for SJ

Zone C

Zone B

Zone A

ACTION BEYOND SCHOOL - CONNECTING WITH WIDER COMMUNITY

ESTABLISHMENT OF DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AT SCHOOL

BUILDING ETHICAL AND VALUE ORIENTED BASE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE COLLECTIVE ACTION

Figure 4: *Multi-level Reflective Frame of Pedagogy and educational Leadership Praxis for Social Justice*

Resistance to action for social justice

- Resistance derived both from within and outside school

- Resistance related to teachers' perceptions, to the complexity of high-risk cases, and to institutional or external interference

- Resistance was faced during the whole project

Resistance at each cycle of action

- **During the 1st cycle**: Resistance was mainly related to the adoption of innovations and the initial perceptions and attitudes of teachers.

- **During the 2nd cycle:** Resistance was mainly related to the realization of difficulties arising from the complexity of problems of high risk students.

- **During the 3rd cycle:** Resistance derived from the realization of difficulties related to external interference.

Sources of resistance teachers' role

- Teachers are in position to mitigate resistance coming from other sources and for this reason in our research great effort was placed to transform teachers' perceptions and to empower their action for social justice

Teachers' attitudes

School and system structures

Children's difficulties
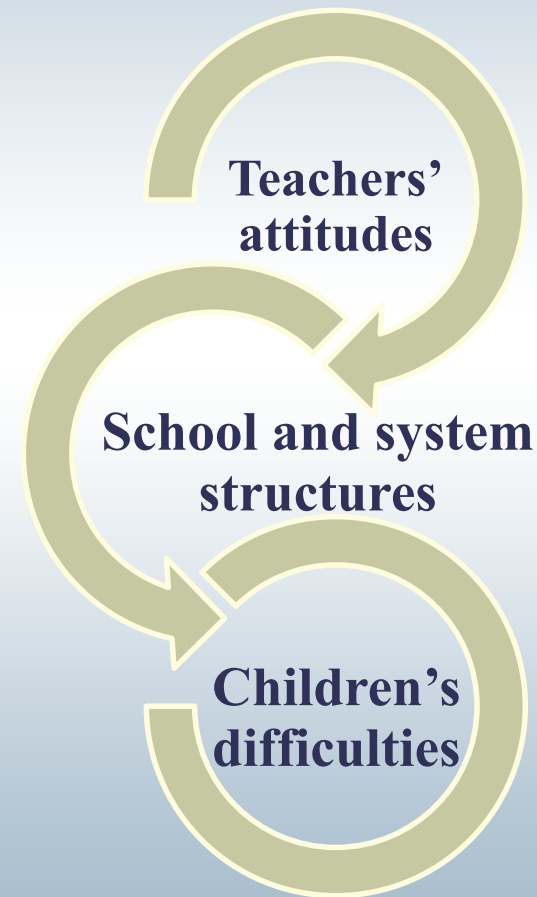
Question 2

- Empower teachers to anticipate resistance.

Participatory action research (PAR) as a learning process

- PAR facilitated a dynamic and a simultaneous personal and professional co-development of teachers and the head teacher on the basis of a shared orientation to promote social justice.

- Reflection was a key component at the effort while it contributed to restore a dialectic relationship between persons, actions and situation.

- PAR revealed how action research and intervention in an educational matter can help leaders and teachers to understand school's reality and surpass potential barriers to achieve change.

Question 3

- Take action for social justice as a …

Social justice is for all of us and action can be taken from all of us!

- "Social justice is a dynamic state of affairs which is good for the common interest, where that is taken to include the good of each and also the good of all, in an acknowledgement that one depends on the other. The good depends on there being a right distribution of benefits and responsibilities" (Griffiths,1998).

Thanks for participating and for sharing feelings and ideas!