

HUMAN RIGHTS PREREQUISITES FOR MIDDLE LEADERS IN PROMOTING INCLUSION AND EQUITY IN DIVERSE SCHOOL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Despite being at the vanguard of converting policy into feasible workplace practices, middle leaders (MLs) are frequently seen as being in a difficult situation because of their position. MLs must balance numerous responsibilities, navigate complicated situations, and they often lack the authority to make final decisions. For MLs to initiate transformative change, they must be afforded the freedom and opportunity to engage creatively with policy and practice to advance equitable human rights cultures that are more consistent with their educational principles. This article examines how MLs can generate human rights cultures through engaging in the discursive policy arena while harnessing democratizing tactics in diverse school contexts. Applying a conceptual research design and looking through the lenses of the theory of human rights, we contend that MLs in schools are now more critical than ever to guarantee that the core principle of democracy is realized in diverse learning environments. To this end, we offer an analysis of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2017) guide for ensuring equity and inclusion in education. From this analysis, we suggest that human rights prerequisites like *promoting equal dignity*, *policy actors for equality and inclusion*, and *harnessing collective responsiveness* can be applied as institutional practices to prevent human rights violations in diverse school contexts.

Keywords: *Discursive policy arena, equity, human rights cultures, inclusion, human rights prerequisites.*

1. Introduction

Middle leaders (MLs) (including senior teachers, master teachers, department heads, head teachers, senior leaders, and deputy principals) are individuals who use transformative energy to drive positive change and contribute to continual human rights leadership development in schools (Pinheiro & Alves, 2024). To drive positive change, MLs must create patterns of inquiry and establish cultures of sharing and trust amongst colleagues (Grimm, 2023), while playing a pivotal role in driving inclusive practices and creating equitable learning environments in schools (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2014). Despite these expectations (EASNIE, 2014; Grimm, 2023; Pinheiro & Alves, 2024) and considering Carvalho and Veiga's (2024) study that investigated the role of middle leadership in promoting inclusive education policies in Portugal, a lack of articulation between policies and MLs' practices negatively influence the promotion of equity and participation in educational processes. As such, MLs should be empowered on how to engage in democratising tactics to promote inclusion and equity in education more than what has been customary (Carvalho & Veiga, 2024). In UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, Sharma, Desai and Sayed (2024) appraised the role of MLs in supporting equitable teaching in India and South Africa. The authors underscored that it remains crucial to enhance MLs' skills, awareness and knowledge regarding generating human rights cultures while advancing equity to ensure the provision of inclusive, quality and equitable pedagogies in schools because a strategy for equity appears to be completely absent (Sharma et al., 2024).

There is an indispensable need for a continuation of the dialogue regarding this phenomenon. As such, the aim of this paper was to explore possible human rights prerequisites MLs may use to promote inclusion and equity in diverse school contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Middle leaders' crusade for creating human rights cultures in diverse school contexts

According to the United Nations (UN, 2011), the creation of human rights cultures (HRCs) through human rights education should be based on “*knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection...which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others*” (as cited in Rossouw & De Waal, 2019, p. 49). In view of this explanation of establishing HRCs, MLs are in an ideal position to engage in agentic and creative responses to policies (Ainsworth et al., 2024), to transform diverse school environments, create a culture of rights, and foster respect for human dignity. We, therefore, contend that MLs should actively provide guidance of how schools can integrate human rights characteristics and human rights nuanced care, whilst creating inclusive and equitable practices. In so doing, they are suitably positioned to facilitate mindset changes so that others understand and interact with human rights issues and promote respect thereof (*vide*: South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2023). In their crusade for creating human rights cultures in diverse school contexts, MLs become transformative agents who have the power to change the life-worlds of all stakeholders enabling them to view matters of inclusivity, equity, equality and freedom from fresh perspectives (*vide*: Rossouw & De Waal, 2019).

2.2. Human rights prerequisites for inclusion and equity

The ability to promote inclusion and equity in diverse school contexts is dependent on MLs' knowledge about the meaning of equity and inclusion, and what strategies can be employed for applying these as human rights prerequisites. Firstly, inclusion presupposes “*the spirit of identifying and appreciating differences through ensuring equality guided by sound principles*” (Tchombe, 2022, p. 8). In essence, MLs should understand that inclusion requires transformative learning experiences that aim to contribute to deep, structural shifts of feelings, actions and thoughts – prerequisites necessary to promote self-confidence and self-worth (*vide*: Tchombe, 2022). Secondly, equity assumes the expansion of individuals' opportunities so that they can enjoy a life valued to live (Ward, 2020). To understand such a view of equity, MLs are required to have agency, capacity and creativity so that they lead the way in developing “*to the maximum the individual, social, intellectual, cultural, and emotional capacities of individuals*” (De los Santos et al., 2020, p. 1). Drawing on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023), MLs' understanding of equity and inclusion may assist in reducing differences, through the creation of human rights cultures and practices, and the implementation of policies that eliminate prevailing human rights hurdles in diverse school contexts.

2.3. UNESCO's guide for ensuring equity and inclusion in education

UNESCO's (2017) guide for inclusion and equity was developed to assist individuals in finding ways to ensure equal educational opportunities for all, provide support to countries in entrenching equity and inclusion in educational policy and suggest transformative ways to overcome educational barriers while ensuring that all learners are respected and engaged equally. To achieve the latter goal (UNESCO, 2017), school leaders [also MLs] must have a strong understanding of equity and inclusion as fundamental human rights. In line with this paper, MLs must understand that while inclusion is regarded as “a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners”, equity aims to “*ensure that there is a concern with fairness, such that the education of all learners is seen as being of equal importance*” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 7). We argue that an application of selected texts in the UNESCO (2017) guide for inclusion and equity can assist MLs to develop a strong sense of agency (Ball, 2021), while they acquire the necessary skills and competencies to meet the growing need for human rights action in the educational setting.

3. Theoretical framework

This paper considered Sen's (2004) version of a theory of human rights which holds that human rights create justifications for action for those who can help in promoting underlying freedoms. In this regard, freedoms are privileged and identified in the interpretation of specific rights. Sen (1985) explains freedoms as the ability to choose between options, but also the value of those options and the ability to live a life that can be regarded as valuable. For example, equity as a freedom requires that people admit that everyone is differently privileged, skilled and abled, therefore, their differences must be considered toward expressing equality (*vide*: Sen, 1985; 2004). Drawing from Sen (2004) on the elements of a theory on human rights, we considered the following questions as guiding criteria in analysing selected texts in UNESCO's (2017) guide for inclusion and equity in education:

- How are the identified human rights prerequisites explained?
- What can MLs do to advance the identified human rights prerequisites?
- How MLs ensure that the identified prerequisites contribute to equity and inclusion in diverse school contexts?

Drawing from Sen (1985; 2004), an application of a theory of human rights was useful because it guided us to understand and justify why MLs play an important role in promoting equity and inclusion in diverse school contexts.

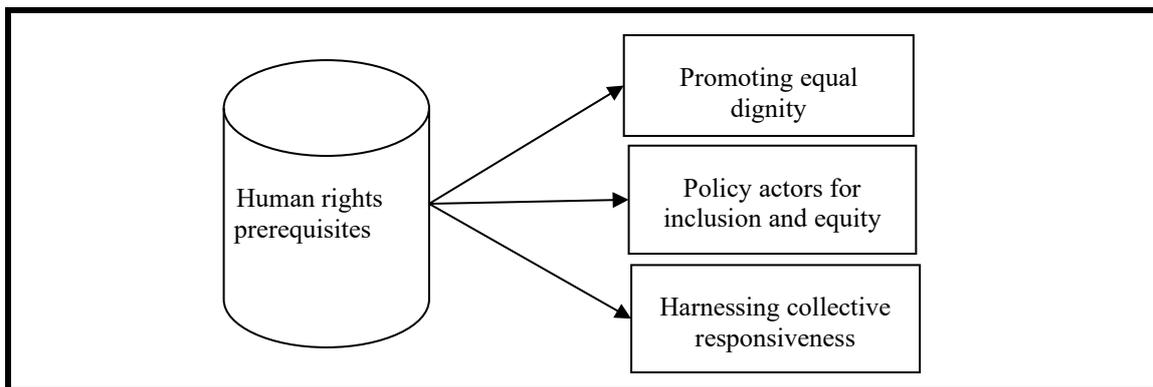
4. Methodology

This conceptual paper followed a qualitative approach to understanding meanings of selected texts in UNESCO (2017) regarding the promotion of inclusion and equity in diverse school contexts. A qualitative approach was useful because we were able to collect data from a relevant document without relying on the views of human beings as participants (Bowen, 2009; Vargo & Koskela-Huotari, 2020). We employed a conceptual research design (CRD) because such papers “are often critical engines for exploring new ideas” (Moorman et al., 2019, p. 3) and it “offers a unique freedom, allowing researchers to explore new ideas beyond conventional boundaries” (Heinonen & Gruen, 2024, p. 2). We based our exploration on an analysis of selected texts in UNESCO (2017) to find a novel approach to the promotion of inclusion and equity in diverse school contexts. Firstly, we examined the document to familiarize ourselves with relevant texts that hold potential meanings about inclusion and equity. Secondly, we selected texts with the strongest association with the phenomenon being studied. Thirdly, we employed coding to inspect a coherent portion of the selected texts and labelling it with words or phrases that summarize their content (*vide*: Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Next, we identified four themes that served as human rights prerequisites for MLs in promoting inclusion and equity in diverse school contexts. These themes include *promoting equal dignity*, *policy actors for equity and inclusion*, and *harnessing collective responsiveness*. During the analysis of selected texts in the UNESCO (2017), we employed the questions outlined in the theoretical framework as guiding criteria.

5. Discussion

We propose the following human rights prerequisites that can guide MLs in fostering inclusion and equity in diverse school contexts (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Human rights prerequisites.



5.1. Promoting equal dignity

UNESCO (2017) advises that is necessary to articulate “principles and rights that is needed for creating a framework for inclusion, and for reforming those elements in the existing system that may constitute major barriers to equity” (p. 23). Ainscow (2020) contends that the creation of a framework for inclusion and equity should be based on an inclusive turn, implying the fostering of a culture where differences are celebrated, and equal dignity is promoted. Equal dignity presupposes a “a state full of life and vigour; comfort and happiness, to grow and augment; to thrive” (Ogilvie, 1882, as cited in Logan, Berman & Prescott, 2023, p. 4). Thus, to promote equal dignity, we recommend that MLs create opportunities for relationship building, facilitate dialogues so that everyone can understand constitutional theories about inclusion and equity and facilitate activities toward the collective realisation of human potential.

5.2. Policy actors for inclusion and equity

UNESCO (2017) is adamant that “*education policy can influence and support inclusive thinking and practices by establishing the equal right of every individual to education, and by outlining the forms of teaching, support and leadership that lay the foundation for quality education for all*” (p. 12). The influential and supportive role of education policy paves the way for the search of solutions to educational challenges and the establishment of strong educational relationships (Fan & Popkewitz, 2020). In this regard, MLs should act as policy actors - individuals who decipher meanings [of inclusion and equity] in policies (Maguire, Braun & Ball, 2015) and translate policy ideas [about inclusion and equity] into contextualised practices (Braun, Maguire & Ball 2010).

5.3. Harnessing collective responsiveness

To harness collective responsiveness, action should be taken to “*bring together practitioners’ ideas, the insights of students and their families, and the knowledge of academic researchers so as to challenge assumptions, stimulate new thinking within a school*” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 36). This statement (UNESCO, 2017) reflects the notion of collective responsiveness to past and present challenges that may hinder inclusion and equity. Therefore, MLs should articulate policy ideas into simpler rules that can be communicated and applied consistently (Lunn, Timmons & Robertson, 2025) to promote an understanding of inclusion and equity. In so doing, MLs can stay abreast of developing practices and implementation strategies related to creating inclusive and equitable learning, whilst becoming the forerunners for the enactment of human rights cultures in diverse school contexts.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine how MLs can generate human rights cultures through engaging in the discursive policy arena while harnessing democratizing tactics of inclusion and equity in diverse school contexts. The literature review revealed that MLs are ideally positioned to respond to policy ideals about inclusion and equity, thus improving the lives of all stakeholders in diverse school contexts. To be agents of transformative change, MLs’ must understand how the application of inclusive and equitable practices can assist them in reducing human rights violations in diverse school contexts. We analysed selected texts in UNESCO (2017), proposing human rights prerequisites that may assist MLs in acquiring the necessary competencies to meet the growing need for human rights action in their educational system.

The analysis revealed three pertinent human rights prerequisites. Firstly, to promote *equal dignity*, MLs must be active in building relationships and foster dialogues so all the stakeholders can understand how to contribute to fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. Secondly, MLs should act as *policy actors*, individuals capable of searching for and understanding meanings about inclusion and equity so that policy ideas can be converted into executable human rights practices. Thirdly, MLs must harness *collective responsiveness* and articulate policy ideas into easy-to-follow instructions that can be conveyed and implemented uniformly to promote an understanding of inclusion and equity.

This conceptual paper did not include the voices of the relevant educational stakeholders; therefore, we recommend that future research should focus on how they perceive and act on human rights prerequisites in pursuit of inclusive and equitable practices in diverse school settings.

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