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Stuck in the Middle?

A case study of how principals manage equity-related change in education

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THIS ARTICLE analyzes the ways in which principals of a large, diverse, urban school board, the Toronto Board of Education (TBE), have responded to equity-based, anti-racist education. Of primary concern is the principal's capacity to foster and inculcate the values and principles of equity within the school environment. In other words, how do principals negotiate, facilitate and manage diversity-related change in education?

It is argued that principals play a critical role in ensuring that equity concerns, or any concerns for that matter, become more than written policies and rhetorical statements.¹ At the same time, it is argued that the institutional culture must be reformed if any far-reaching equity policies are to achieve any meaningful status.² This study sheds light on how the education system is structured so as to apply significant pressure on prin-

cipals, which often renders them less preoccupied with, focused on, and effective with equity.

Four questions frame the analysis:

- a) What is the involvement of the principal in the conceptualization, development and implementation of equity-based policies?
- b) What structural barriers prevent the principal from exercising his or her leadership role in anti-racist education?
- c) What is the impact of the lived experiences of principals on the effectiveness of his/her leadership?
- d) What can be done to ensure a more comprehensive and effective implementation of equity-based policies?

The TBE was chosen because of its reputed leadership in equity and diversity. The case study focused on the secondary panel because of the problems in inculcating equity education initiatives

in secondary schools as well as the unique aspects of the secondary system, which are now being reviewed in several jurisdictions. The study was undertaken over 18 months, starting in late 1994. In-depth interviews were first held with 22 key decision-makers and contributors to anti-racist education in the board, and then with six secondary principals.³ Next 22 racial minority teachers, of whom five participated in a focus group, were interviewed. Survey questionnaires were then completed by another five principals and 95 teachers, of whom 60 were white, in order to triangulate the data gathered through the interviews. A qualitative conceptual approach was used.

Key findings

Understanding equity

The study found that principals who have a good understanding of the rationale and conceptualization of equity (the "big picture") as well as having their finger on the pulse of the intricate workings of their immediate educational environments are more likely to achieve success with this policy. It is important for principals to be able to communicate to the various factions in a school — staff as a whole, staff in the department, students, parents, and other interested parties — giving a consistent and effective message of the necessity of equity in the school. The primary agenda should not be hidden, but made explicit. Principals unwilling to openly discuss equity matters, the study found, often created a feeling of ambivalence among staff, and even forced those active in the area to undertake much of their work in an isolated, non-mainstream, informal manner. The key to implementing equity, and anti-racist education in particular, hinges on mobilizing community resources and bolstering informal efforts, but it is also critical that the formal structures and practices change in order for the concepts to achieve some cross-the-board⁴ legitimacy.

1. Although the study focused on anti-racist education and anti-racist organizational change, it became apparent that the racial variable could not be easily isolated from other equity initiatives and trends, such as gender equity, issues dealing with social class and also those dealing with ethnic origin or sexual orientation. Anti-racist education, in its broadest sense, aims to significantly reform institutional structures, and identifies systemic barriers as the primary source of aggravation in regards to inequitable power relations, discrimination, the Euro-centric curriculum and differential student outcomes by racial origin. Although racial origin is a focal point in understanding the conceptual aspects of anti-racist education, there is also a clear attempt made to link all inequities (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, etc.). Those advocating an anti-racist approach also highlight the necessity of it being a "political project" as well as having a solid "grass-roots" connection. For an introduction to the foundations of anti-racist education, see: Enid Lee, *Letters to Marcia: A Teacher's Guide to Anti-Racist Education* (Toronto: Cross Cultural Communication Centre, 1985). For an up-to-date discussion of anti-racist education, see: George Dei, "The Challenges of Anti-Racist Education in Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 25:1 (1993), pp. 36-51; "Anti-racist Education: Working Across Differences," *ORBIT*, 25:2 (1994):1-3; "Examining the Case for 'African-Centred Schools in Ontario,'" *McGill Journal of Education* 30:2 (1995), pp. 179-198.

2. There is a vast literature on the influential role played by the principal, and some analysts have suggested that the success of policy implementation, in large part, can be measured against the effectiveness of the principal. See, for example, K. A. Lrithwood, *The Role of the Secondary School Principal in Policy Implementation and School Improvement*, (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 1986), or David Moorthy, "How Principals Can Influence a School's Culture," *The Canadian School Executive*, March, 1995, pp. 3-6.

3. See, for example, Paul Carr and Tom Klassen, *The Role of Racial Minority Teachers in Anti-racist Education*, "Canadian Ethnic Studies 28:1 (forthcoming), for a discussion of institutional barriers facing racial minority teachers, and thus the argument for reforming the institutional culture.

4. To illustrate this, the subject of managing diversity-related change or anti-racist education has gone almost untouched during the past two years in three of primary sources informing principals of trends, policies, activities and professional development: *The Canadian School Executive*, *The Canadian Principal*, and *Ontario Principal*.

5. See, for example, Paul Carr and Thomas Klassen, "The Role of the Racial Minority Teacher in Anti-racist Education," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 28:1 (forthcoming).

6. Of the six TBE secondary principals interviewed, there were two women and four men, two racial minorities and four whites, and all of them had over twenty five years experience in the Board.

Principal commitment to and involvement in equity

The study found that there are essentially three categories of principals in relation to equity. One group, representing about half the principals, acknowledges that policies have been developed and that the education system is becoming increasingly diverse, but is not proactively implementing anti-racist education. The principals in this group are unlikely to show much leadership and may even be unwelcoming to board specialists working in equity. The second group of principals, the bulk of the remaining half, takes an interest in equity and diversity issues, but feel overwhelmed by the numerous initiatives demanding their attention. For this group, there seems to be a genuine interest in ameliorating the situation for staff and students alike, but there are also fears about not knowing how best to proceed with issues. This group, like the first, has difficulty in understanding the systemic nature of the problem. As a result, their focus is on managing the school effectively rather than attempting to become a fully inclusive or representative school. The third group is the smallest and includes principals who critically analyze the ways in which their schools produce and reproduce a certain "culture," and, consequently, emphasize how to more effectively involve marginalized groups. This last group confronts numerous barriers in trying to change the existing culture, but these principals are committed to eradicating them, and to involving various people to come up with creative solutions to deal with issues of inclusion, equity, representation and racism. This group is most supportive of the board's involvement in equity and anti-racist education; whereas the first is more likely to view the board's intervention as being unnecessary and based on a "top-down" organizational model.

Principal preparation and equity

Not understanding the broader con-

cept's of equity can box principals into micro-management, handling specific administrative matters, such as the resolution of racial harassment complaints. For instance, most of the principals emphasized the importance of the board's Racial and Ethnocultural Mistreatment Policy as the cornerstone of the board's strategy to anti-racist education. As important as this specific policy might be, it is only one component of anti-racist education; it does not touch on the question of systemic barriers, power relations, curriculum reforms, validating the needs of diverse students regardless of their origins, outreach to parents, professional development for staff, and the composition of the teaching staff. Focusing only on complaints related to racism can too easily negate the central message of ensuring that the school and its curriculum, in the broadest sense, must be representative of all interests within the school, and, further, that the curriculum needs to be de-centred.

Many principals are unwilling to deal with anti-racist education issues because they are unable to do so. In some cases, this may be a question of not having the appropriate training, and in others, of not receiving the appropriate supervision and delegation. Many principals noted that they did not receive training in equity in the faculties of education, or as a teacher, or during their supervisory preparation. The study found that, due to the decentralized, somewhat auto-

7. A very broad definition of the notion of an inclusive curriculum, including all aspects affecting what students learn, is provided by Nora Allingham in *Toward a Definition of Anti-racist Education* (Toronto: Curriculum Division, Toronto Board of Education, 1991).

8. The rationale for decentring the "Euro-centric" curriculum and education system is provided by Ontario Ministry of Education and Training in *Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (Toronto, Ministry of Education and Training, 1993).

9. There does not appear to be any well-known, rigorous, consistent monitoring and evaluation of the performance of principals vis-à-vis equity, in general, and anti-racist education, in particular.

molls, nature of the secondary system, principals who were unwilling or were not fully committed to anti-racist education did not necessarily face any reprimand. Similarly, it is at the principal's discretion that those working on equity in the central-office headquarters of the board are invited out to the schools, so the pressure from the senior levels, like the pressure from the outside community groups, can be tightly controlled.

The principal and leadership

The study found that without the "buy-in" or approval of principals, it is unlikely the activities undertaken within their schools, such as the daily events characterizing the school's culture, or professional development and leadership for teachers, will reflect progressive, proactive equity strategies. The principal plays a key role in determining the orientation of the school culture, including which activities will be given priority, how assemblies will be structured, whether or not there will be ethnocultural clubs, and the degree to which the community and parents become involved in the school. Who the principal is, his or her formal and lived experiences, combined with the collective sentiment and culture of the group of secondary principals, will have an impact on how directives and policies are interpreted across the secondary system. Participants at all levels concur that the principal's actions are watched closely especially by staff, but by students as well, and that his or her participation in specific initiatives will set the tone for the entire school. For their part, principals felt strongly, without exception, about the necessity of their demonstrating leadership for equity politics to be adhered to, if they are to have any meaningful impact.

The complexity of implementing equity initiatives

Throughout the research, principals emphasized how multi-faceted, complex and diverse school settings are, arguing that the implementation of policies re-

quires a great deal of finesse, local understanding, coalition-building and "management." Several of the principals emphasized that building a credible strategy directed at inculcating the values most germane to promoting equity involves a number of daily actions (i.e., being visible among staff and students alike, participating in group activities, staking out a position and sharing a vision). Similarly, many of the principals participating in the study expressed frustration with the senior decision-making level of the board, claiming that the appropriate funding, resources and support often were not available to buttress the implementation of anti-racist education. The majority of principals viewed the anti-racist education initiatives as being driven by a top-down force, which, they argued, adversely affected the implementation, since those charged with the implementation were not provided with the entry-point to craft the policy and influence the process.

Another key finding is that principals do not view the board as having a coherent strategy in relation to anti-racist education on the one hand, or equity, in general, on the other. One principal speculated that there was a "hidden strategy." Several principals resented the amount of paper that was funnelled down from above, which was supposed to frame and buttress these disparate equity initiatives. Several principals argued that the implementation of equity or diversity-related initiatives is least effective when the main component involves a big push, in which all aspects are highly publicized, and then efforts slowly dissipate, snaking the strategy appear to be directed only at achieving short-term results. Some principals mentioned that "legislation doesn't change things," but it is "the thousand and one things you do every day that count."

10. A 1984 study funded by the elementary principals in the Toronto Board found that principals felt overburdened by the number of new programs, responsibilities and assignments that they were forced to deal with (*Edu-Con of Canada, The Role of the Public School Principal in the Toronto Board of Education, report commissioned by the Principals' Association at the ME, 1984*).

The principal as mediator

Several principals found themselves somehow trying to lead and follow at the same time. Many participants vehemently suggested that the role of principal was not intended to be one of facilitating social change, "and, therefore, implementing pro-equity policies is a particularly difficult challenge. Those chosen to become principals are often caught in a bind, constantly trying to balance competing interests while satisfying their immediate supervisors who recently left the principal ranks. As an example, although the principals surveyed did not view it as problem or as a conflict, a number of teachers and key decision-makers questioned the leverage principals would have on teachers while they are members of the same union/federation.¹² The principals in the study emphasized the myriad difficulties in creating a conducive environment for pursuing equity initiatives without alienating some segments of the teaching corps.

Trying to bring various groups and interests together, the principals provided numerous examples of how they address equity and anti-racist education concerns within their schools. One strongly supports ethnocultural clubs, with the proviso that there be at least one staff-member in each club, and tries to

11. *The ability of educational leadership to understand and lead change has been addressed in the literature. Michael Fullan, in Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reforms (London: The Falmer Press, 1993), provides a broad portrait of the essential pillars to facilitating change, and Spencer J. Macey, in Educational Leadership: A Critical Pragmatic Perspective (Toronto: OISE Press, 1991), makes a strong case for critical inquiry as the cornerstone of leadership in education.*

12. *This seemed to be more of an issue for some racial minority and activist white teachers rather than for the bulk of the teachers and the principals, who saw no conflict of interest in principals and teachers each belonging to the same federation/union (Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation). The major concern centred on the willingness and ability of principal to show leadership in reprimanding those teachers who may not adhere to the principles of anti-racism and equity policies or directives, since principals might feel pressure from their own federation to not isolate or punish fellow members of the same federation for discriminatory acts.*

ensure that they do not function in isolation. Another has created an equity committee, composed of about two dozen teachers, which tries to promote school-wide activities and practices. Another places a great emphasis on extra-curricular activities in which diverse groups can come together in becoming part of a team in the hopes of creating an inclusive school spirit. Yet another organizes "community-days" in which various segments of the community, including social services agencies and immigrant centres, are invited into the school to make formal and informal connections between the school and the community. Those principals working actively in this area emphasized the importance of repeating the same message of how necessary it was to persevere in equity-related matters.

Barriers in the secondary system

The unique structure of the secondary system poses a number of challenges for principals in implementing equity initiatives. There has been a tradition of decentralization in the TBE's secondary panel, intended to better respond to local needs, but which has led some to criticize the principals of maintaining "fiefdoms," which are unresponsive to outside influence. In comparison with the elementary panel, parent and community involvement has been extremely low at secondary schools.

The unique departmental structure in secondary schools has also been criticized for impeding the development of the fruitful synergy required for a multi-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary curriculum. Many teachers complained that they felt ghettoized in their departments, and, moreover, felt uncomfortable promoting anti-racist education within their departments, due to the fear of being isolated or alienating colleagues. It would appear that department heads hold a significant amount of power in deter-

13. *Michael Fullan has warned of the dangers of "balkanization" in the departmental structure in Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform (London: The Falmer Press, 1993).*

mining the curriculum, departmental activities, and who will be the assistant department head.

The size and physical structure of TBE secondary schools is, in most cases, so massive and unruly that the effect the immediate geographical context may have on students and staff is questionable. A large number of teachers do not have office space or even adequate departmental space for planning educational activities. The burgeoning diversity in the secondary panel, in which some 45% of the students are racial minorities, and almost 20% do not live with their parents,¹⁴ not to mention numerous other demographic indicators, contrasted with the teaching staff where only about 10% is of racial minority origin,¹⁵ also forces important equity issues to the fore.

The expectations placed on secondary principals may be unrealistic given the ways in which the institutional culture can affect and shape any efforts at reforming the education system. At the same time, are the secondary principals qualified and well positioned to orchestrate this type of change?

Racial representation of principals and teachers

The dearth of racial minorities among the secondary principals in the TBE was a concern highlighted by numerous participants. "The perceived cliquish nature

14. *Maria You, Many Cheng, and Suzanne Ziegler, The 1991 Every Secondary Student Survey, Part II: Program Level and Student Achievement (Toronto: Toronto Board of Education, 1993).*

15. *Paul Carr, Employment Equity for Racial Minorities in the Teaching Profession, "Multicultural Education Journal" 3:1 (1995), pp. 28-42.*

16. *The problem of equitable representation is multifaceted, as outlined by Paul Carr, Ibid. Since racial minorities have traditionally faced numerous institutional barriers in accessing employment in the teaching profession, the critical mass from which promotions to principalship are granted has been an issue of serious concern. There are examples, however, of how a racial minority principal, using a pro-equity anti-racist approach can significantly alter institutional culture and its motivational outcomes of a particular school. For a review of the Flemington (elementary) School in North York, Ontario, see: Mavis Simons, Flemington: Towards Being a Successful School (North York: North York Board of Education, 1991).*

of the secondary school principals' association, combined with the relatively homogeneous composition of the secondary school principals, has left many asking for change not only in the functions of principals, but also in their make-up. It should be no surprise then, in this context, that the racial origin of the principal was viewed as pivotal by a number of participants, especially racial minority ones.

Not only do racial minority principals act as examples of more equitable hiring practices, but they serve as role models for teachers and students, regardless of racial origin; they also influence the character and culture of their institutions. The lived experiences of principals, regardless of racial origin will shape their perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, as with teachers and others in the education system. A significant minority of principals surveyed felt strongly that more efforts should be made to recruit, hire and retain racial minority teachers. The primary reason given was that racial minority students need role models, and further, that equitable hiring would have a positive effect on the school as a whole. A more sizeable number of principals agreed that racial minorities were needed in teaching, but emphasized that no preference should be given, and that only those qualified should be hired.

Discussion

The structure of the secondary system does not lend itself well to the modern-day needs of accessibility, accountability and equity. The institutional culture of the board buttresses the activities undertaken in the secondary panel, and, at the same time, is affected by the unique features and practices of the secondary leadership and schools. Emphasis has also been placed on the relative homogeneity of those in the leadership position of principal, highlighting the need for a plurality of life and educational experiences, as well as the need for greater and more relevant training in relation to understanding and implementing equity initiatives and policies in education. The

need for greater sensitization and diversity must, therefore, become a priority for reforming the position of principal.

The perception of the secondary schools as being run as "fiefdoms" can only harm the legitimate efforts made by the principals and schools to undertake effective reform strategies. If principals are to be accountable, they must re-evaluate the various factions that co-exist within their schools as well as the external groups and communities that need to become more fully integrated at all levels in their schools.

In order to better respond to the various concerns raised in this article, six measures are proposed which could facilitate and render more effective the role of the principal.

1) Boards should be required to develop a comprehensive equity strategy, targeting all concerns related to racism, sexism, social class, homophobia, etc., and ensuring that all interested parties are included in the development and implementation phases. Each secondary school, led by the principal, should be required to develop implementation plans tailored to their local environments, while respecting some fundamental principles that would be mandated system-wide.

2) To facilitate implementation, tools should be created to ensure that equity initiatives in the secondary panel can be measured. Qualitative (student and staff behaviour, enhanced self-esteem, effective outreach, inclusive curriculum, the process for orchestrating change) as well as quantitative (student participation in academic subjects, distribution of awards, drop-out rates, graduation rates) measures should be developed, with input from staff, students, parents and other interested parties.

3) Principals should be given five-year contracts with their school, and during that time they should follow some form

17. I would like to caution that these recommendations constitute only a small part of the overall reforms discussed in the larger study.

of training or professional development plan which would enhance his or her skills.¹⁷ Principals should also be required to create an integrated component to this training plan, which would specifically deal with equity and diversity.

4) Principals as a group should be required to take part in an annual conference related to equity in which the progress of their individual school plans could be discussed. It should be underscored that this conference would not be intended to embarrass or isolate those who are encountering difficulties, but rather to make the school system more transparent, allow for a broad range of input from traditionally marginalized groups, and also to receive assistance and support to better deal with issues related to diversity.

5) Principals should be removed from the same federation as the teachers, and, consequently, placed in the same human resources category as the superintendents. This realignment should also involve greater principal participation in the development of policies so that they more appropriately and effectively mesh with the implementation.

6) In addition to an accelerated employment equity plan to increase the representation of racial minorities among principals, the hiring and promotion of principals should be based, in large part, on the individuals' demonstrated commitment to, and accomplishments in, equity.

Principals are often wedged between two polarized forces. Although the principal is the key figure charged with the implementation of formal policies, he or she is not the key figure in the conceptualization and development phases. Moreover, because of the structure of the education system, the principal is required to implement policies in which there may be a great deal of disagreement or disaffection among those at the top (the senior levels at the board) and those at the

18. Royal Commission on Learning, *For the Love of Learning* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1994), O. 46.

bottom (the classroom teachers). The lack of consensus and mutual sensitization leads to a disjointed, inconsistent starting-point from which solid, across-the-board equity work can not be undertaken. The force of the individual principal's character and capacity to lead, combined with the institutional culture of his or her particular school, will influence the outcome of the desired objective.

Taking a neutral position will only serve to further entrench the systemic nature of discrimination. □

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