SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS: A CASE OF CONFLICTING VALUES

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Cherryvale Secondary School is located in a small, rural city. Mike Randall has been the principal there for three years. Each year principals are required by the school district to devise a School Improvement Plan. In Mike's first year, he chose a social justice goal, focusing on *Student Success on a Case-by-Case Basis*. Mike and Cherryvale's teachers have since worked to track what each student defines as success, plan what each student needs to be successful, and monitor progress. This case highlights challenges that arise when Mike decides to reallocate resources to further support this goal by focusing on the most at-risk students.

Cherryvale Secondary School

Cherryvale Secondary School has about 600 students and is part of an English public school board. It is situated in the downtown core of a small, rural city, but is part of a school district that has one large urban centre and many considerably smaller rural components. Cherryvale draws an almost even mix of students from the city and students who are bussed in from the surrounding county. There is a very small group of visible minorities in the school, no English as second language (ESL) students, and two classes of developmentally challenged (DC) students totalling no more than 20. Close to 20% of students are on either a formal or informal Individual Education Plan (IEP). The average income of the students' households is approximately $68,000 and 23% of the families have a post-secondary education; both of these statistics are comparable to the other schools in the city.

When Mike Randall arrived at Cherryvale Secondary, he very quickly realized that he had inherited a "gifted class"; teacher motivation was high and student achievement data was

strong. Cherryvale's high level of student achievement is reflected in course pass rates, credit accumulation, graduation rates, and provincial standardized tests in numeracy and literacy. In spite of the positive data, Mike noticed a disturbing trend amongst those who did not graduate. Through Mike's on-going efforts to know his most at-risk students (those most at risk of not graduating or dropping out), he noticed trends among many of them; many of these students would turn to dealing drugs as a way to make money. Mike saw this as not only a safety issue for the other students in his school, but was also deeply concerned for the wellbeing and future of these young adults, many of whom ended up with criminal records, and the community at large whose resources have dwindled dealing with the social problems of unemployment and crime.

Mike Randall's path to becoming a principal was paved with personal experiences that cemented in him a deep commitment to social justice. To Mike, social justice is an umbrella term that means providing each person with the assistance and support they require to thrive in society. Mike's commitment to social justice began when he and his wife became first foster, and soon after adoptive, parents to three school-aged children who had been identified by the Children's Aid Society (CAS) as high needs children. Through Mike's own experiences with his adopted children as they moved through the education system, he grew to understand that social justice could be achieved in schools with the support of committed and compassionate educators. Each of Mike's own children was successful in school because caring educators took the time to recognize what each of them needed as individuals, and then tracked and monitored their progress. When Mike became a principal, he set a goal that the needs for success for *all* students in his school must be found, supported, monitored, and achieved. This was exactly what Mike was finally working towards with *Student Success on a Case-by-Case Basis*.

Case Narrative

When every principal was instructed by the board to create a School Improvement Plan (SIP), Mike decided that he could use the opportunity to exercise his own commitment to social justice and challenge his staff to embrace the philosophy of *Student Success on a Case-by-Case Basis*. Traditionally, SIPs are based on improving conventional measures of success such as standardized literacy and numeracy test scores, graduation rates, and credit accumulation. Mike's plan of *Student Success on a Case-by-Case Basis* entailed determining what each student defined as success, what each student needed to achieve *their own definition of success*, and working as a team to help each student meet personal success. Mike was fortunate to have the trust and support of his superintendent in taking this somewhat unconventional SIP forward. Mike was not surprised at the support, since student achievement data was strong and his superintendent had a reputation for being passionate about social justice issues. Also, Mike was the first principal in a decade at Cherryvale who lived in the community and was looking to remain at the school for the long-term. This was important because Mike and his superintendent knew real change towards a more socially just school would take several years.

Over the first two years, Mike introduced many new programs to support this vision. He introduced a revamped Student Council program, a new Peer Mentoring program, a new Peer Tutoring program, and a new Intermural Sports program—all with the purpose of providing new opportunities for students to experience success. Mike knew he was reaching more students with these new programs, but was still not satisfied. As he entered his third year at Cherryvale, Mike set a personal goal to try to reach students most at-risk of dropping out. In Mike's opinion, students rarely just decide one day that school is not for them and leave. Mike believes that, like most life decisions, dropping out is a process more appropriately labelled "fading out." Mike

knew that any process has a beginning, middle, and an end, and he was determined to interrupt the process of these "fading out" students.

Mike made use of individualized timetabling, credit rescue, and credit recovery with grade 9, 10, and 11 students that he and other teachers perceived to be in the beginning and middle stages of the dropping out process. Individualized timetabling takes the uniqueness of each student into consideration—the subjects a student likes, the time of day the student is most likely to be in school and productive, etc.—when developing a student's schedule. For example, if a student loves Art but does not like English, putting these two courses on their timetable in the same semester might make the student more likely to attend the English course. Credit recovery supports students after they fail a course, as long as they earned over 35%. For those senior students who are heading into their fourth year achieving less than 14 of the 30 credits needed to graduate, Mike took a rather unconventional approach. Although he did not want to believe that these students would *never* graduate, he also knew that *his* time with these students was becoming more and more limited as they became increasingly defeated, disengaged, and more obviously ready to give up. Therefore, parallel to the school's efforts to keep them engaged in their graduation pursuit, Mike enlisted the support of a community partner to help prepare students for their life once they were done with school, with or without their diploma. Mike approached the Employment Services Office in his community and arranged a meeting with Wendy, the Employment Services representative, to explore this idea. Wendy quickly saw the potential and explained that her organization could take on a caseload of these "fading out" students. Employment Services would help determine where students' interests lie and arrange for them to get the specific training and preparation they would need to secure employment. In addition, Wendy said she could use her own networking to connect the students to other social

agencies that could help them secure housing, get food and clothing, and meet their other basic needs.

Since Mike and Wendy were the only two adults working on the project, they decided to keep the number of students small, and began with a group of five. Over the course of the year, these five students experienced varying degrees of success. Their success did not necessarily show in their academic progress, but more so in the growing stability of their lives outside of school. Though improvement was observed, Mike wanted to do better for these students, and to be able to do so for *more* students. But Mike realized that if this program was to expand, he and Wendy could not do it alone. Wendy's organization was not able to add more employees, so Mike had to use his own resources. The program would need some of his teachers working specifically towards this goal, and the program would need a larger budget. This would require a re-allocation of resources at his school. Mike spent some time working on the staff allocation and decided that he could re-assign part of his library and guidance allocation to focus on the monitoring and planning for these students in connection with the work that Wendy was doing. Mike hoped to take a small amount of money evenly from all other school programs, in order to ease the impact of loss among any individual program. Mike decided to let the teachers know the next day at the staff meeting about his plan to expand his program.

During the staff meeting, various teachers and the vice-principal ran the meeting for the first forty minutes, leaving twenty minutes for Mike. When Mike's turn came, he began:

> As we are nearing the end of the school year, and the end of our third year
> working towards our School Improvement Plan, I want to take this chance to
> thank all of you for your commitment and dedication to our goal. I believe in
> the past three years we have made school a better experience for more of our
> students. We have allowed them to define their own versions of success, and
> stepped outside our own comfort zones in helping them work towards that
> success. I am extremely proud of what we have done thus far. Going forward,

I would like to continue working towards student success on a case-by-case basis. It is important that we keep doing what we have been doing, but I also think it's important that we challenge ourselves by aiming to reach those students most at-risk. As some of you know, I have worked with five of those students this year, collaborating with Community Employment Services to try to make sure they can find jobs and be successful—on their own terms, even if they do not graduate. I would like to ask for your support in further growing this program next year. It will require that resources be moved around, with teachers in library and guidance, dedicating some of their time to this program. It will also require some decreases in budgeting in other programs in the school. I want to open up the floor to you as a staff. What does everybody think about this?

The staff sat in silence and the meeting ended a few minutes later after Mike gave up prompting for more information. When Cherryvale's teacher union representative knocks on the door to Mike's office the next day, Mike takes a deep breath and invites her in. She informs Mike that while some teachers support this decision, others are worried that certain teachers and students will suffer in this reallocation. Further, while some department heads see the value this reallocation has for the school, they are at odds with other department heads who are concerned about their teachers' roles, and timetables being changed without their input; and most department heads express apprehension about losing funding. Since the unions's role is to ensure administration follows staffing processes outlined in the contract, and some teachers are expressing fear that this may not happen with the reallocation, the teacher union representative suggests Mike rethink the decision, and leaves the room.

But Mike is also getting pressure from other sources. After the recent dip in test scores, Mike received a visit from the area superintendent who was initially supportive of his SIP. She expressed concern about Mike's priorities and suggested that perhaps he should shift his attention to a more traditional SIP that focused on literacy, numeracy, or improving instructional practice. Superintendents are accountable to the executive superintendent of the board who

oversees SIPs and achievement data. Every board cares where they rank in the province, so if achievement data is low in the board, superintendents will feel pressure from above and eventually this pressure will be experienced at the school level. In spite of the superintendent's concerns, Mike respectfully made it clear that his plan needed time, but its success, if realized, would be of great consequence as it could be adopted throughout the school board, and that therefore he would continue with *Student Success on a Case-by-Case Basis*.

To whom is Mike most accountable? Should Mike push forward in spite of the inevitable tension and conflict, with and among staff, it will cause? Should Mike try to convince staff that the most at-risk students are those who need resources the most, or is Mike being unfair? How will Mike maintain the integrity of his convictions to stay the course of this SIP in the face of mounting barriers?

Teaching Notes

Professors in educational administration, educational leadership, social justice, policy, and politics graduate level courses, as well as instructors of courses in principal training and other professional development trainings for educational leaders, can use this case to discuss the difficulties that may arise between implementing theory and policy into practice in schools. Students can use this case to discuss and deconstruct competing values at play that guide and limit the decision-making and actions of educational leaders. We have identified two challenges we believe to be current, relevant, and pressing in educational leadership: challenges in implementing social justice and challenges in implementing school improvement plans. We designed two activities around these challenges to be used by or modified by instructors for the unique purposes of instructors' courses.

Below, we explain the relevance in focusing on each of these challenges; explain our reasoning behind designing these activities as we did; provide notes to guide instructors through the activities; and suggest additional readings that may be useful in guiding class activities.

Activity 1: Challenges in Implementing Social Justice

 Relevance of this challenge. School populations are becoming increasingly diverse (Gerin- Lajoie, 2008; Irvine, 2003; Mitchell, 2009). In efforts to meet the diverse needs of students, there is a need for leaders to become actively involved in promoting social justice in their schools. Further, since social justice is becoming an increasingly important issue for educational leaders in schools to discuss, become knowledgeable about, and aim to promote, yet is complex, this activity encourages students to think critically and deeply about challenges that arise when aiming to enact social justice in schools.

 Purpose of activity. Promoting social justice in schools is a very worthwhile goal to devote one's career towards; however doing so can be wrought with difficulty (Ryan, 2010). As such, fully understanding one's own beliefs about social justice and one's reasons for promoting social justice prior to beginning this work will better set a person up for success. We encourage enlightening and courageous discussion with colleagues about the challenges of creating socially just schools, prior to aiming to enact social justice in schools as an educational leader.

 Weiner (2006) believes that educators who differ in terms of race and class, from the students they teach, often hold deficit views of these students. This deficit view results in an inability of educators to meet the unique needs of students, and ultimately can result in educators blaming students "for what has ultimately stemmed from their negative and stereotyped views of their students" (Katsarou, Picower, & Stovall, 2001, p. 140). Recognizing and reflecting on one's

127

own privilege is recognized as a necessary first step in order to begin to enact social justice in schools.

Instructor guidelines. In addition to asking students to read this case in preparation for class, ask students to read Reason and Broido (2005) before class. Reason and Broido discuss the difficulties involved with forming an identity as a social justice ally (someone who promotes social justice) and offer worthwhile strategies to overcome them. Use class time to discuss some of the key questions provided below, first in partners and then as a group.

- What is social justice?
- Who decides what a socially just school looks like?
- How can social justice goals stay a priority in the midst of other competing school initiatives?
- In order to best understand issues of inequality, is it first necessary to recognize one's own position of privilege?

A potential follow-up activity is to borrow Rawls' (1971) "original position with its veil of ignorance" activity, and have students apply it to the organization of schools, rather than the organization of society. In his famous work, *A Theory of Justice,* Rawls (1971) challenges readers to imagine each of us has to go back to our "original position," before we are born or know who are parents will be, with a "veil of ignorance" that blinds all of us from knowing any details about the position we will be born into (including our personal traits and characteristics, as well as our environment or social conditions), and *then* decide what a socially just society looks like. Rawls believes that if people could imagine going back to their "original position" where they do not know their ethnicity, gender, or social class, they will be more likely to create a society based on principles of fairness and justice. What principles of fairness and justice would guide the creation of a school that you would be happy to attend no matter what circumstances you might be born into? How would that school look?

One alternate follow-up activity is to challenge students to write a Social Justice Mission Statement. In this statement students could articulate their own definition of social justice, their beliefs about social justice, a reflection on one's own privilege, and an explanation why enacting social justice is important to them. Reason and Broido (2005) "believe that effective and sustainable [social justice] behavior requires a solid foundation of self-understanding—that is, understanding based on continuous critical reflection into the roles of power and privilege in one's life and relationships" (p. 81).

Suggested additional reading:

- Reason and Broido (2005), "Issues and Strategies for Social Justice Allies (and the Student Affairs Professionals Who Hope to Encourage Them)."

Activity 2: Challenges in Implementing School Improvement Plans

Relevance of this challenge. The government recommended the employment of School Improvement Plans a number of years ago after a comprehensive review. Because these plans are so important, principals feel pressure to ensure their success. School Improvement Plans involve coordination, collaboration, and cooperation between principals and teachers, but in the end, principals are accountable for their progress and success. As such, principals must be prepared to overcome challenges that stand in the way of their SIP's success and make crucial, time-sensitive decisions in this regard.

Two of these challenges are the allocation of financial and human resources. Both resources are finite and, therefore, an introduction of any new program that requires either or both of these will result in a decrease to other existing programs. Schools receive a budget amount at the beginning of the school year based on projected enrolment. This money must cover almost every expense at the school including textbooks, computers, paper, renovations,

etc. Most often, there are not enough funds to suitably support all necessary aspects of a school, therefore, any new program that requires any amount of significant funding will result in less funding for one or more existing budget lines.

Schools receive their staffing allocation in the spring each year, again, based on projected enrolment for the upcoming year. As with the budget process, and especially in a small school, it is always a challenge to find enough staffing to run all of the courses desired by each department. A program such as one designed to support at-risk students will be seen as "expensive" since it will have a small number of students attached to it. Hence, there is a "risk versus reward" mentality with such programs. Again, as with the budget, a program for at-risk students will operate only if its staffing comes from one or numerous departments, resulting in less course offerings for those departments.

This challenge draws attention to some tensions that might arise between principals and teachers when important budgeting and staff allocation decisions need to be made. Future educational leaders—just like Mike in this case—need to ensure they are prepared to handle challenges such as this, that arise in implementing SIPs.

Purpose of activity. The purpose of this activity is to get students to appreciate factors that influence decision-making at a leadership level, as well as potential outcomes that may result from various decisions. Leaders cannot make everyone happy and it is important that future educational leaders practice making complex decisions and being prepared to defend why they made those decisions.

Instructor guidelines. Ask students to read this case independently before class, and make a list of pros and cons for Mike a) reallocating resources to support new program and b) not reallocating resources to support new program. Remind students that as future educational

leaders, they may encounter a situation just like this and need to make decisions similar to the ones Mike needs to make in this case study. Class time can be used to debate or discuss these decisions, first in small groups, then as a class. Some possible pros and cons for both choices are listed below.

Discussions can extend to include strategies that principals could use to ensure they are making well-informed decisions as well as strategies principals could use to minimize or manage conflict at the school-level. Follow up activities could include interviewing other principals to find out if they have dealt with a similar situation and if so, how principals handled the accompanying challenges.

A. Reallocating resources to support new program

Pros	Cons
- The most at-risk students will have their needs met and the potential to achieve their own definition success.	- May weaken relationships with some teaching staff; teachers affected by these changes may decide to apply to work at other schools during school staffing.
- Continuity in progress and success of School Improvement Plan.	- May create conflict among teachers (some may support SIP's new initiative and the reallocation of resources, others may not).
- May impress superintendent with commitment to SIP and social justice.	- Some students may miss out on opportunities due to reallocation of resources.
- More likely to meet long term goal of improving the community.	- Potential backlash from some parents if their child loses out because of these changes.

B. Not reallocating resources to support new program

Pros	Cons
- Gain further trust/respect of staff by demonstrating a willingness to include them in important decisions.	**-** Disappoint/lose the trust of at-risk students that have started to buy in to their unique chance at success; disappoint/lose trust of

	those students' parents.
- More time to work on other principal tasks.	- Stagnate the progress of SIP.
- Eliminate stress associated with trying to begin a new program.	**-** Students are those that lose out due to issues outside their control (tension among staff).
- Avoid conflict with staff by "not rocking the boat."	**-** Potential backlash from superintendent due to limited progress with SIP.

Suggested additional reading:

- Flessa (2012), "Principals as Middle Managers: School Leadership During the Implementation of Primary Class Size Reduction Policy in Ontario." This article allows students to consider the ways in which policy impacts educational leaders' ability to make decisions that affect important ways in which schools function. Flessa's (2012) article discusses the responses of 24 principals interviewed from eight school boards in Ontario who were involved in the large, multi-year evaluation of the implementation of the Primary Class Size Reduction policy. Responses of principals surround the constraints and restrictions they felt as middle managers whilst this policy was implemented. Flessa (2012) also "raises questions about how policy shapes principals' leadership discretion and influence on crucial school functions of teaching and learning" (p. 325). Students can relate the experiences of these principals to this case study and learn from descriptions of how these principals coped.

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