

Promoting Equity in Contexts of Work Intensification: A Principal's Challenge

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Abstract

This case describes the experience of a principal named Jade working in a diverse school in South Central Ontario. A teacher in Jade's school had been confronted by parents and a school board trustee for reading a book to their class about a family with two moms. The teacher, no longer feeling safe or welcome, eventually decided to switch schools. Jade would have liked to be more involved in the issue, but given her mounting workload, found it difficult to devote as much time as she would have liked. This case is a starting point for discussion with educational leaders and teachers about the challenges of leading and teaching for social justice in a context where many are experiencing work intensification. The teaching notes are designed to help the readers understand the micro and macropolitical context in greater detail including perspectives and values of the key actors, particularly that of the principal. The role of the principal is underexplored and therefore often misconstrued or misunderstood. The principal of a school is expected to be an instructional leader, a human resources manager, and a leader for students and the broader community. They are primarily and ultimately responsible for too many aspects of the day-to-day operations and the lives of staff and students. This case raises important questions about the role of schools and the roles of principals within those schools.

Keywords: principals, accountability, workload, diversity, homophobia, heteronormativity

Case Narrative

Jade was shocked when she received a resignation email from her star teacher Clarence, informing her of her decision to leave the school and the community; Clarence was one of Jade's teachers and had been teaching and living in the community long before Jade became principal at South Central Elementary. How did things escalate so quickly? As far as Jade was aware, the episode involving this teacher had all begun with a minor disagreement (one Jade had hoped would be quickly forgotten). Jade was overwhelmed and fearful this incident would become yet another issue for her to fit into her already over-full schedule.

South Central Elementary was a vibrant and diverse elementary school, serving students of diverse backgrounds from kindergarten through Grade 8. South Central was a desirable school, with relatively steady enrollment over the years, despite board-wide declining enrollment. Parents seemed to favour the K-8 model over other local K-5 schools and were moving into the catchment area so their children could attend. The school did well on provincial standardized tests. Many students were from middle-class families that held to socially conservative values. Often, these parents were forceful with the school about their beliefs that the school's responsibility was to teach academics, and the role of parents was to teach family values. The community was known for being unwelcoming to same-sex families, yet the community worked hard to project a positive image.

This was Jade's third year as principal at South Central, and it was the second school at which she had

been principal overall. While initially challenged in her new administrative role, she had over the years come to enjoy the work—until recently. In the past couple of years, administrative work had begun to pile up on her and she found herself getting further and further behind on some of the tasks she valued. Jade wanted to spend more time with students and their families—working to create equitable and inclusive schools and communities. However, she found herself dealing with more paperwork which resulted in having less time to interact with the students, their families, and even the teachers. Among other things, Jade’s time was occupied with implementing increasing numbers of board-level and Ministry-level policies and regulations; managing pressures to improve test scores; evaluating new teachers; overseeing outreach initiatives with the community; figuring out the complex finances of the school budget; processing piles of paperwork; negotiating the levels of bureaucratic red tape; and perhaps most time consuming, coping with the exploding mental health issues among her staff and students. The result was that Jade had less and less time to devote to her valued equity agenda.

In September, the equity committee met to discuss their ideas for the year. The committee had plans to introduce a new Indigenous flag, celebrate Pink Shirt Day, and Black History Month, amongst other things; most of their plans were similar to what they had done in previous years. The group was comprised of five teachers, the Principal (Jade), and Vice Principal (Tom). Most of the group had been members for many years and were very proud of their equity agenda. The group often participated in board-wide conversations and events about equity and openly promoted their school as being equitable and inclusive (not always an easy thing to do in a school district that did not always favour equity-minded initiatives in the recent past). The equity committee held many locally focused events at their school, but also focused on international equity concerns, including raising money for schools in Ghana, and sending clothing and supplies to areas experiencing natural disasters. They were a tight-knit group, and would hang out socially outside the school and in the staff room at lunch. For the most part, Jade thought the group was in agreement about the nature of the equity work they did. The members were usually supportive of the ideas each put forth and worked together to achieve their goals. Jade was particularly pleased with the group’s commitment to equity, given the community’s conservative leanings and the district’s less-than-enthusiastic support of these issues. Jade felt good about having an equity committee in her school, and it was one of the few things she felt happy about when she thought about her job; it helped her to feel connected to her role as principal and to find meaning in her work. She hoped she would have more time to get involved in the equity committee in the future.

While the equity committee was normally on the same page, there were occasional disagreements between the more activist members, such as Clarence, and the rest of the group. There was a tension between the members that wanted to create drastic changes and those that felt they needed to move slowly and be careful. In September, Clarence, one of the teachers on the committee who often took the lead on more activist issues, had pitched the idea of going from class to class talking about homophobia and transphobia, and shared that she had spent the summer putting together some resources which teachers could use in their classes. Clarence had also prepared a short speech that she wanted the group to share with all classes in preparation for Pink Shirt Day. The group had been divided on the issue; the more activist minded teachers, such as Clarence, wanted to move quickly and with force, whereas other members were fearful of moving too fast. The members that wanted to move slowly were not sure if it was an appropriate discussion to be having in an elementary school, believing that it was not really the focus of Pink Shirt Day. A few of the teachers mentioned their fear of backlash from parents, especially of students in the younger grades. Others pointed out that the school did not currently have any students that identified as gay or transgender, so it was not a pressing issue for them. At the end of the meeting, the group decided that Grades 5-8 would receive the speech and all teachers would have the option of using the resources prepared by Clarence. Clarence seemed disappointed but agreed she would continue to work on this initiative in this way with the rest of the group while doing more intensive work with her class around heteronormativity and homophobic bullying. During the meeting, Jade had to leave on three different occasions to address important issues; this caused her to miss much of the discussion, although she had managed to be there at the end to hear about Clarence’s determination to go ahead with the speech in her class and hoping other teachers of the younger grades would present the speech to their classes. The group seemed tense but resolved, and that was the last Jade had heard of the initiative, until she was called into a meeting with Clarence and a parent three weeks later.

Jade had received an email from Clarence on Monday night, saying she was having a meeting with

a parent about a book she had read to her Grade 2 class, and she hoped Jade could support her in the meeting. She had presented her speech on homophobia and transphobia and then read a book to her class about a family with same-sex parents. A parent from their class had requested an immediate meeting and Clarence wanted to address their concerns. When Jade arrived at the school on Tuesday morning (after being called to an impromptu, mandatory meeting at the Board Office) Clarence and the parent had already begun the meeting on their own. Jade felt exhausted from being bounced around from the board to the school on such short notice. Recently, a lot of her time had been taken up with many of these last-minute meetings. Taking an extra-large sip of her coffee, she tried to push through her fatigue as she focused on how the meeting was progressing. Jade sensed the meeting was tense. The parent looked anxious and Clarence appeared to be doing her best to cover up her own uneasiness.

The parent was angry and upset that Clarence had read a book about a family with two mothers to her class on Monday. The parent did not think it was appropriate for Clarence to be teaching the students about such things. In his opinion, this subject was an inappropriate topic for a teacher to discuss with students and was something that should be left to parents. Clarence and Jade explained that the book was part of the school's equity mandate which encouraged students to be inclusive and supportive of all people. The educators briefly outlined the school board equity policy and explained that the books were from the school board's approved book vendor list. Clarence described how they had read this particular book in her class over the last few years without issue, yet she had not given such an in-depth speech before reading the book in the previous years. Jade explained how, according to the equity policy, students were not *forced* to agree with the way others lived their lives, but they were expected to be kind and caring with one another, regardless of beliefs and they were not allowed to discriminate against one another based on things like race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender. The meeting had come to an end as the first bell rang and the school day was about to begin. Although the conversation was cut short, Jade thought the parent seemed less upset. Everyone had come to an agreement that Clarence would talk further with the parent about what they would be learning in class, and they would decide together how they would move forward in a way that made the parents feel comfortable. Jade did not think about the issue for two weeks, only revisiting it after receiving another email message from Clarence.

Jade was shocked when she received an email from the school board trustee, asking for a meeting with her and Clarence. She connected with Clarence to ask what she knew about the request. According to Clarence, she had continued to discuss the issue with the parent and felt that things had been resolved until she received the same email from the local school board trustee, asking if Clarence would agree to a phone conversation with Jade about what had happened. As locally elected representatives of the public, school board trustees play an active role in the school community and are often called upon by parents and other constituents with school board related questions and concerns. While some trustees have agreements with school and school board personnel where they will follow the chain of command and accountability of the board by connecting with the principal and then other board level employees, many trustees are actively engaged with their local constituents outside of school. As elected officials, trustees are politically active and engage with their voting public in the way they feel will help them to get re-elected, sometimes in ways that puts them at odds with people at the school or school board level. Managing relationships with local trustees is another level that principals must handle as part of their role.

Clarence, Jade, and the trustee spoke on the phone and the trustee had informed the educators how the parent had come to them, upset that Clarence had been pushing her "gay agenda" on her students. Clarence expressed her belief that things were going relatively well with the parent and how she was caught totally off guard. Jade expressed similar sentiments. This escalation was a surprise to both Jade and Clarence. The trustee pushed back, seeming to align themselves with the parent's perspective on how Clarence was pushing her "gay agenda." Clarence admitted to the trustee that she did identify as queer but did not have an agenda and was not pushing her beliefs on the students. Jade was shocked at this revelation. Clarence said that she had not shared details about her personal life with her students or her colleagues for fear something like this might happen.

The conversation with Clarence, Jade, and the trustee had not ended well. The trustee had been relatively polite, but it was clear there was something going on and the trustee was not on their side. Clarence and Jade discussed how Clarence should reach out to her union representative and the school board equity office for assistance. Jade told Clarence she had her support and she wanted Clarence to keep her in the loop about how things progressed. Unfortunately for Clarence, those processes move very slowly. After

the phone conversation with the trustee, Clarence received numerous emails from other “concerned” parties, and even received threatening letters at her home address.

Clarence sent an email to Jade saying she was feeling unsafe, unsupported, and the best thing for her to do at this point was to apply for a position in another school. She shared that she was currently staying in a hotel and was thinking of moving out of fear for her privacy and well-being. Jade was surprised and concerned by this news from Clarence. As a principal, she cared about social justice, equity, and wanted to do the right thing. There appeared to be an agenda at the board level but given her preoccupation with all the other responsibilities she had, Jade did not have time to investigate. As an experienced administrator, Jade had witnessed a shift in priorities over the past few years by the government and local school board. While the government and school board spoke publicly about the value they placed on diversity and their belief in the achievement of equity and social justice, Jade did not see this public commitment being matched with resources and support at the school level. Board leadership was concerned about competition between school boards, Private schools were competing for the attention of public students and their parents and there were declining student demographics; schools were at risk of being closed, math scores were down, and the new government was changing education policies and making funding cuts. There was a lot going on. Jade suspected that equity had been taking a back seat to these other priorities for years. While this incident with Clarence confirmed these fears, the board was more concerned about their reputation than doing the most equitable thing. Nevertheless, she was caught off guard. Jade felt compelled to take action, but she was uncertain what to expect from the board, and what would be best for the teacher. She also worried about how she would have time to take care of all of her responsibilities at the school and help support Clarence.

Teaching Notes

Engaging in equity work as an administrator is not easy. One of the challenges for equity-minded principals is the work intensification that many are now experiencing (Armstrong, 2015; Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014, 2015). Heavier workloads are making it more difficult for principals to keep up with their daily tasks, let alone take on important initiatives such as equity work. Multiple and competing responsibilities, increasing pressures to perform, growing bureaucracies, reams of paperwork, unplanned interruptions, severe budget cuts, and encroachments on discretionary action (among many other work-related matters) limit the time that principals can devote to valued issues such as equity (Chang, Leach & Anderman, 2015; Darmody & Smyth, 2016). Effectively, a principal’s increasing workload make it more difficult for them to pursue their equity agendas in the ways they would wish. Aside from workload pressures, equity work incurs many costs and complications. Activist minded educators and educational leaders inevitably face challenges when their peers and superiors do not support this activism (Ryan, 2012; Tuters, 2017). Engaging in equity work can be associated with an early exit from the teaching profession, lack of promotion and retention, isolation, and emotional distress (Bell, Love, Washington, & Weinstein, 2007; Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Picower, 2007, 2011). Often, those who care deeply about equity and social justice are unprepared for doing this work because, among other things, they do not have sufficient training or support (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003; Tuters & Portelli, 2017), or they simply might not have the necessary time to devote to the issues associated with equity, as illustrated in the case described above. This case study is designed to help current and prospective principals reflect upon, understand and consider potential strategies for dealing with the challenges they face as they seek to promote social justice and equity in their schools and communities.

Activity 1: What is Going on?

Prior to beginning this exercise, it is suggested that students read:

Gill, H. (2013). Unmasking vandalism: A case of social justice leadership and complexities.

Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 142. <https://journalhosting.ualgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/42848>).

While reading, students should draw comparisons between the context of the issue, the concerns of the parents, and the role of the principal and their approaches. Working in groups, students are encouraged to come up with a description of what they think happened in the case:

- What are the main issues?
- What precipitated these issues?
- Who are the key actors?
- What are the concerns of the key players?
- What power do each of the players have? What are the implications?
- What, if anything, could have been done to avoid what happened?

Once students have completed their group discussions, they should come back together as one larger group and compare lists. In this larger group, students will need to come up with a master list of the key issues, actors, and strategies that should have been undertaken by the key actors they identified. Students should come up with a process for coming to an agreement as a group, whether it is anonymous or public voting, or a hierarchical system where people holding certain roles (such as principal) get more votes in their system. Students should then create one master list of the strategies they feel should have been undertaken and by which of the key actors (trustee, teacher, principal).

Activity 2: Understanding the Context

Although jurisdictions such as the province of Ontario continue to create more equitable and inclusive policies, and administrators and teachers increasingly espouse their belief that equity and inclusion are part of their education mandate, students and other educational stakeholders may continue to experience discrimination and oppression related to real and perceived gender and sexual identities. In a comprehensive study involving over 3,700 students in Canadian high schools, Taylor and Peter (2011) found that “70% of all participating students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, reported hearing expressions such as ‘that’s so gay’ every day in school and almost half (48%) reported hearing remarks such as ‘faggot,’ ‘lezbo’ and ‘dyke’ every day in school” (p. 15). The data collected by these authors helps to demonstrate that there is a disconnect between teachers’ espoused beliefs about equity and inclusion and their practices, because while most educators will say they are supportive of equity and inclusion and do not tolerate discrimination and exclusion, the high occurrence rates suggest otherwise. These experiences are related to the lack of support and resources provided to administrators in supporting teachers in implementing inclusive curriculums (Taylor et al., 2016).

There is no doubt that the work of an administrator is challenging, even on a “good” day, particularly for those who are new to the role. As mentioned above, principals’ work has become increasingly complex, intense, and demanding; it is also tied to the context within the district and at the school site in which it occurs. The history, culture, politics, and size of the community a school serves will have an impact on the way in which leaders are able to provide the best possible educational experience for all students (Ryan, 2016b). Students should read Ryan and Tuters (2017) and Ryan (2010, 2016a, 2016b), and look into the equity policies in their jurisdictions at the school, school district, and government levels as many jurisdictions have policies that are adapted or created anew at each level. Students should also spend some time online on local and national government websites in order to gain an understanding of the political, social, and economic context in which they work, particularly by learning about the demographic statistics that are collected by their local and national governments. For example, in Canada, this information would be found on the Statistics Canada website and local municipal websites. This investigation should be guided by questions such as: Who are the major players in this context? Who has power? What are the beliefs and goals in their jurisdiction(s)? Working in groups, students are encouraged to develop a plan for how they would move forward as the principal. Among other things, the participants should be able to identify supports and constraints that relate to their ability to achieve their chosen outcome. In doing so, students consider the following questions and take notes:

1. What is the nature of the context in which they work? Is their context undergoing political (including policy), funding, leadership, or demographic changes?
2. What policies exist that inform the work of the educational leader in relation to this case? For example: Are there diversity policies at the government and/or local level within the educational system and at the provincial level? Which Human Rights Laws might be relevant in this case? What, if any, are the legal implications for actors involved such as the principal, trustee, and parent? What does the teacher’s provincial collective agreement say about teachers’ rights? Do curricula describe the role of the teacher in creating and supporting a diverse student population in an equitable manner?

3. What challenges and supports exist for leaders at the school site, and in community and provincial contexts?
4. Given the context, policies, challenges, and supports that exist in their jurisdiction, what strategies or next steps would be recommended in this case?

Students should then come up with a plan for designing an equity team, including a team mission and vision with designated roles for equity team members. Students should come up with a plan of action for their equity teams that will help to guide them in any incidents that arise. Included in the plan of action should be two example scenarios with the strategies for action outlined in accordance with the roles outlined for equity team members. Attention should be paid to sharing responsibilities amongst the equity team such that no equity team member (i.e., principal) is solely responsible or accountable for the actions or inactions of the equity team.

Activity 3: Role Play

Cases such as the one presented encourage us to consider important issues like work intensification and how resulting additional responsibilities impact equity work in schools. Perhaps, as illustrated here, the increasing demands associated with leaders' work may get in the way of promoting equity and inclusion. Jade, for example, had found it difficult to participate in equity related activities and meetings because of the demands and pressures of her position. Busy work schedules may make it difficult to counter the resistance to equity initiatives. The following role play exercise requires students to think about not only how to react to and defend equity practices and initiatives in the face of challenges, but also how to anticipate and prepare for them, in the context of their busy work lives.

Students are asked to assume roles in a meeting scenario where Jade, Clarence, and a parent discuss the book about the family with two mothers. The three characters include: (1) Jade, the principal; (2) Clarence, the teacher; and (3) the parent. Students are to re-enact the meeting described above. In doing so, the actors might consider the arguments for and against the book, the manner in which each promotes their position and future action that might be proposed. Following the role play, students are to discuss these questions:

What is the role and what are the rights of the administrator? For example, is the principal more than a manager? What are the key concerns of an administrator? How should administrators prioritize their tasks? For whom, and to whom, is the administrator responsible? Does the administrator have a role in determining what and how a teacher "teaches"?

What is the role and what are the rights of the teacher? For example, to whom is the teacher primarily responsible? How should teachers decide what and how they teach? What is the teacher's role in relation to the purpose of public education?

What is the role and what are the rights of the parent? For example, should parents have a say in what and how their children are taught? If/how should parents provide input in the public education system? Is it the parent's right to go directly to the district trustees?

What is the role and what are the rights of the student? Should students be involved in deciding what and how they are taught? At the younger grade levels, who advocates for what is taught to the young students?

Once participants have completed outlining the roles and rights of each of the key actors listed above, they should create a handbook that can be used by principals to inform their equity work. Students should create this handbook for principals that want to do equity work but are feeling overwhelmed by the intensification of their workload and need strategies for working towards equity in a way that is timely and manageable for their contexts. This handbook can also be a tool for students as they engage in equity work in their contexts.

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