

# Making a Case for Exemplary Principal Leadership for Racial Equity

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## *Abstract*

*The concurrent crises of climate change, a pandemic, and social unrest have laid bare systemic inequities in our economic, health, education, and criminal justice institutions that negatively impact people of color. School leaders face unprecedented challenges as they navigate these dilemmas and are compelled to address the implicit biases and resulting behaviors and policies responsible for the opportunity gaps in their schools. A path to equitable educational opportunities for all students in an era beset with compounding crises can begin with a new focus on character and virtues to provide a framework for right action. This prioritization of character and virtues dates back to nineteenth-century American educator Horace Mann, who asserted that the goal of public education should be to instill character and civic virtue. Our proposition that the philosophical analysis of character and virtue can be an effective framework for leading for educational equity is followed by an example of how this form of advocacy is utilized by a school principals' group founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the "Good Trouble Principals."*

**Keywords:** *educational inequities, principal leadership, virtue ethics, exemplarist virtue theory, moral theory, critical race theory*

## **Introduction**

In less than a decade, the crises of climate change, a global pandemic, and social unrest in response to police killings of Blacks in the United States have intersected to uncover systemic inequities in our economic, health, education, and criminal justice systems with undeniable transparency. Since climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic have a disproportionately negative impact on people of color and low-income families, children and youth of color carry a greater risk of home displacement, physical and mental health issues, and impaired cognitive functioning (Mann et al., 2020). Impacts of climate change, including periods of extreme heat, add "another layer of vulnerability to communities that are already burdened by historic and disproportionate pollution, poverty, political powerlessness, and unequal health access and quality of care" (American Public Health Association, 2021; White-Newsome, 2016), the same circumstances that resulted in these communities suffering more cases and deaths from Covid-19 (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). Police shootings traumatize children and college-age youth, resulting in lower academic achievement, missed days from school, and dropping out (Campbell & Valera, 2020; Redman, 2020; Ang, 2020). For example, Ang's (2020) study found that "on average, each officer-involved killing in the [southwestern U.S.] County caused three students of color to drop out of high school" (p. 4).

This convergence of crises challenges school leaders to address the foundational inequities in their buildings and communities with urgency and creativity as they navigate an environment impeded by implicit bias and its effects.

A strategy for leading for educational equity in these turbulent times can be framed around a process of emulating the character and virtues of exemplary leaders to define right action. This focus, applied to principal-led activism designed and organized around the safe space of an online community, introduces a new perspective for school leadership. Turning to character and virtues as hallmarks of leadership harkens back to nineteenth-century American educator Horace Mann, who established the idea that the aim of public education should be to instill character and civic virtue “rather than mere learning or the advancement of sectarian ends” (Cubberly, 1934, p. 167).

We propose that the philosophical analysis of character and virtue can contribute to effective advocacy for educational equity and offer an example of how this is put in practice by a school principals’ group launched in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Inspired by the late U.S. Representative John Lewis, one of the nation’s leading civil rights activists who famously referred to social justice work as getting into “good trouble, necessary trouble” (Hayden, 2020), Minnesota’s “Good Trouble Principals” (Good Trouble Principals, 2020) advance a set of principles and directives for dismantling systemic racism in education. For these leaders, John Lewis is an *exemplar*, defined in Zagzebski’s (2017) exemplarist moral theory as someone to be admired because of the character traits they have acquired through their life, cause, or actions they take. According to this theory, as a society, we are especially drawn to admire the moral excellence of those who act for the benefit of others. The emotion of admiration then triggers a desire to emulate what we know to be good: “Admiration of exemplars can serve as a psychological force to (a) get agreement within a community about the identification of negative and positive duties and (b) motivate persons to act on their duty” (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 208). The Good Trouble Principals define their duty through a four-part action platform consisting of (a) de-centering Whiteness, (b) eliminating practices that “reinforce White academic superiority”, (c) reconstructing “school” to revamp business-as-usual practices, and (d) speaking truth to power (Good Trouble Principals, 2020). This article explores how exemplarist moral theory is actionalized by principals who created a safe space for fortifying their advocacy for equitable education inspired by the work and example of John Lewis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two theoretical frames address the negative impact of systemic inequities in our institutions, including education. Combined, they reveal their correlative aim toward a more just society. These are the exemplarist virtue theory and critical race theory.

Each of the converging crises listed in the introduction has in common inequalities that weigh the heaviest on the lives of non-white students. Consequently, educational leaders are faced with addressing deep-rooted implicit bias and its effects on learning and growing. To counter the convergence of crises, a confluence of social justice and what we identify as virtue ethics are practiced in the advocacy for equitable education by the Good Trouble Principals. In her prodigious work on the ethics of race, Zack (2011) upholds that “ethics today remains a powerful contribution to human equality and social justice” (p.4).

## Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, focusing on character and virtues, is now included with deontology and utilitarianism as the three prime ethical approaches (Hursthouse, 1999, Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). Virtue ethics is about human nature and how a person wants to live (Grant et al., 2017). “Virtue ethics aims to specify what constitutes a good human life” (Aristotle, Taylor, 2006, p. xxii).

Hursthouse (1999) explains the three approaches within moral philosophy. Deontology is about duty and rules. Utilitarianism claims that an action is right if it promotes happiness for the greater good. Virtue ethics focuses on *being* and connects the practice of good habits with an individual’s character traits. The other two methods also consider virtues in their theories, but should not be confused with virtue ethics. The difference is these theories stem from the relative lack of attention philosophers of deontology and utilitarianism give to virtues in their approaches (Hursthouse & Pottigras, 2018). It is important to note that moral theories explain what makes an action right or wrong and outline what virtuous people ought to do in various situations. When moral theories are about duties, they primarily answer the question, “what should I do?” While knowing what to do is critical, having moral virtues makes us care to do the right thing. Virtues are characteristics that help us decide how to be or behave (Sommers, 2001).

When it comes to climate change, an environmental ethics study conducted by Morrison, et al., (2018) found:

Relationality, interconnectedness, and contextual thinking allow virtue ethics to encompass environmental issues with a degree of flexibility unavailable through the application of utilitarianism or deontology. Through acknowledging our personal relationship, and our role within the environment, virtue ethics builds on a foundation which recognizes the intrinsic value of nature, and our profound reliance on its wellbeing. (p. 6)

The same can be said of how virtue ethics builds on our profound reliance on the wellbeing of humanity. Where there is race-based inequality, the concern needs to be about correcting *injustice* (Zach, 2011):

People can peacefully agree all day long about what constitutes just or ethical behavior regarding race, but that in itself will not guarantee justice in reality. This is why it is possible to have a society with written, legal, formal justice, and widespread real-life injustice. Indeed, it is when injustice is identified as such that controversy, anger, and mindless rage results. (p. xi)

In the *Global Sustainable Development Report* (2019), global climate change is addressed as an ethical matter linked to inequalities:

There is now consensus—based on robust empirical evidence—that high levels of inequalities not only raise difficult issues for social justice but also lower long-term economic growth and make such growth more fragile. Inequalities also tend to become entrenched through the efforts of those at the very top to secure and perpetuate their positions through various channels, such as having a greater say in the political process. (p. 25)

Corral-Verdugo et al.(2021) in *The Virtues of Sustainability* state:

Character strengths and virtues are currently considered traits that may serve the purpose of sustainable development. Promoting the conditions that facilitate the prosocial and environmental use of character strengths and virtues should be imperative in every community and culture throughout the world. (p. 48)

### **Critical Race Theory**

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), critical race theory (CRT) began as a framework in the 1970s as recognition that the gains of the civil rights movement of the 1960s were dormant or being turned back. The theory was rooted in critical legal studies and radical feminism and drew from American liberation thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and postmodern philosophies as well as the Black Power and Chicano movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Critical race theory has extended beyond a legal framework to inform research and understanding in education, sociology, and other fields. The five basic tenets of critical race theory observe that:

- a) racism is the normal state of affairs in society, the usual and ordinary way things work and the everyday experience of people of color;
- b) racist policies, laws, and other circumstances do not change unless there is an “interest convergence” in which Whites recognize such change will result in a benefit for themselves, in other words, be in their best interest;
- c) race is a social construct with no biological basis;
- d) “intersectionality” recognizes that our layered identities impact our experiences; being both Black, and a woman, for example, faces different kinds of discrimination than being both White and a woman, or being Black, and a man;
- e) Black, American Indian, Asian, and Latinx people have experiences with oppression that give them a “unique voice of color,” a definitive competence in communicating about race and racism that White people do not possess (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

The spring and summer of 2020 brought a new challenge beyond Covid 19 and social unrest—a widespread attack on critical race theory carried out across the nation predominantly at school board meetings due to a lack of understanding and knowledge about the theory (Waxman, 2021; McTighe, 2021; Sawchuk, 2021). Misleading information based on fear, misdirected anger, distrust, and willful ignorance can all too easily become believed lies or a “disruption to education” (McTighe, 2021, para. 2; Sawchuk, 2021, para. 32). Moody-Adams (1999) describe affected ignorance and its large-scale impact:

Affected ignorance is a common accompaniment of wrongdoing. It is essentially a matter of choosing not to be informed of what we can and should know...Even our most deeply held convictions may be wrong. But it is also common for human beings to avoid or deny this possibility...The main obstacle to moral progress in social practices is the tendency to widespread affective [willful] ignorance of what can and should already be known.” (p. 301, 180)

As the CRT controversy advances, Texas and other states are setting strict guidelines about what can be taught in public schools. House Bill 3979, the Texas law passed in May 2021, dictates how teachers talk to their students about current affairs and the country's history of racism. A test to this law came during a routine professional development session in which teachers were warned to "balance" books about the Holocaust by also providing books that share the opposite view. After a story broke about this interpretation of the law, a district official issued a statement clarifying that the comments at the session "were in no way to convey that the Holocaust was anything less than a terrible event in history. Additionally, we recognize there are not two sides of the Holocaust" (Hixenbaugh & Hylton, 2021).

### **Philosophical Analysis of Character and Virtue**

A philosophical analysis of character and virtue that can contribute to effective advocacy for educational equity begins with the growing number of human sciences interested in cultivating an understanding of the advantages of living virtuously (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). Biglan et al. (2020) assert that the collective documentation of research from these sciences is a validation of what is needed for humanity to flourish and counter the inequities and crises our society faces. Character education, moral education, and more recently, virtue education are the subject of much research in this regard (Clement & Bollinger, 2016).

Virtue ethics is about human nature and how a person wants to live (Grant et al., 2017), rather than the morality of right versus wrong. Virtue ethics focuses on an individual's character and virtues. Virtues have been defined as "one's potential. It is that which enables us to become who we really are" (Solomon, 1999, p. 69). Defining character [and virtue] with consensus across fields of study has been argued and discussed since the Ancient Greeks laid their foundations (Clement & Bollinger, 2016). Mitchell (2015) finds:

Character cannot be separated from the person. Virtue is an aid in this; it is the act of good character. Growing in the virtues, especially prudence (knowing what to seek and what to avoid) forms good character. What is at stake is the integrity of the person. (p. 149)

Ways of acting/being are not virtue traits by themselves. Our attitudes, emotions, what we value, our dispositions, beliefs, and mental states are all part of the fabric of our character (Goodwin et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2015). When it comes to educational leadership, Berkowitz (2020) teaches the concept of *being* by stating the importance of leading by example so others will emulate the character they see in you.

In a study of how virtues motivate principals specifically (Eisenschmidt et al., 2019), it was found that when principals live into their values, moral virtues generate purpose for ethical leadership in their work. "The principals in this study can be said to exemplify ethical leadership" as shown in their interaction with teachers, students, families, and the community (p. 443). This study concluded that virtue motivated principals' work toward solutions to challenges in a "morally sustainable way" (p. 444).

Leaders, such as principals, are role models and exemplars when their actions are seen as important (van de Ven, et al., 2019) and therefore, admired. In turn, admiration generates a feeling of inspiration in the admirer to raise the bar in their own character, in a sense of "self-expansion" (Schindler, et al., 2015, p. 305).

## Exemplarist Theory

The exemplarist virtue theory (Zagzebski, 2010) is based on the emotion of admiration of an exemplar, which leads the person to emulate the virtues and character traits the exemplar displays. The concept of admiration dates back to Aristotle's use of the word *kalan*, which translates to "the admirable" (Miller, 2011). The *kalan* thus functions as the goal (*telos*) of the virtuous person, whose characteristic motivation is to act "for the sake of the admirable" (*E.N. III.7, III5b12-13; E.E. III.12, 1230a28-29*). Moral motivation—that which causes us to engage in the practice of ethical action, is at the heart of the exemplarist theory. We learn through imitation. Our emotion of admiration naturally draws us to good persons, defined as exemplars. Through our admiration, we are led to want to imitate that which we admire (Zagzebski, 1996). As we each develop morally, we become more capable of improving our imitation and becoming like those we admire. The traits that make a person morally good are virtues.

In developing the exemplarist virtue theory, Zagzebski (2010) described moral theory as a complex domain that contains many theories created to simplify understanding and justify moral practice while giving us guidance that leads to improvement. Her interest is in explaining morality at a level that leads from the abstract to influence practice through the "imagination of ordinary people" (p. 44), not just moral philosophers. Several authors have written in the realm of personal goodness with ordinary people in mind (Miller, 2018; Quinn, 2000; Brooks, 2015; Popov, 1997; Tuan, 2008; Haidt, 2006, 2012; Bennett, 1993). Zagzebski points out there are non-moral exemplars with natural talents (like musicians and artists) whose talents we cannot imitate. We can, however, admire and imitate their virtuous acts like striving and humility.

In exemplarism, Zagzebski (2013) explains, it is good to start imitating character traits (the virtues) of someone slightly better than us at whatever it is we admire in them. Then, once we understand our own moral motives and our actions' consequences, we imitate the exemplar's behaviors. There are many ways a person can be good and admirable but not imitable. Zagzebski (2013) uses the example of admiring an explorer who went to the South Pole in 1912. Although she admired him, she had no interest in imitating him. Instead, she "wanted to be the kind of person who could do such a thing" (p. 201).

The exemplarist theory differs from most virtue theories. Zagzebski (2013) believes a moral theory needs to include definitions of concepts from all three normative ethics theories (Kantian deontology, Utilitarianism, Aristotelian virtue theory). She defines these concepts as:

- A *virtue* is a trait we admire in an admirable person. It is a trait that makes the person paradigmatically good in a certain respect.
- A *right act* in some set of circumstances C is what the admirable person would take to be most favored by the balance of reasons in circumstances C.
- A *good outcome* is a state of affairs at which admirable person's aim.
- A *good life* (a desirable life, a life of well-being) is a life desired by admirable persons. (p. 202)

Zagzebski (2013), MacIntyre (2007), and Engelen et al. (2018) see narrative ethics and stories as critical to inspiring moral insight and attracting attention to the importance of ethical practice. Moral learning is done mainly through stories and helps us identify exemplars. The exemplarist theory provides a structure to learn—the narratives are the substance. It is through the personal reflection of stories that we can revise our views as well. Engelen et al. (2018) report that

relatable stories about exemplars that produce an emotional response are best at promoting prosocial behavior.

Being prosocial includes possessing values, attitudes, and ways of being that are good for those we are around. Being prosocial contributes to the well-being of others when we are kind, supportive, cooperative, show interest, are appreciative, and virtuous in our behaviors. The movement from helping ourselves to benefiting others is a highly valued prosocial behavior and a marker of well-being (Biglan et al., 2020; Thomson & Siegel, 2013; Diessner et al., 2013; Vianello et al., 2010; Algo & Haidt, 2009). Studies indicate that people will choose prosocial values when they are free to select their own values rather than those handed down to them (Biglan et al., 2020; Gagné, 2003.)

Van de Ven et al. (2019) further support the role admiration has in inspiring people. Schindler et al. (2015) concur that those who admire others tend to seek higher standards for themselves. Schindler et al. (2013) describe admiration as having to keep our values and ideals in mind as we choose how to behave in situations that require the use of the traits we most value. Additionally, internal motivation drives development toward the person we strive to become—our best self. Thrash and Elliot (2004) discussed that being *inspired by* often leads to being *inspired to do or to be*. Archer's (2019) findings substantiate the connection between admiration, as an emotion, and the resulting motivation: "On my account, admiration leads to a desire to promote the values we admire in the object of our admiration" (p. 148).

In the many disciplines interested in virtue ethics, debates in literature worldwide have recently increased regarding Zagzebski's (2010, 2013, 2017) exemplarist theory (Szutta, 2019; Vaccarezza 2020; Vos, 2018; Marchetti 2018). Kristjansson (2020) refers to the interest in moral exemplars as "the hottest ticket in town, with major contributions from within moral philosophy, moral psychology, moral education, and even popular trade books" (p. 350).

Several references advocate for exemplars and/or admiration. Van de Ven et al. (2018) (psychology), Kristjansson (2017) (education), and Algo & Haidt (2009) (positive psychology) claim that (the emotion) elevation is a form of admiration (Haidt, 2003). Van de Ven et al. (2019) found that those who felt motivated to better themselves were most moved to do so after admiring another's behavior and judging it to be of importance.

Vos (2018), a theologian, and Kristjansson (2017), an education scholar, are among many who argue for learning not only from the exemplar but from the "virtuous qualities displayed by them" (Vos, p. 26).

In contrast to theories that posit exemplars in a role model approach, Levinson (2017) finds that even family members and ordinary people we know from our neighborhood can be greater motivators than those who stand out as exceptional. Hoyos-Valdes (2018) argues in favor of close friendships as role models who help nurture virtue. This is due to the knowledge friends have of the values and behaviors of those they are closest to. In this way, friends become models to emulate. Additionally, there is intrinsic value within oneself to be the person our admired friend sees in us. This "character friendship" (p. 68) provides ongoing practice of engagement in becoming or realizing our best potential.

Kristjansson (2020) agrees with Hoyos-Valdes (2018) that the "raison d'être of character friendship is mutual character development" (p.361). At the same time, Kristjansson is not opposed to role-model education based on admiration and emulation. He articulates the origin of the term "character friendship" thoroughly as Aristotle's definition of a kind of deep friendship and how

that may be more influential in cultivating moral growth for oneself and the good of one's community than moral role modeling through emulating exemplars. Kristjansson employs Aristotle's (1915) definition of a character friend as "another self":

When we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking into the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves, we can obtain that knowledge by looking at our friend. For the friend is, as we assert, a second self. (p. 1213a: 15-23).

John Lewis is an *exemplar* for the Good Trouble Principals as he fits the definition in Zagzebski's (2017) exemplarist moral theory as someone to be admired because of the character traits they have acquired through their life, cause, or actions they take.

### **John Robert Lewis**

The late U.S. Representative John Robert Lewis, born in 1940 in Troy, Alabama, was drawn to the Southern preachers who inspired him during his formative years. Vos (2015) observed that we admire exemplars also for the "virtuous qualities displayed by them" (p. 26). Lewis admired the qualities of one such preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King was a man who believed in non-violence and the ideal of the "Beloved Community," a community committed to inclusion and respect for the humanity of its people, a community that would not tolerate hate, divisiveness nor injustice:

King's Beloved Community is a global vision for all of humanity, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth, where poverty, hunger, and homelessness will not be tolerated, where racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood because international standards of human decency will not allow anything differently. (The King Center, n.d.)

Dr. King, whom John Lewis tried to emulate, died after preaching at a Black Church in Memphis, Tennessee, about the plight of sanitation workers in Memphis. Lewis was also influenced by Rosa Parks, the slightly built Black woman who refused to give up her seat at the front of the bus for a White passenger. Her refusal led to one of the largest protests, as people refused to use public transportation. Her use of the term "good trouble" led John Lewis to say, "It is important to get into good trouble, necessary trouble." John Lewis, in his commitment to serving his community and bringing his country to a "Beloved" state, was admirable. Lewis himself was injured during what was supposed to be a peaceful march from Selma to Montgomery by way of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. He sustained head fractures from the police, and throughout his lifetime named others, mostly Black men, who lost their lives to police violence.

Before critical race theory was formulated by legal scholars in the 1970s, John Lewis understood the CRT theme that racism is permanent and ordinary, having lived through and observed the role that race played in education, policing, housing, and employment. He saw American society permeated with injustices that compelled him to take up the mantle of King and Parks and get into good trouble, necessary trouble, because nothing else would change and move us toward the Beloved Community.



Emulation is the highest level of flattery, yet John Lewis had no self-interest. He was not doing this work for his own gratification, but his was a sacrifice for the good of the entire community. Correspondingly, the Good Trouble Principals don't seek self-gratification, but rather a way of being that has proven effective over the decades for civil rights activists. These principals join local Minneapolis leaders like Sondra Samuels, CEO of the Northside Achievement Zone, and her husband, Don Samuels, former Mpls city council and MPS board member who focus their educational advocacy for students of color on collaboration in the spirit of moving beyond self.

The Black Lives Matter movement and George Floyd's death have raised the volume of the alarm about how racism and discrimination are still alive and well. Through social media and mainstream news, leaders express shock at the deep injustices that are commonplace in the lives of Blacks. Yet for Blacks, this has been their lived experience every day (Morris, 2020).

### **Good Trouble Principals: Standing Up for Students of Color**

The Black Lives Matter movement and George Floyd's death created the impetus to take up the mantle of publicly denouncing inequities caused by racism. Although racism is nothing new, the call for leadership to take action now rings louder than ever (Morris, 2020). Because all societal issues eventually land at the front doors of their schools, school leaders are charged with discovering, developing, and practicing ways to address the foundational inequities in their buildings and communities.

The Good Trouble Principals (GTP) describe themselves as a "loose collection of diverse Minnesotan principals bound together by a commitment to changing our nation's future by engaging in better, more equitable educational practices" (GTP, 2021a, para. 3). As shown in Figure 1, the majority of members are White and female (GTP, 2021b). Though they are diverse and work in different contexts, they found a common purpose to unify them.

**Table 1**  
*Demographics of Good Trouble Principals*

Number of Members	Gender	Race	District Type
160	Female: 105 Male: 55 Other: 8	White: 138 Black: 13 Rural: 3	Urban: 94 Suburban: 63

*Note: Demographics gathered from follow-up identification of Good*

#### **Trouble Principals' signatures|**

The GTP describe their site as a gathering place, a safe place to rest among like-minded leaders where convictions about educational justice in our country can be fortified and views of education as a transformative social force can be reinforced. Two mission-driven individuals launched the GTP movement, both high school principals in North Minneapolis, where they grew up, and where their own children attend high school. (Y. Abdulah and M. Friestleben, personal

communication, November 18, 2021). The community they serve is African American and impoverished and has experienced an increased level of gun violence in recent years—the City of Minneapolis has experienced a 90% increase in gun violence over the past year (Jany, 2021). According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2021), a child in the U.S. was killed by gunfire every 2 hours and 36 minutes in 2019. Sadly, several victims of this gun violence and death have fallen on young school-aged children. The lived values of the two founders of GTP, who describe themselves as people of faith who feel deep concern for this community, precipitated their movement toward activism. In many ways, their motivation and actions (inspired by Lewis, as the name of their group implies) signal a similar strategy used by Dr. Martin Luther King in his letter from Birmingham Jail. In his letter to eight White clergymen who had criticized one of his marches and other demonstrations, Dr. King pointed out that creating tension leads to awareness and compels people to act: “there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth...the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood” (King, 1963, para. 10). By publicly declaring their commitment to specific actions to upend inequities in education, The GTP are articulating actions and ideas that create tension, exemplifying Dr. King, who wrote:

You may well ask: ‘Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path?’ You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. (p. 10)

The Good Trouble Principals recognize that institutional racism continues to be alive and well through the misuse of White power. Until there is accountability for the perpetuation of rhetoric and actions that do not change the plight of Blacks, change will not happen. The only way leadership can change the experiences of Black people is through instituting processes that are race proactive and held up within policies (Morris, 2020).

To become a member of the GTP, one must be a school building principal or assistant principal who is willing to support the group’s Statement of Purpose as well as work within their buildings and communities while in the company of like-minded individuals who want to make a difference in the lives of the children/families they serve; in other words, to be just and virtuous leaders.

Principals in this organization are placed into project management groups that address the four action items defined in the Good Trouble Principals’ (2020) statement: (a) De-centering Whiteness by calling out and advocating for “historically non-represented voices of color...to hold weight and power”; (b) “dismantling practices that reinforce White academic superiority” such as tracking and use of testing that contains intrinsic bias; (c) reconstructing ordinary practices such as staffing and schedules that are “open to drastic changes”; and (d) speaking truth to power (para. 14-17). Every member records their activities and experiences and shares them monthly through an interactive website portal (GTP, 2021b).

## Analyses: Theory Meets Leadership

As we look at the leadership framework the GTP have designed for themselves, we see its origin emerge from the continuing need to confront inequities that persist in our educational systems nearly six decades after the Civil Rights legislation of 1965:

We write today, 57 years later, to say the fight for educational equality rages on and so does our counter—we will not be moved. We write to say it is our role as school principals to be the faces and names of this fight; to be in the forefront and not the shadows. (GTP, 2021)

The GTP's existence and publicly stated mission can be more deeply understood through the lens of CRT, namely that racism is ordinary, voices of color possess more legitimacy and competency to speak about race, and interest convergence. Their commitment to “dismantling practices that reinforce White academic superiority like bias in testing and the labeling, tracking, and clustering that reflect an Americanized version of a caste system in our schools” (GTP, 2021a, #2) acknowledges that racism is the normal and permanent way of doing things in American society, including in institutions like education. The practices they list are long-held behaviors based on policies that assume the superiority of White culture and ways of knowing. The CRT tenet that voices of color carry the most legitimate authority in matters of racism is expressed in the GTP's mission to de-center Whiteness. They state this with the understanding that “traditional organized whiteness ensures domination through forms like PTAs and Unions. We purposefully call out and lift up historically non-represented voices of color in our spaces to hold weight and power” (GTP, 2021a, #1). This statement, as well as the entire GTP mission, is particularly powerful coming from an organization in which the vast majority of members are White. As part of an anti-racist community of school leaders, the White majority are committed to giving their colleagues of color a platform of power and influence.

In terms of intersectionality, which recognizes that White people engage in anti-racist action only when they perceive a benefit in it for them, the GTP claim that they are “not leaving white children behind by lifting Black, Brown, and Indigenous children up” (GTP, 2021a, #4, para #1). This implies that the common perception of White families is that policies and practices that even the playing for students of color degrade White-upheld standards and, as a result, the achievement of White students. In other words, White families do not see a benefit for themselves in such equity work.

Turning to the theoretical insights of exemplarism, the GTP's embodiment of this concept is reflected in their admiration of John Robert Lewis, who fits Zagzebski's (2017) definition of an exemplar as someone to be admired due to the character traits he acquired through his life, cause, and actions he took. “Character cannot be separated from the person. Virtue is an aid in this: it is the act of good character” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 149). The Good Trouble Principals were inspired by Lewis' “good trouble” statement about the necessity of challenging the status quo and adopted it in their approach that emulates and continues Lewis' commitment to fighting against injustice and systemic inequality. Their actions reflect Thrash and Elliot's (2004) claim that being *inspired by* often leads to being *inspired to* do or to be. As seen through a virtue ethics lens, which focuses on human nature and how a person wants to live (Grant et al., 2017), these principals made a “covenant, a promise, a pact” (GTP, 2021b) in their principles and directives for dismantling systemic racism in education. Zach (2011) reminds us that where there is race-based inequality, the ethical

concern needs to be about correcting injustice. “Ethics is a matter of ideals and principles for action that involves human well-being in important ways” (Zack, 2011. P. 171).

The GTP see themselves as a group in support of their statement of purpose, their ideals, and principles, while in the company of like-minded individuals who want to make a positive difference in the lives of the children/families they serve (GTP, 2021a) This form of “character friendship” (Aristotle, 1915, p. 1213a: 15-23) cultivates moral growth for oneself and one’s community (Kristjansson, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Morris (2020) states that the world is now able to see and document racism, discrimination, inequality, injustice, and the lack of a leader’s response to it. There will be an expectation for firm, consequential action to be taken.

School principals are hired and entrusted individuals who are held accountable to take action when it comes to advocating for all students’ welfare. Through a virtue ethics framework and an understanding of the tenets of CRT, this group of diverse leaders leads the way in calling out injustices by refusing to be bystanders to ongoing educational inequality.

The GTP chose a prosocial framework for right action that is designed around social justice work and activism with the intention of dismantling systems of racism in education. In this way, the exemplarist moral theory is actionalized by principals who created a safe space for fortifying their advocacy for equitable education inspired by the work and example of John Lewis.

Across the state of Minnesota approximately, 160 people publicly added their names to a list to announce their agreement with the declaration of the GTP. The principals who signed this letter have seen the injustices, murders, failing education systems, and discord across Minneapolis enough to know they had to “make some tension” (King, 1963, para. 10) to get people’s attention. Such attention guarantees backlash, and the group’s experience was no exception. Due to the attacks on CRT, individual principals started to ask to have their names removed after being intimidated to do so by parents, school board members, and superintendents where they are employed.

On a positive note, a local mid-sized university in the Midwest hosted the first gathering of the Good Trouble Principals who had previously connected only on Facebook. The event gave the principals a new space in which to engage in their purpose of supporting each other in advancing racial equity in their schools. They spent time sharing ideas for staying strong in the face of being challenged and received supportive feedback from the faculty member who hosted the meeting.

To better understand this group of school leaders, their motivation, work, and outcomes will require further study. Documenting how these principals address systemic issues of racism, impact the educational outcomes and experiences of their students, and potentially recognize other leaders and educators as exemplarists in their own actions will enrich the literature about equity work in education. While these leaders are licensed by the State of Minnesota’s Board of School Administrators (BOSA) and held to a static and demanding set of standards, their actions as ethical leaders bring a “lived” dimension to better understanding how these standards can be met in additional ways.

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