Talking about Social Justice and Leadership in a Context of Accountability

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Introduction

The idea for this conversation came from a seminar organized by the Centre for Leadership and Diversity at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). As part of an ongoing series, the Centre had invited three principals who were known to be advocates for social justice to talk about their practice. The conversation that followed was so stimulating that we decided to continue it at a later date and record it. To prepare for the second conversation, each of us came up with a few questions that we were interested in pursuing. These questions included the following themes:

1. the meaning of leadership for equity, diversity, and social justice
2. the necessity of leadership for social justice
3. the struggles associated with it
4. leadership efforts inside the school and in the wider school system
5. continuity within administrative teams
6. administrators who are not ready for leadership responsibilities
7. dealing with resistance to equity issues

When we eventually met again, we talked about various topics, not all of them related to the ones we intended to track. The conversation was subsequently taped and transcribed. The transcripts revealed, however, that not all topics produced fruitful discussion and not all were rich enough to provide useful insights into the issues that principals who advocate for social justice face. To get the transcribed conversation to a point that could illuminate issues of social justice, we did some editing. What follows is a portion of the original conversation that coalesced around a related set of issues, and reactions to it.

Initially we did not talk about our respective roles in the conversation. We merely anticipated that all of us would come together and discuss issues of social justice in which we were interested. As the conversation proceeded, though, we took on different roles. The academics acted more as questioners and provocateurs, while the practitioners were the ones who talked about the practice and practicalities of promoting social justice in schools. The academics included in the conversation are Reva Joshee (R), John Portelli (J) and Jim Ryan (JR). They are co-directors of the Centre for Leadership and Diversity. The practitioners were all principals in Ontario schools at the time. Mike De Angelis (M) was a principal of a new and ethnically diverse secondary school located somewhere in suburbia. He is working now in teacher education at OISE/UT. Darrin Griffiths (D) was a principal in an inner city and ethnically diverse elementary school. He now administers an elementary school in another community that is less diverse. At the time, Lindy Zaretsky (L) was a principal of an elementary school in a White, middle-class neighbourhood. Previous to this appointment, she worked in more ethnically diverse settings. She is now a superintendent of special education and leadership development.

The issue that we highlight below is one that revolves around the consequences for social justice in a context of accountability. How can principals advocate for social justice when they are responsible for overseeing accountability measures that may be unjust? The principals who took part in the conversation—Lindy, Mike and Darrin—speak about this dilemma in the context of EQAO. EQAO stands for the EducationQuality and Accountability Office. It is the branch of the Ontario Ministry of Education that is responsible for designing and managing the province-
wide mathematics and literacy tests that are written by Grade 3, Grade 6, and Grade 10 students. The Grade 10 literacy test is a high-stakes test, in that students have to pass it in order to graduate, in contrast to the Grades 3 and 6 literacy and numeracy tests, which are not. As with everything else that goes on within school walls, principals in Ontario are responsible for overseeing this tightly controlled testing enterprise. Another contextual fact relevant to the conversation is that recent government legislation removed principals and vice-principals from the teacher federations.

Principals who advocate for social justice may find themselves in a difficult position when put in the position of overseeing such tests. In this sense, they are "caught between a rock and a hard place." On one hand, they are apt to recognize the inequitable nature of the test and may oppose the idea of such testing. On the other hand, though, they are agents of an institution, and as such are responsible for ensuring that legislation is followed in their schools. So if legislation requires them to administer high-stakes, standardized tests, they are obliged to do so. This presents a dilemma for these administrators: What are they to do in these circumstances? The conversation that follows probes the issues associated with these kinds of dilemmas.

The conversation begins with Reva asking the question about how social justice looks in a context of accountability. Two interesting lines of discussion emerged. One revolved around the value of accountability procedures. Not everyone agreed that such practices were inequitable; one of us dissented. The other theme involved the ways in which principals should approach testing and accountability and other equity issues. Not all of the participants agreed on what should be done. The practitioners were decidedly practical in their orientations. Among other things, they were reluctant to pursue courses of action that would leave them without their jobs. But at the same time, they also wanted to be true to their commitment to social justice. This required that they engage in practices that simultaneously satisfied the powers-that-be and worked in the interests of the marginalized. Each of the principals had their own ways of doing this. Darrin, for example, urges that principals need to exercise a degree of patience. But he also introduces a strategy that elicited much response in our discussion—subversion. Lindy took issue with the idea of subversion. For her, it was a dishonest way of doing one's job. Mike, on the other hand, felt that principals needed to act strategically rather than subversively. Eventually, though, the practitioners came to more-or-less agree that their respective approaches could be categorized as "creative compliance." Throughout the conversation they describe how they creatively comply
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with institutional policies and practices in their day-to-day practices.

The Conversation

R: How does social justice look different in a context of accountability? And what does that mean then … for thinking about continuity [sustaining social justice practices when schools change administrators]. I'd really like to hear what the three of you [Darrin, Lindy and Mike] have to say about that.

L: I promise not to pounce on it. [laughing]

D: I wanted to go, I'm not sure where my answers to your question are; I think it's somehow connected with what John was talking about [a lack of support for social justice initiatives]. But you have to be a bit subversive because as much as you have to include everyone, when you include too many opinions that might really not have a sound quality, you end up diluting the answer for our children, whatever that might be.

JR: What is subversive?

R: I still want to hear what social justice is in the sense of accountability in the context of accountability.

D: I think working within your framework, I mean, you deal with EQAO, where you know that this is part of the thing you have to do and you look at ways to make sure that your children [do well]. And all principals do that, and also look after their kids because they know that some are going to suffer through those. So you look at ways to support them and deal with them as best they can to get through it.

L: Okay. So that's social justice and leadership. And EQAO is a great example. I don't want them to suffer and I do want them to get through the best way they can. So in that sense, there's benefits to the accountability context. I want our teaching to be so great and inclusive and aware of different kinds of multiple literacies. So looking at an EQAO passage, what's exclusive about that language? What kids do we know have never had the experiences of that language? How do we give it to them so they're going to achieve as well if not better than everybody else there? So in other words, I'm going to use it in a different way when I'm defining my leadership and social justice. You can't keep saying, because it's coming at
you every year, this is unfair, it’s culturally not representative of language, on and on and on. Okay, then let’s do something about it so those kids perform, and it’s no longer a barrier to their success or to programs or to college and university, but it’s about our responsibility to teach those experiences so all kids can succeed, and remove that barrier.

M: Yes, it’s about equality of outcome; it’s not about equal treatment. We know within all of our schools that kids need differentiated support whether it’s in learning, whether it’s in their own social development, their moral development. And I think we do that on an ongoing basis. And I think that by doing that, we invert this, we take back accountability onto ourselves. We know that with EQAO, we know that if we can build a school environment and culture that is just, that is, inclusive, where kids have agency, they can impact on their own learning, I think, by extension, they will do well on EQAO. It’s not a matter of teaching to the test; it’s embedding those things that we believe in that school, and we come to that belief through our academic training. And as well, with this discourse with our community around what does social justice look like at our school? How do you continue to keep that discussion alive at school council? So that when you receive those left-fielded questions, “We want to do this,” okay, well we’re going to take that good citizen and good parent, we’re going to take it back to what we believe, and we are going to judge that in relationship to what we believe social justice looks like and what we value in this school. And you know, when I have a tough issue, I go back to well, does this fit with what we believe? If it doesn’t fit, then I have no difficulty saying to whoever is making that request. If we can get to that, fine. But we need to differentiate within what we believe.

JR: So what you’re saying is that there are ways of getting around these culturally biased standards tests?

L: Not getting around, going right through them. So it’s not, you know, that linguistically they’re not proficient enough. I think without the accountability context, that gave us an excuse to exempt certain students who become invisible … who could have participated but many of whom we too quickly assess differently; or the B is not a real B. Same with many special education students. And now that accountability context has allowed us to work with teachers and say, “Let’s go right through that and include many who were excluded from the assessment.”
J: Yes, but at the same time, the accountability discourse has pushed us also to reproduce privileged norms. Now I’m not—

L: Deal with the tensions and change them. I think it allows me to—

R: But if we’re going to—I mean, what I heard both you and Mike say was that we’re in an era of the EQAO, and if we accept as a baseline that EQAO is here to stay, then are we not just continuing to support it?

D: I’m just sitting back listening to everyone’s conversation. And it comes back to what John said earlier that we’re, and myself included, talking about one idea of success for our students. And I guess, I look at it too, I spent a long time talking to the parents in the community which I serve, and they are marginalized. And for us to tell them their children are smart, they’re living in a society which tells them implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that their future doesn’t hold much. So for me, part of the success is getting past EQAO, is getting these kids to realize that they do count as people. So whether they do well on the EQAO or not, or they do well—to provide some sort of an idea where they are and to give them some sort of hope. And then the parents need that too. Because you can’t expect a 7- or 8-year-old to have a broader understanding of the world if their parent does not have hope for their own child.

JR: You know, I’m just astounded these days that many have come to accept the measures on these standardized tests as a true measurement of the child’s worth and their academic achievement. And it is becoming more and more pervasive, and I’m just wondering—

L: Can I put a different spin on that? [JR: Sure.] I don’t know if it’s any more pervasive. We had much more standardized testing while growing up. That it’s public knowledge with rankings published does make us accountable in a socially just way. Before, we didn’t have to talk about it, we just had our insular school practices where we excluded in all these ways, hidden, much more hidden. At least it’s overt; EQAO is a tamer kind of standardized testing in Canada as far as I’m concerned. So I don’t think it’s more pervasive, it’s just out there now. And I’m glad because now we can talk social justice and equity and everything else; we just never spoke about it thirty years ago.
R: Yeah, I know, I mean, I worry about it because, well, I don’t know if you’ve heard any of these sessions at AERA [American Education Research Association Conference], but listening to the experience in the US and the UK.

J: We do have high-stakes testing in Ontario.

M: There’s an exit out of it though.

R: Yeah, but it’s, you talked about, Mike, you talk about a solution, it’s very much the solution. I mean, when you look particularly at Britain and the way that kids are being streamed, and you know all about this because you’ve been there, all right, and the way the kids are streamed into classes. And what the data is showing is that particularly working-class kids are overrepresented in the lower categories, and kids who are Black, and Pakistani, and Bangladeshi, are way overrepresented in those categories. So I mean—

L: This puts different pressure on principals too. I interviewed several principals in one particular state a few years ago who spoke at length about “No Child Left Behind” and the submission of their Annual Yearly Progress reports. Those numbers mean something. Many spoke about demonstrating improvements or else. “You’re out and your teachers are out.” They felt it similar to the British model. [M: Right.] We aren’t here, nor do I think we will go there. So I’m an optimist which is why I’m staying in the field and working with you for a number of years. [laughing] But it is different here. Their pressure is different, so their numbers promote the streaming. I asked several of them, how do you define inclusive education? And it was specific to Special Education. A typical response was that they include all students except those with severe autism and behaviour. They move them into “central education centres” because they were only allowed at that time to exclude 1% or so of their students with what they called “severe disabilities.” They may have had many more in special classes who were then going to bring down their scores as those scores were not disaggregated. So your school looks like a “nonperforming” school. I don’t think we have that pressure but somebody disagree with me. I don’t feel that pressure to exclude. I don’t feel it from my system. I remain focused on figuring out how all students can achieve academic excellence and equity in high-quality programming.
M: I think we’ve made some inroads at secondary, at least with the EQAO, with the test of reading and writing, by the acceptance now that there are other ways of demonstrating literacy and it’s not just solely through the tests, that there are venues where kids who have been unsuccessful through semester-long programs, to demonstrate different ways of knowing. And I think that that’s encouraging because I think it is a step back from, you know, the edge of the cliff on this all-knowing. The Grade 9 mathematics test EQAO is tied directly to the curriculum; it’s delivered in that semester, that year. And I think it’s more authentic given that part of that mark can be used in assessing that child and in reporting on their progress in that curriculum, over what they’re doing on a yearly basis. What always surprised me when we first started it was having kids who were passing Grade 9 Math, failing EQAO Math, supposedly measuring the same things, or vice versa. So you know, that’s problematic to me. And again, I think we need to take back this accountability agenda, and I think we can do it through social justice. Because I think that’s the power of public education.

JR: Okay, how do we do it?

M: How do we do it? I think you do it by having leadership in the schools that understand the context within which they work, they understand the complexities that children bring to schools every day, leadership that is brave enough to take individual and also collective positions. I go back to defining our practice. And really being truly known as a profession. We’d be hard pressed to define practice, you know? Are we about instruction? What is good instruction? What does success look like for all kids? And I think that until we have a clear understanding of our practice, then we, no one’s going to listen to us, you know, in terms of any kind of social organization. If we cannot be seen to be together and know what we’re about and be able to articulate it, then why would anyone listen?

L: I’d like to say that if they’re listening it’s because you can invite in different publishers, for example, there are math textbooks written by wonderful curriculum instructors, including a principal colleague of mine who wrote a math book that included representation from different cultures where all kids could see images of themselves. For instance, a concept of probability was introduced through games from different cultures in a much more integrated and deep way through learning with and from each other. Accountability has really always been here. It’s just way out there
now in terms of visibility. I guess that’s the word. So I’m just going to keep saying, the accountability context to me isn’t evil, it absolutely provides the tensions we all need to experience in order to ask the critical questions in responsible ways, not to make anyone feel, “Uh-oh, as a leader I may be experiencing racism in my school.” It gives permission to say, “How do I begin to ask the questions with my staff that would begin the discussion around racism?” That’s what we need to begin doing in preparation programs for principals but we have to position it within an accountability context. And that’s not a bad thing at all.

J: But I disagree on that one. I want to distinguish between an accountability and a responsibility agenda. [L: Okay.] I am all for a responsibility agenda, and the distinction I keep on making is the one between simply accounting externally what one does (whether it is through standardized testing or submitting a report) and actually doing one’s work in a responsible manner. The act of accounting does not necessarily include responsibility. For example, the fact that I have accounted what I have done in no way does it imply or mean that I am doing my work responsibly. The popular view of accountability assumes that if one passes a standardized test—which by definition only represents a limited view of things—then one has learned. This is an outright fallacy!

L: See, this is what we should have put down to define accountability. And take it a step further and say provide evidence.

J: Well, of course. But this discourse of accountability within a narrow liberal agenda is one that is concerned with accounting, and not with genuine responsibility in the ethical sense and in the power sense that takes into account who is privileged and who is marginalized. Right? I mean, if we are going to account by using the EQAO high-stakes testing which is based on the notion of standardization (that is, one size fits all), then we have to come back and ask the question: Which standard is the EQAO using? Which standard is the high-stakes testing using? Whose view of knowledge is privileged and whose view is excluded or marginalized? And from the research that has been done, it shows that the standard that is used is one that privileges White middle-class norms. There are hundreds of testimonies of people who feel marginalized in our schools. And this is not new. Sociologists of education have thoroughly documented this in the last 40 years. Right? So then I come back to the question, do I include everyone in the same way? No, I cannot include everyone in the same way,
because people are not included in the same way. So when I am working within schools and working with communities, I have to ask this very difficult question, right? And if I were a principal or a vice-principal in a school, I think I will have a heart attack or whatever. Okay? Because of all the tensions that this causes. And the question is who do I privilege within the schools? And do I keep on doing things which privilege the same kind of people? And this is a very difficult question. And so what I’m arguing for is that from an equity social justice perspective, and to be responsible in administration, we need to work from some form of affirmative action of some way. Whether it is affirmative action applied to curriculum issues or to hiring or to programs that are needed, and so on and so forth. We cannot, I think, I may be wrong, but we cannot assume that we have a meritocracy. We cannot assume that we are starting the race from the same place. Now another point I wanted to make and I will make a very strong statement here, and then I want to give an anecdote from my own self to explain it. I think it is immoral not to show and not to talk about inequities that the EQAO and high-stakes testing are creating. It is immoral not to show the inequities coming from this. Now let me be clear. I’m not arguing—[L: I’m still in agreement.] I’m not arguing that therefore we should not [L: I’m not covering it up.] prepare for the EQAO testing. Once we have them, unfortunately we have to prepare them. But I think we need to do two things at the same time. I think we need to prepare them because if we don’t prepare them they would fail. But at the same time, we have to protest and voice our disagreement and show the inequities that these things do. [L: We’re all on the same page.] Right? I mean, I learned my lessons. And this is my anecdote. I was brought up in a very small village of about 2,000 people, and I spoke a dialect in the village. But in school, they somehow taught me in some way that if I’m going to go for an interview for a job, or if I’m going to go for an interview to be admitted to the university, if I speak the dialect I may never get the job or whatever. So continuously there are these two levels. And Lisa Delpit talks about this.¹ Right? Continuously. So we need to do these two things at the same time, but doing these two things at the same time I think creates lots of tensions.

L: But I think you’re more successful doing these two things at the same time. You can still be asking the questions. If you absolutely reject everything else, you’re gone. So I’m, won’t be able to have the power to do the work that you’re talking about if I don’t do it. So nobody is going to accept either/or arguments anymore. Okay, well, I’m going to reject
all this and nobody in my school is going to write the test. Or I see the inequities in the testing, we’ll talk about the injustices of EQAO but we’re still going to do it. But we are also going to talk about the kids for whom there is inequity through their participation? Unless we’re doing this in a responsible and responsive way we could lose our jobs. And I don’t want to lose my job because I think I can advance social justice and leadership by either getting a really good understanding of what all the players are thinking and doing and being aware of the injustices, and monitoring the tensions about how much of this injustice I can table today. I gave Jim one that I’ve been dealing with within my own fairly affluent school community. Many wonderful mothers are very involved in fundraising efforts in the school. However, for one particular dinner dance fundraiser, I felt the price set for tickets was out of reach for many community members. So I raised the whole notion of “privilege” at a School Council meeting which didn’t go over very well at the beginning. I offended many who translated that into that I was calling them exclusive in their practices. It took several weeks of healing of very hurt feelings. But we worked through it.

J: I mean, I’m not saying that we have to take a bulldozer approach. Yet we need to be explicit and state the injustice of some policies. And, of course, even in the university context, this has led me to be marginalized on some things. And by saying this I do not mean to hide my privilege as a university professor.

M: I think there’s a couple of things there that come up for me. One of them is that often in these kinds of discussions there is a sort of feeling that there is a right way of doing things. And then, I don’t think that any of us believes that. And I think that what we need to reiterate in lots of ways is that we need all of those different kinds of strategies out there. We need people like you, John, who are going to walk right up to the dean and say this is not right. And we also need people like Lindy who are going to say, “Now, okay, and what about this?” You know? So I think we need all the strategies. I think, though, that if we, one of the things that we do have to also sort of stand back and look at is that it’s not just that we’re in an era of accountability and EQAO, it is the neo-liberal agenda that John is talking about, and that goes beyond just accountability and EQAO and it pushes this kind of notion of social cohesion, which makes the kind of conversation you wanted to have, Lindy, harder because under that umbrella and the question of racism in the schools, too, Jim, because under that umbrella of social cohesion what we’ve got to try and do is
create harmony, right? We have to keep everybody working together in nice ways and so we have the Safe Schools Acts and we have Character Education programs that value obedience over all. You know? [laughing] And those things don’t get talked about, I don’t think, in the same kinds of ways. And they don’t get, and they’re not understood in the same kinds of ways, publicly. That I think yeah, maybe accountability, we can push in a particular kind of direction. But I think some of this other stuff just sort of sits under the radar.

D: Yeah. I agree with what you were saying. I have to pounce on John a bit. [J: That’s okay.] [laughter] Because I think we have to be patient up to a point, practically within the school. Because we would get replaced. And I think [L: With more obedient principals.] [M: Yes, more obedient principals, really.] No, absolutely. So some way of finding a way to subvert and keep listening to the research out there, combined with our knowledge of our community and with our system, to try and put it all together with a specific package that fits our school.

L: But not through subversion. I hate that word.

JR: Why do you hate it?

L: If you’re subverting you’re saying it needs to be hidden, or you need to manipulate it in such a way that you’re tricking people. We have to be honest about needing to move the agenda forward. I’m very excited through my next position to be designing modules in preparation programs that embed issues of diversity and equity throughout modules so we can promote the asking of critical questions in responsible ways not to offend or make them so fearful of their present behaviours and actions that their ears are shut with, “This is too hot an issue to discuss.” So let’s temper it. They are hot issues but there are ways in which to work with vice-principals and principals and to pose critical questions about being racist or experiencing racism in their schools without offending them. It’s so tenuous. And that’s where we are currently.

M: I think that you need to set the conditions under which people can look deeply and openly at themselves in the contexts within which they work. And I think that we need to act strategically, as opposed to subversively. And I act in a very intentional manner, you know? Make no mistake about it, we’re going this way. And we will not in any way subvert the legislation
that exists in this country or in this province, or the policy of this school board, in terms of promoting inclusion. [L: Right.] So don’t go there. How we construct our own understanding of social justice, we are going to do together. And some of us are going to get to it more easily than others. And we’re going to have to follow the contour of where our staffs are at. And that takes us right back to the first question we contemplated here, around leadership and succession. You know? When either you or I could be transported into a school where there’s a total disconnect between what we believe and what this school has collectively committed to. But I think you have to continue to set those conditions. And I’m not a very patient person. I am strategic. But every kid that I’m overly patient with is a kid who is currently in a system that’s not inclusive, where they can’t see themselves reflected in the curriculum. So there is that dynamic tension between the urgency that I feel to deal with those kids that are in front of us every day and the long term but I think that’s ever been the case. And we talked about leadership that currently exists and the type of leadership we need to have. We need to understand that there are people in the system that are all along these spectrums, or this continuum. And how do we move people over? I think that’s the big challenge around principal and leadership preparation. And when we’re rapidly promoting internal candidates who have scant understanding of what they may engage in leadership roles in your board and my board, because they’re geographically so huge and because you can go from an urban to a suburban to a rural setting, you could just, you know, you could have even been raised within that district and have been on a farm. Yet you become a teacher or a leader in a school that’s urban [L: That’s right.] that has all the complexity that we enjoy in our schools, and be expected to lead it forward. So. It’s a tall order. No wonder I’m a little tired some days.

L: Yeah. [laughing] Give ourselves a pat on the back there.

JR: I’m wondering if any of you three have any examples, concrete examples about how you, I won’t use the word subvert, but how you question the system, how you— [R: How you are strategic.] How you are strategic. Can you think of any examples of these things?

L: In the broader system? [JR: Um hmm, yeah.] I do a lot of inviting. So whether it’s joining my school council with other schools’ councils, it’s that lateral capacity-building strategy, although I don’t want to risk overuse of that expression that it just becomes rhetoric and the next buzzword. Or
inviting system people in to participate in a school event such as one we
hosted for students only, entitled Promoting Adolescent Health. We did
this because we had numerous students dealing with significant challenges
like eating disorders, cutting, and drug use in our elementary school. These
were high-achieving students with parents who had high expectations for
their children. It was a way to connect with community agencies and other
partners and also helped move the "social justice" agenda forward. We
confronted in a proactive way some sensitive issues that needed addressing.
It was a big eye-opener.

D: I guess coming to the school that I went to, I’m at now, there has been
a way of doing things for a number of years. We have fourteen people on
our admin team. And we spent many weeks and hours talking about how
we’d been included or not included in our own lives, even though most
of us are White. So we developed awareness that way. Then we applied it
to the school and then we looked at the things we did as a school, and the
kids that weren’t. So as opposed to being subversive, strategic, whatever,
we looked at our own school practices, now, not just with one pair of eyes
but fourteen, and looked at things like translators. What do the books look
like? And we aligned our budget to issues of equity because now we had
all these different eyes. And it was, I’ve learned so much from being here.
And it was funny, I was like a page ahead of the kids. I’d get something
from John’s class, a question, and I’d bring it back and we’d talk about it
in admin team.

L: Sort of like advocacy.

D: So now we have fourteen and it’s converted but it’s slow, it’s a slow
growing. [L: Good.] But we look at it much differently and the school is
much different now than it was two and a half years ago.

M: Yeah, that’s an interesting starting point for me when you talk about
budget. Because, you know, in any organization, if you chase the money,
you’ll see what they believe in, as opposed to what they talk about. You
know, in talking about money and how we tried to use money to drive
us forward, I had all my department heads and all my vice-principals
and School Success team training as facilitators. So we use the focus of
conversation methodology every time we meet together on big issues.
You know, what does social justice and equity look like at our school?
So we use the same format with the staff, with the kids, with the parent
community. And then we can capture it and collate it all in the same form. And we just continue to feed it into this loop. And you know, I think, we're talking today with one of my vice-principals around EQAO results which we received, and the whole notion of data logic, it's only data until you start asking questions around it. What are we going to do with this? What's it going to look like and how are we going to build this Math day PD? We know that our kids do as the rest of the kids in the province do—the kids of privilege do better than the other ones. We know that we do a better job around writing tasks than we do around reading. We know that our school goal, what it is to reduce kids below norms by 10%. So how we tied our school goal around student success into the work that we want to do on literacy? And how do we embed it and how do we use the work around instructional improvement, you know, backward design for planning. How do we use Marzano's² work around background knowledge? We talked about that. Our kids come with a different background knowledge than they are going to engage in their new learning in this curriculum. So how do you mitigate that? So how do you bring this into, you know, not strict alignment, but how does one support the other, focused on this goal of inclusion and our kids doing better across that dimension and every other dimension of what we do in the school? So I think there really has to be, you start from what you believe and then there has to be an intentionality to support it with money, resources, and professional development. And you know, I think, from a strategic standpoint, I'm a pretty nervy principal, you know, I design my timetable to give my staff 100 minutes every week with no kids there, where we work professionally and intensely, where we value the intellect and the professionalism of people on staff. Because you can't say it's social justice and equity for one group in the school, when it's not for the other. So we talk about, you know, schools as hospitable places for adult learning, and by extension they will be for student learning. And if you don't have hospitable places for adult learning, it's not going to occur. So that's the way we've tried to do it. And you know, I had the public support for it, so it kind of makes me a little bulletproof within the District. I just say, call it a pilot, and I can move forward.

L: I'm staring at him. I want to know how he does that timetabling. I'll be calling him up.

M: I did three hours of professional time in my last school.

J: It shows me the examples of subversion.
L: Why? There's no subversion in it. I think he's saying something else. I don't think that's what it is. Yeah.

M: I try all kinds of interesting concepts, unstructured instructional time, I just look for solutions. And it's not subversion with me.

J: To me it sounds like subversion.

L: No, because if you give teachers that time, you're going to have instructional improvement. [M: Well, it's—] You've said we value your professional talk. So there's no subversion there. That's why I'm looking at it and say—

M: No, and it's reciprocity. If I give them time and training and the opportunity to learn together and to use data to inform their practice, focus on student success, then I can reasonably expect that they do that work. And they feel good about themselves, you know, again, it inverts it. You know, I believe that they're quite bright people and they're quite professional. As opposed to people saying, "Ah, they're lazy, they're slack-asses."

L: We're not university professors, you know, giving them the PD. No, I'm kidding. [laughter] But you're developing the expertise from within.

L: No, but you're saying to teachers, you're researchers, you're researching your own practice and you're generating your own theories and building knowledge within— That's really powerful. So there's nothing subversive about that.

JR: How did you do this?

R: The subversion is in the timetabling.

L: No, because I don't think he's taken away any instructional time from kids.

M: No, in fact, we still work on our little Carnegie unit of about ten hours, in fact we exceed it. But because over time, I've been able to establish some level of credibility with the union, with the upper administration, my school day is actually 11 minutes longer each day, to accommodate my Wednesday mornings. My concession is that we don't have a staff
meeting, a traditional staff meeting, outside the school day, we have it on one of the Wednesdays. [L: Creative compliance.] So—

R: Okay, call it creative compliance.

J: These are different meanings, there are different meanings of subversion. [L laughing]

R: But that’s different connotations, people have different connotations.

M: People should ask me questions about what I use that time for. [J: I’m not afraid of subversion.] If I can’t answer that, then they shouldn’t grant me the time. [R: Right, right.]

J: He’s doing it in a quiet way. This is what I mean by subversion. And so did you, I think [indicating Darrin].

JR: What do we mean by subversion? What do we mean by subversion? What is subversion? What is it?

L: I guess I look at it as, you know, this fundamental disagreement with something and then I’m going to find a way around that and circumvent it and do my own thing. Again, in an organizational entity, I think I can move forward with dealing with the constraints and tensions of something that’s bothering me and moving through it. But I don’t have to be, you know, secretly moving about, and yeah, that manipulation tactic. There’s a tactic.

M: My day is eleven minutes longer than it should be. Is that subversion?

L: I don’t think there’d be a parent in the community that would protest that.

M: But you know, and people would say to me at this particular school and my last school, you know, “What do the parents say about you letting the kids sleep in?” I said, “It’s never been my expectation that they sleep in. They all have meaningful things they could be doing.” And even at my last school, it was even more severe because every Grade 11 was compelled to do a service program. So on those Wednesday mornings
they did their service in the community and that played so well in my community where the ethnicity wouldn’t allow a lot of parents to allow their daughters or their sons to be out in the evenings. So a lot of the work, they worked in 88 different agencies in my community, from schools to daycares to everything, in a protected environment. So again, it’s how do you complement everything that you’re trying to do with this structure? The structures are only structures. I can give that 100 minutes to people and they’d squander it, you know, they’d talk about the hockey scores if hockey was still on. I think it’s around meaningful work, where they collaborate around student performance data. How are kids doing? Why are Eva’s kids doing better than Jennifer’s kids and my kids? And it’s not around “I gotcha.” It’s around how can we have common assessments that give us back control of accountability. How do we have kids who believe in writing, the kids are writing to common prompts, where we sit down and we establish what are the writing skills in our school, like what does a Level 3 look like to Reva, to Jim, and to Mike? So again, it’s teachers collaborating around real work. And I think that that’s where it becomes embedded.

R: Darrin, you were the one who brought up subversion to begin with. How do you understand it?

D: I guess similar to Lindy’s definition. [JR: The good one or the bad one?] I’m not sure; I think she’s sitting on the fence. [laughter]

J: Which is a very uncomfortable way of sitting.

D: I think you have to distinguish between subversion and noncompliance. We’re compliant but— [L: Creative compliance.] Creative noncompliance, yeah. [L: No, creative compliance.]

J: So we’re trying to standardize subversion right now. [laughter]

L: Insubordination or any of those.

D: Insubordination, no, you can get fired for that. Subversion, you can just say, “Oh, I didn’t know it was that important.” I haven’t answered in all of this, anything.

L: You just tried to avoid it.
D: I guess I would look at it as a creative, positive for kids. You might dodge it a bit, in hockey it might be a deke, you’ll still be on the same set of ice, still on the surface. But I think all principals do that. [J: Do what?] They deke a bit. [laughter]

J: I believe that this notion of compliance, standardization is contradictory with social justice and equity. I don’t want us to go the route of so many ready-made curricula. You know, in times of difficulty we buy these off-the-shelf solutions. Character Education, boom, we got it. Virtue Education, we got it.

L: After school remedial programs, or you know, catch-up stuff.

JR: I knew of an administrator who dealt with finances. And the person who succeeded her in the position was a rule follower, followed the rules to the button. This person, the rule follower, said her predecessor didn’t do her job properly because she didn’t follow the rules. And according to her successor, if she got audited, supposedly, she would have got fired or she would have got in trouble. I really didn’t look at things that way. I saw her as really being able to understand the spirit of the rules, the spirit of the principles involved. And she could do her job on the basis of that and mostly everyone was happy. The work of the department got done better; people were able to accomplish what they needed to accomplish. This contrasted with the rule follower, who really constrained the ways in which people could do their jobs, and in my view, obstructed the ways. They had shackles on. And so I’m wondering if this is an appropriate analogy for you know, subversion or not. Is that subversion or not?

L: It’s perfect. Well, my husband is an accountant and he would say there’s creative accounting principles. Is it subversive? Well, it’s to certainly benefit and allow you more freedom to do what you can do best without being illegal or subversive, necessarily. So I think it’s a great analogy. I think it’s just allowing us some more creativity; it’s about bringing that accountability back locally. I like that one. Same with you. You’re responsible individuals, you’re full of integrity, you’re not going to violate all these financial rules, you know, not just for personal gain, and you’re thinking of each other, and what’s best. But there will always be rule followers. It’s easier. You don’t have to critically think about things. I dole out the same to you, to you, to you, that’s equity. We know it isn’t.
M: Yes, and the old line at Suburban School District used to be, "Suburban School District never met a regulation they didn't like." [laughter] And then they have principals like me who just— My argument is always what's in the best interest of these kids. And if anyone should ask me, "Well, what's in the best interest of those kids? Can you explain that to me? Can you explain why, you know, your school day looks the way it does? And why you do the things that you do?" Well, if I can't answer those questions, then I shouldn't be doing it.

J: The difficulty of course, and this is back to the whole issue of success, it's like success, and I'm not against the notion of the best interests of students. But the fact of the matter is that in practice people have different notions of what is in the best interest of the students.

L: I raise that with any Special Education IPRC meeting. You know, everybody there says "Well I have the best interests of the student—" But the ends look very different. You know? In terms of—

J: My view is that if we take democracy seriously, what follows is that we should allow for alternative conceptions of what is in the best interest of students to operate at the same time. [L: Yes.] [R: Right.] But standardization, by definition, actually works against that because it is saying there is only one concept of what is in the best interests of the students. And either that, [R: That's right.] And that is the problem I find with—

L: And I am in agreement with that.

J: That's why I think standardization is immoral—

L: What we do with that also is at least introduce language that indicates, "Here's the standard, here's the benchmark, if you don't meet it, you're not deviant."

J: I'm sorry to interrupt. There may be different benchmarks, not just one benchmark. Right?

L: I agree. And I'll pose the question, has school ever not been stratified. Nobody's ever introduced another way of schooling, have they? [R: Yes.]
J: Well, schooling is only as we know it now, compulsory schooling is only 120 years old. That's nothing in comparison to the history of humanity. [R: That's right.] But we assume, or at least, popular discourse assumes that this is the only way how to do it.

M: Yes. No, I was just going to say that you know, the lines, the argument around targets, are targets inherently a bad thing? Or who sets the targets, and I guess that's what we're talking about here. But I've got to excuse myself. I wanted to thank everyone for allowing me in. Again, I introduced another notion when you were out, about suffering from premature clarity. Once again, I have and I've been brought back to reality. So I don't know the debate, I don't know it as clearly as I—I got to take that admission to my staff: I've been suffering from premature clarity. After they all stop laughing, and again, I think it speaks to what we've been talking about. Because everyone is at a different point of understanding and a different readiness to engage their own feelings and who they are from the standpoint of how racist we all are and how much we've supported systems that preclude inclusion and that foster exclusion. But again, you have to keep looking through those lenses; you have to keep doing that reflective component.

J: I wrote down here, the examples you've been giving was again showing me that there is no one standard way of doing equity and social justice. That is obvious.

L: So what we need are tons and tons of examples.

J: Yeah, that's why I use those examples and case studies.

L: That gives us a great deal of clarity. Let's go and visit him.

JR: And see what happens at his school.

M: Every day and every time I have an opportunity to speak with people and to engage in deep discourse, I mean, it helps my own learning.

R: That's the piece that I wanted to pick up on too, Mike, is that it's not just about going and seeing examples. It's really a lot of it is dialoguing; you've [indicating Darrin] heard me saying way too much about that over the last year.
L: But you need to talk about the practice [J: But learning is social protest.] I do, I think social justice theory has moved us to that point that the talk has to be focused on the practice. So give us examples that will help us lead in more socially just ways. I’m not going to replicate, but I need that knowledge.

R: We’re trying. But it’s to move past what’s already been done, too. To say, “Oh yeah, no, that was really good what you did there, Mike [L: Yeah, but have you thought about—] but have you thought about this piece that Darrin has thought about? And how do we put that together with what you’ve done.”

L: Yeah, I think we’re just at the beginning of finding this guy and others. I keep reading because it’s my new project. So I’m going to the social justice literature and everybody keeps telling me what we need to do next. It is there. We haven’t yet gone to the voices and said, “How do you do it? How do you enact social justice in practice?” I don’t think we have enough examples, I don’t think we’ve talked to nearly enough principals. I can’t find it in the literature. So keep doing your work.

R: It’s coming. [L: Yes, it is.]

J: But the exciting part for me becomes when there are the examples and we analyze and discuss and there are disagreements.

M: I need to test out my thinking. I don’t mind being proven wrong or, because that’s where the clarity comes from.

JR: And the critical dialogues like this, yes, we all learn from them.

L: Yes, and principals getting together.

M: No, that’s why you need to change those contexts as well, so we can work together. You know, I was, when I opened this school with another principal, that’s unheard of, for a year. So the next new school, Jan was with me. On a daily basis we would engage in these kinds of discussions. Richard is opening the next new school; he’s with Pam. So again, we start to challenge things.

J: The question for me is, I mean, the fact that principals get only this
little bit, right, it is—

L: And I'm a single administrator, unto myself.

J: Yes, for me that is a form of oppression that the system creates. And then we need to ask why does that happen? And one answer is it happens because of the neo-liberal agenda.

The Reactions

Mike

As I reflected on the conversation I was struck by the passion and commitment of the participants to social justice in a time of accountability. The struggle as expressed by the discussants is one of compliance vs. doing the right things to support student learning. The right thing for me is ensuring environments in schools are inclusive—where curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment and evaluation instruments are reflective and appreciative of the diversity of the students in our schools. Educational reform speaks loudly about inclusion and diversity, but the disconnect between what is stated and what actually occurs is problematic for me, as I believe it is for other administrators. Much of our conversation was taken up with discussion about social justice almost as a subversive activity as we work in a system that has a narrow view of what constitutes student success. The problem is that these accountability strategies, as in the case of EQAO, use a very narrow measure. This results in blind standardization and the further disenfranchisement of students who are already disenfranchised. There needs to be greater administrator and teacher advocacy about what constitutes accountability in the public school, which begs the big question of the goals of public education. Notwithstanding this dilemma, the school leaders who were involved in the conversation continue to build coalitions of support within their schools and communities that allow them to mitigate the negative impact of external accountability measures. Among other things, they and their teachers are building inclusive and democratic classrooms where instruction is differentiated to appreciate individual abilities of students and provide multiple and varied opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do. The conversation demonstrates that passionate and committed leaders do exist, who possess the resolve to continue to work towards the promotion of social justice in this time of accountability. The question remains: Are there enough of these types of leaders willing to lead the necessary discourse so that social justice spreads across whole systems?
Darrin

The discussion further broadened my understanding of the hidden barriers in our system that prevent us as educators from meeting all our students' needs. Having the discussion with practising administrators and academic researchers allows for a certain tension in the room in that the conclusions are rarely "this or that." Leaving the discussion, I know my understanding is clearer and more representative of the "big picture." A crucial component involved with all discussions is that all of us in that room are on a continuum of understanding the system. If we stop asking questions or believe that we have all the answers then we will be left behind. The reality is that while we will never achieve a perfectly clear understanding, we can nevertheless enhance our perception and knowledge considerably.

Reva

What strikes me is that we didn't engage in dialogue in the way that I thought we would. As Jim said later, John, Jim, and I acted as interrogators. I believe we did this in part because we are all interested in hearing from our colleagues in the field and in part because we feel we have a number of ways to make ourselves heard (journals, conferences, our own classrooms). But the downside is we didn't engage in the kind of deep conversation that might have forced us to examine some of our own preconceptions. John engaged in more of this than Jim or I but still it was a minor part of the exchange. Perhaps it was too early in the process. Towards the end of the conversation we noted that the way forward was to bring our various insights together and to look critically at what is happening in the name of social justice. Perhaps that will be the starting point for the next conversation.

John

Neo-liberalism is one of the strongest influencing factors on current educational policy, leadership, and practice. Taking the traditional liberal notions of freedom and individual rights to an extreme, it has overemphasized marketization, competition, a narrow notion of accountability, and efficiency. Mainstream thinking has accepted the neo-liberal discourse as the "natural human condition." As such, this dominant ideology has hijacked the meaning of "democracy," "accountability," "standards," "equality," "efficiency," and "school improvement." Democracy is confused with individual choice. Accountability is reduced to a mechanical and superficial form of keeping track of what we do.
Assuming meritocracy, standards have been equated with standardization. Equality is conflated with sameness and equality of opportunity. Efficiency is conceived as an end in itself rather than as a means, and hence, as Janice Stein concluded, has turned into a cult. And, notions of success that flow from the aims of neo-liberalism, as if these aims are uncontested and the only plausible ones to achieve, have primarily guided popular notions of school improvement. As such, an open consideration of controversial issues, responsibility, equity, and diversity have been marginalized.

Neo-liberal discourse is very seductive and alienating, and educators genuinely interested in social justice, diversity, and equity need to take heed of its daily normalizing force. It presents itself as "neutral" and hence it is expected to be consistent with any other set of beliefs. However, in fact, this is not the case. The values associated with the neo-liberal and extreme capitalist agenda are inconsistent with a critical-democratic notion of social justice. We need to be aware of the contradictions and the tensions the neo-liberal condition creates. In the dialogue, Darrin, Lindy, and Mike identified several of these tensions and contradictions. I fully sympathize with the unenviable predicament they find themselves in—predicaments which are also common in the university context. Leadership informed by critical democracy realizes the importance of identifying these contradictions and developing ways of dealing with them. I realize that there are times when it may be counterproductive to outright object to systemic inequities without careful and creative activism. But critical educators in the field have also taught me that there are times when it is very ethically plausible to positively subvert (turn against, which is the root meaning of the term) and meaningfully resist current inequitable and unjust structures and policies. It is amazing that the massive empirical evidence produced by sociologists of education in the last 40 years—identifying the inequities of standardization policies and practices, deficit mentality, the reproduction of inequities through liberal aims—have been completely disregarded by proponents of neo-liberalism!

Of course we should evaluate what we do, aim for high standards for all, and improve our schools. The real substantive issues include: Whose notion of evaluation? Whose standards? Whose notion of success? By definition, standardization (which takes different forms, including standardized testing, standardized curricula, etc.) is intrinsically exclusionary. It restricts possibilities that are not considered "normal". Critical-democratic leadership calls for a moral responsibility to weave through the tensions and at the same time open as many possibilities as we can—even if at times this involves elements of subversion and resistance.
This will be a qualitatively different kind of school improvement than what is popularly promulgated. The principals in the dialogue provided some good examples of this improvement. I hope we will have another opportunity to continue this conversation.

Jim

The thing that struck me the most about the conversation were the tensions—not always apparent in the printed version above—that arose. I expected us to have an open, fruitful, and friendly conversation. After all we all were more-or-less acquainted with one another and all of us were advocates of social justice. The smooth-flowing conversation that I had envisioned, however, did not materialize. Although the conversation generally proved to be very illuminating, I had a sense that at times we were hesitant to speak up about certain issues and at other times demonstrated a certain amount of defensiveness. I concluded that these tensions were the result, at least in part, of the differences between us.

I wondered about these differences—about the nature and extent of them and the impact that they had on our dialogue. Some of the questions that I pondered included: Did we bring to the table fundamental differences in our views of social justice? Or were these differences associated more with the ways in which we saw social justice working out in particular contexts, that is, in the manner in which it was, or should be, “operationalized” in schools? Were these differences just about semantics, that is, about slight differences in the meaning we attributed to the words we used to name strategies, like subversion? Did our roles/positions in our respective institutions shape the way we thought about social justice? If so, how? Did the fact that the principals who worked in fast-paced and hierarchical organizations dictate that they approach social justice in different ways than academics who had a different stake in school practices? Did the fact that the principals were/are/would be students of the academics affect the way in which they were willing to talk about social justice? How did these differences constrain what we might have said? How did these differences enhance the conversation? Did we learn from these differences? How will these differences affect any future conversations?

Lindy

Leadership for social justice presents one of the key challenges facing educational leaders in contemporary contexts characterized by diversity and comprehensive school reform. As expectations increase
for more rigorous and demanding academic standards of achievement for all students, the progress of all must be accounted for. Quite often, the inequities experienced by disadvantaged learners are attributed to contemporary emphases in educational reforms on performance, efficiency, achievement, and assessment. To this end, the school leader’s role has become increasingly important to the improvement of inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Our current accountability context underscores the importance of training leaders in ways that will prepare them to manage and mediate the instructional needs of all students while leading their schools in increasingly diverse (yet ostensibly inclusive) contexts. I continue to argue that there is an increasing amount of data that show that when accountability systems are well thought out, they can serve to keep the focus on creating more equity in improvement of instruction and fair assessment practices for all students. When I and other principals are accounting for all students, we must continue to critically examine the growing amount of data we are charged with managing in order to uncover how inequities are being perpetuated in our schools. To succeed with diverse populations within a context of standards-based reforms, educators and administrators need to model for others how it is possible to view different forms of sociocultural capital as valued resources rather than deficits.

Externally promulgated educational ends may advance substantially different values than those typically associated with leadership and social justice. However, in my dual role as practitioner and scholar, I fundamentally disagree that this is evidence for the claim that principals can either practise social justice in their leadership practices or focus on standards of achievement and test scores as part of school improvement processes. School improvement efforts need not be positioned as a countervailing force to social justice efforts. To what end does this bifurcation serve the interests of social justice if they are positioned separately from other administrative concerns? If anything, this only serves to promote a restrictive and exclusive notion of what might reasonably constitute social justice in leadership practice. Regrettably, this denies aspiring and practising leaders the opportunities to consider how the ends of social justice may be integrated and embedded throughout elements of their professional preparation.

Endnotes

