

SCHOOL LEADERS FACE COMPLEX RACIAL ISSUES IN DIVERSE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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Educational leaders across Canada are confronting a “perfect demographic storm” (Passaris, 2012, para. 1). Educators in towns and rural-influenced cities across the country are responding to the complexities of demographic change and social diversity within their schools and communities (Hamm, 2009; Wilson-Forsberg, 2012). Bélanger and Malenfant (2005) projected, “By 2017, about one Canadian in five could be a member of a visible minority group. This contrasts with 13% in 2001 and less than 5% of the Canadian population in 1981” (p. 19). Given this emerging demographic reality across Canada, we believe educational leaders and teachers in rural communities will experience heightened anxiety while serving increasingly diverse school communities. Educational leadership is crucial for cross-cultural understandings in Canada. As Lopez (2013) reported, many teachers “do not have the confidence in their ability to work well with students, interact with parents from diverse backgrounds, and feel inadequately prepared to teach students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (p. 292).

Combating Racism: A Complex Leadership Issue in Canada

Canada’s growing ethnically-diverse population has many positive and exciting implications for the nation’s society. Having stated such, successfully meeting the specialized needs of this dynamic group of school-age children is challenging for educators. In particular, one of these needs is to provide an inclusive, safe, and welcoming school environment for every new student. Unfortunately, upon entering the school grounds, many new students face discrimination and oppression.

Racism is difficult for educators to talk about; in fact, many educators tend to completely avoid conversations on the topic (Schwartz, 2014). However, neglecting these difficult conversations does not help students or teachers gain understandings about sensitive issues, and it does nothing to disrupt stereotypical and racist viewpoints that may circulate in the school and surrounding community (Ryan, 2006; Shields, 2004). Reflecting on recent news events related to racism in Canada (MacDonald, 2015), it is apparent that racial issues continuously plague and challenge our society. Racism has not gone away and performing social justice work in Canadian schools and communities is as important today as it ever was.

To address diversity issues in socially just ways, there are many culturally responsive strategies that leaders can employ with their educational teams (Hamm & Doğurğa, 2014). One key strategy for educational leaders in diverse communities is to confront their school and community realities head-on (Knight, 2007). For example, a school leader can create, revive, or revisit the school or school district’s Inclusive Education or Diversity Plan to ensure all educators are working collaboratively toward

more inclusive practices (Boothe, 2000; Hamm & Doğurga, 2014). It is important for school leaders to learn about issues associated to rapid demographic change and diversity and search for opportunities to promote social justice dialogue, collaboration, and direct action within their schools that may invoke more understanding and appreciation of students and families who are new to Canada (Shields, 2004).

Leadership for Courageous Conversations

Building cultural leadership knowledge is crucial for principals when working with and supporting teachers who may not have experienced teaching in diverse communities (Glanz, 2006). To do so, educational leaders in Canada must be able to “Facilitate courageous and difficult conversations” (Schaffer, 2012, p. 5). In our view, face-to-face conversations are best when encouraging staff to learn more about the backgrounds of their students and families (Hamm, 2009). Equally important is for educators to fully understand themselves and their worldviews, while simultaneously learning about their own ethnic identities (Hamm, Sears, & Peck, in press; Santoro, 2009). Increasing self-knowledge helps educators appreciate the diverse worldviews and cultures of their students. Such fundamental knowledge, in turn, supports leaders in leading difficult conversations, when needed (Santoro, 2009).

Do Not Rely on Laminated Social Justice

Further, educational leaders cannot simply support laminated social justice posters (Armstrong, 2012) adorning school hallways and naively believe that racism, discrimination, and equity have been addressed. As Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell (2006) stated, “Racism hurts all of us” (p. 155). Racial issues will not be effectively confronted or overcome in our schools unless educational leaders open spaces for deeper dialogue to occur among educators and the school community. For example, school leaders should actively recruit culturally diverse representation of parents and community members on school councils and/or parent-teacher associations. During staff meetings and professional seminars, topics should include White privilege, racism, social justice, and cultural awareness. In diverse schools and communities, the topic of racism needs to become part of a perpetual conversation that teachers learn to be comfortable with. Sadly for educators, “The pain of not addressing racism is all the more dangerous particularly in educational spheres where the minds, subjectivities and futures of minoritized youth are influenced by the information present in the curriculum and in the interactions with their teachers” (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 155).

New Possibilities for Dialogue on Racism using Digital Technologies

As we have argued, with sweeping dynamic changes taking place across Canada, there is a greater need among educators for cultural and dialogical leadership. Another strategy that school leaders can use involves digital technologies to support teachers to engage further in difficult conversations about race (Hamm & Cormier, 2014). From our experience in developing and teaching an online graduate course called “Leadership in Culturally Diverse Schools,” we have observed that courageous conversations can take place between graduate student practitioners across Canada

working together in a digital learning format called *Desire2Learn (D2L)*. In this online learning management system, employed by our university, graduate students are able to engage with each other in challenging topics related to diversity, while investigating the realities in their own rapidly changing communities. By linking leadership and cultural theory directly to their practice, many of our educational leadership students have ignited courageous conversations in their schools and communities in response to the complex situations they are facing. One of the key topics in this course is how to confront racism.

School leaders in Canada who consider licensing a learning management system like *Desire2Learn* may provide additional opportunities for their staff to build an online toolkit of resources that will help them understand racial issues in Canada better. Discussion forums, like the ones in our graduate courses, can be set up where educators and leaders within districts, or even across Canada, share their diversity resources and their experiences of combatting racism in their schools and communities. This professional support system can guide and support educators while they exchange knowledge about how to effectively confront and challenge racial stereotypes and inequities in their communities. Most importantly, an online learning option through *Desire2Learn* provides educators an opportunity to communicate with other teachers and leaders from across our nation who may also be experiencing challenges associated to demographic change and diversity.

Face-to-face discussions about racism may be best, but these online conversations may be enhanced through digital technologies like *Desire2Learn* offering educational leaders another avenue with their colleagues to explore strategies for combatting racism in their schools and communities.

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