

NAVIGATING IN STORMY WATERS

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This case study examines the tensions of social justice and culturally relevant leadership. It also examines the challenges of school administration and building cohesive teams. This case engages readers in theorizing about social justice and culturally relevant school leadership as well as thinking about practical ways to make the endeavour of school leadership and administration more effective. We present the challenges faced by Arlene, a principal in her second year at a large diverse secondary school and some of her challenges building a cohesive team, dealing with the union, and within the construct of social justice leadership.

Case Description

Arlene is in her second year as principal at Yellowridge Secondary School (Yellowridge SS). Yellowridge is one of five secondary schools in Ridgecole, a growing city of over 250,000 people that is ethnically, racially, linguistically diverse. The city accurately represents the growing diversity in most of Canada's urban areas. Yellowridge SS, like the city, is very diverse. The immediate area in which the school is located could be considered middle class, with families representing many racial and ethnic groups. Most of the housing is single dwelling, with a few rental apartment buildings. The school boundary also includes a low-income community with subsidized housing. Students from the low-income community are bussed to Yellowridge SS. Over the years the number of students bussed to the school has increased. The school is traditionally known for its strong academic program and high graduation rates.

Arlene's administrative team is diverse and consists of three vice principals. She is white. Cassandra, a white female is in her third year as vice principal at Yellowridge SS. Michael

is the longest serving member of the administrative team. He is a white male and has been a vice principal at the school for six years. He is close to retirement and has no interest in becoming a principal. Melinda, a black female was appointed to Yellowridge at the same time as Arlene. She is very much interested in becoming a principal and sees Arlene as a mentor. Like most secondary schools in the area, the teaching staff of 110 is predominantly white. Of the one 110 staff at the school there were two black teachers, two South Asians, and one Asian. The staff is predominantly female. There has been very little staff turnover. A large percentage of the staff has been at the school for over 10 years.

All teachers in secondary schools in the province are members of the provincial union, a registered trade union that negotiates with the school board on issues of salaries and workload, among other things. Each school board negotiates separately with the union and each school elects a representative for the school. Yellowridge SS is known in the board as a school with a strong union presence. Jeffery Briggs, a math teacher with over twenty-five years of teaching experience has been the school's union representative for the last six years. He is a white male, in his early fifties. He has been teaching at Yellowridge SS for fifteen years, which coincided with the removal of administrators from the teacher's union. He became actively involved in the union during a very politically tumultuous time in education. He assumed the role of the union representative after the retirement of his predecessor by acclamation, as no one else expressed interest. He takes his role very seriously and feels that it is his responsibility to promote and safeguard the interests of teachers at the school. He has a reputation of being tough on administrators and is not afraid to confront those who challenge. Jeffery sees himself as standing up to administration for the rights of teachers. Given the number of years he has been at the school, he has built strong relationships with some of the more senior teachers, particularly those

who admire his “tough stance,” adversarial approach to the school administration, and focus on sticking to the “rules.” Since the bussing to the school of students from neighbouring low-income communities he has been complaining in staff meetings about the “declining discipline” at the school. He feels that the administration, and in particular the principal, is not “tough enough” and the “kids are getting away with way too much.”

While Jeffery has the support of the older staff and staff who have been at the school for sometime, several of the newer staff members at the school do not like his overly aggressive style, particularly towards Arlene, the principal, and towards many of the visible minority students. Some of the staff complained to the principal that he unfairly singles out visible minority students for minor infractions such as breaking the no hat policy and eating in the hallway. On many occasions teachers have heard him yelling at students to remove their hats, pushing students to the point of provocation for issues such as not looking at him while he is speaking and disobeying the school rules. Some teachers feel that he is “pushing some students’ buttons” and then writing them up for “opposition to authority,” an offence that could lead to suspension. While the staff like the fact that Jeffrey keeps them informed about union matters and ensures that supervision and other work related issues follow the collective agreement, some teachers find his constant aggression and approach towards the principal and visible minority students troubling.

Arlene feels that it is important to create a safe, positive learning environment, not by punishing the students for minor infractions, but working with them to change behaviour. She spends time counselling students, communicating with parents, and finding alternative approaches to address inappropriate behaviours, such as having students engage in a variety of community service activities. Melinda and Cassandra, two of Arlene’s three vice principals,

support Arlene's approach to progressive discipline and work hard to present a united and consistent approach to behaviour management.

Jeffery finds this approach to disciplining students completely inappropriate and has even suggested that the learning environment has become "unsafe" for the teachers. He has gone to the office on several occasions to complain to the principal about what he calls "unfair disciplining" by Melinda. He feels that she is biased towards visible minority students and is too lenient on them. He has indicated several instances where he felt that the discipline should have been harsher. In one incident, he was heard yelling in the office at Cassandra who refused to follow his instructions to suspend a student who had been late to school on a number of occasions. Cassandra's unwillingness to suspend the student has led Jeffery to suggest that this is just another example of the administration's unwillingness to support teachers.

Jeffery has found an ally on the administrative team in Michael, who agrees with him in critiquing the leadership of Arlene and his two vice principal partners. During administrative team meetings, Michael regularly criticizes Arlene's approach to running the school. He often makes reference to the way things were before she arrived and suggests that she is being soft on discipline. Although Michael is only one member of a four person administrative team, he is the most senior administrator in the school, is vocal and aggressive, and has the ability to undermine the work of the rest of the administrative team. His long standing relationship with Jeffery and other senior teachers has created a challenging and divisive climate at the school.

The situation at Yellowridge SS has become increasingly challenging for Arlene and the administrative team. Jeffery has become progressively more adversarial with the administration regarding teacher workload, scrutinizing supervision schedules and looking for

opportunities to formally bring forward grievances against the administration. Arlene is struggling to deal with Jeffrey and the tension within her administrative team.

Arlene and all the members of the administrative team were once teachers and support the union. They believe the union plays an important role in protecting the teachers, but feel that Jeffery's approach is creating poor working relations between the administrative team and the staff. In fact, a number of teachers visited the office to complain about Jeffery's open criticism of administration in the staff and lunch rooms. They feel that the working environment is becoming toxic and suggest that Arlene has to do something about it.

At the regular weekly administrative meeting Arlene raises the issue of the working relations between the administration and the union and the apparent division among the staff. She asks members of the administrative team for their assessment of the situation and input.

Cassandra: "I support the union, I was a member of the union, but I feel there is a larger issue here. My sense is that Jeffery stereotypes the students who are bussed in. I also feel that he is sexist towards Melinda, Arlene and I. I say this because of his aggressive manner when he is speaking to any one of us, and he is constantly challenging the way we discipline students."

Melinda: "I agree with Cassandra. I do not like Jeffery's tone, and students have complained to me about his harshness in class as well when it comes to the students from Merchant Lake. Students have told me that he says 'discipline has gone down at Yellowridge SS, since Mr. Bruce left.' I do not encourage the students to speak about Mr. Briggs, but I think it is not healthy when he speaks like this in his classroom. I feel sometimes a little scared to advocate for the students because I do not want it to be seen as if I am taking up for black and other visible minority students because I am black. I think we need to speak to Jeffery before the working situation deteriorates further."

Michael responds to Cassandra and Melinda: “Before we talk to Jeffery, we need to figure out what we are doing as an administrative team. Cassandra and Melinda, I think you are too soft on the students and you are making me look like the bad guy all the time. I do not feel that we are acting as a team here. Some of the teachers are complaining that students are going to classes up to ten minutes late. When they suggest detention after school, they are asking to come to the office to speak with their vice principal. This cannot continue, we have to be tough with these kids.”

Arlene responds to Michael: “Being tough on the students, who are most at risk, does not help them to succeed. I do not believe that Cassandra and Melinda are taking up for students. I believe that they are practising a progressive discipline approach. They are looking at mitigating factors and the circumstances of students, and this is in keeping with our equity and diversity policies.”

Michael responds: “I have been at Yellowridge SS for a long time and it is the worst I have seen it. I support Jeffery and those teachers who think we must be tougher with student discipline, especially the kids from Merchant Lake. You all see how they behave.”

Cassandra: “Michael, I think there are many issues here to be discussed including Jeffery’s aggressive approach towards the admin team. I do not like the way you are describing the students from Merchant Lake. I also think that it might be useful as an administrative team to review the board’s equity policies and have some professional development with the staff, particularly around discipline.”

Arlene: “I agree with a workshop for the staff. I also agree that I need to speak with Jeffery and raise the concerns of the administrative team. We also need to figure out how we are going to work together as a team. Michael you are clearly not in agreement with some of the

decisions I make as principal and there seems to be some fundamental differences with Cassandra and Melinda as well. I am concerned about the impact on the students and staff, and this stress is not good for any of us.”

Arlene’s entry plan at Yellowridge when she started two years ago was to get to know the community and the students. She is well liked by the parents as she makes herself available to them and requires her vice principals to do the same. In her first year, she made an effort to get to know the staff and developed cordial working relations with Jeffery. She describes the first year as “challenging,” as it is for most new principals, and felt very positive at the start of her second year. When she arrived at Yellowridge SS Michael welcomed her and congratulated her on her appointment. She recalls him saying, “I have seen many principals come and go, and I will help you to understand Yellowridge SS.” Arlene believes in social justice and equity as the guiding principles of her leadership, but feels challenged by the difficult situation that is developing at Yellowridge Secondary School.

Teaching Notes

This case study and accompanying readings can be used as tools to investigate educational leadership from practical and theoretical perspectives. The case study can be used as a practical example of the complex nature of school administration while providing a framework for theoretical discussions in educational leadership courses and principal qualification programs. The realistic nature of the case study engages learners in strategising potential practical solutions for use in real school leadership situations. Instructors and workshop facilitators can use the case study to: a) explore issues of equity and social justice including gender, race, and social class; b) examine various leadership styles and reflect on one’s own

strengths and needs as a leader; c) explore the notion and potential implementation of social-justice and culturally responsive leadership; d) explore the importance of working effectively in teams; d) review regulations, policies, and practices of a school administrator; and e) support administrators in examining their philosophies in dealing with students and colleagues.

Class Discussion

Class instructors can use the following questions to guide the discussion:

- What is your understanding of social-justice leadership?
- How do you as a leader understand culturally responsive leadership?
- What makes culturally responsive leadership and social-justice leadership different from other forms of leadership?
- What issues does this case study raise for you as an educational leader?
- How would you describe Arlene's leadership style?
- What are some of the ways that Arlene can build cohesion on the administrative team?
- How would you suggest that Arlene deal with Jeffery's aggression towards her and the female members of the admin team?
- How should Arlene deal with Jeffery's approach to visible minority students?
- Do you think Jeffery's approach is racist? Give reasons for your response.
- What suggestions do you have for Melinda? Is she justified in feeling that she might be seen as playing favourites with students of colour?
- Should Arlene ask for Michael's transfer to another school or should she seek out ways to work with him to get him to better understand her leadership philosophy?
- What support might Arlene need in this difficult situation?
- Arlene has a good rapport with the community. Should she seek their input in addressing Jeffery's concern?
- How might the diversity in your school and community influence your leadership style?
- There is no doubt that the demographics of schools are changing. In what ways might principals, schools, and the board respond to this changing reality? How might school leaders and principals be supported to respond?
- Some argue that the teaching population in schools do not reflect the diversity in the student population. How might Arlene respond to this? Should Arlene seek to hire qualified visible minority teachers at Yellowridge Secondary School?

- Describe how you would promote or model relationship building as a tool for cultural responsiveness when dealing with teachers?
- Should different approaches be used when handling disciplinary problems related to different racial and ethnic groups? If so, how might this approach differ?
- What are some of the ways that leaders can build relationship with staff?
- How does relationship building promote cultural responsiveness in this school?

Case Study Response: Written Assignment

Instructors could ask students to write a case study response using the following template. The following supplementary readings could be assigned to support their response.

Instructions. Read the assigned case study and complete your response using the attached template.

Case Study Response Template	
What are the broad issues raised by the case study?	
What are the issues of equity and social justice raised by the case study?	
Choose three of the issues raised and suggest how might approach them. In your response refer to at least two the assigned readings.	
Are there issues raised by the case study that you are unsure about? I am uncomfortable with...	
I need to learn more about to assist me in my development as a school leader...	

Assigned reading: Case study response and class discussion. The following resources could be used to support class discussions and Case Study Response Template. Choose 2–3 readings from the list.

- Council of Directors of Education (CODE) (2012), *Working Effectively with Federations and Unions*.
- Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, and Lindsey (2007), “Cultural Proficiency: Tools for Secondary school Administrators.”
- Ryan, (2010), “Promoting Social Justice in Schools: Principals' Political Strategies.”
- Ryan (2010), “Understanding Leadership and Educating Future Leaders.”
- Ryan and Rottmann (2009), “Struggling for Democracy: Administrative Communication in a Diverse School Context.”

Supplementary Resources

- Hare and Portelli (2007), *Key Questions in Education*.
- Normore and Blanco (2008), “Leadership for Social Justice and Morality.”
- Portelli and Campbell-Stephens (2009), *Leading for Equity: The investing in Diversity Approach*.
- Ryan (2011), “Administrative Approaches to Diversity: Imposing and Sharing Meaning.”
- Stralser (2004), “Leadership and Team Building.”
- Theoharis (2010), “Disrupting Injustice: Principals Narrate the Strategies They Use to Improve Their Schools and Advance Social Justice.”
- Young, Madsen, and Young (2010), “Implementing Diversity Plans: Principals' Perception of Their Ability to Address Diversity in Their Schools.”

References

- Council of Directors of Education (CODE). (2012). *Working effectively with federations and unions* (Advisory No. 18). Oakville, ON: author.
- Hare, W., & Portelli, J. (2007). *Key questions in education*. San Francisco: Caddo Gap and Edphil.
- Normore, A., & Blanco, R. (2008). Leadership for Social Justice and Morality. In A. Normore (Ed.), *Leadership for social justice: Promoting equity and excellence through inquiry and relative practice* (pp.215–240). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Nuri-Robins, K., Lindsey, D. B., Terrell, R. D., & Lindsey, R. B. (2007). Cultural proficiency: Tools for secondary school administrators. *Principal Leadership*, 8, 16–22. Retrieved from <http://proquest.umi.com>
- Portelli, J., & Campbell-Stephens, R. (2009). *Leading for equity: The investing in diversity approach*. Toronto: Edphil.
- Ryan, J. (2010). Promoting social justice in schools: Principals' political strategies. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 13, 357–376.
- Ryan, J. (2010). Understanding leadership and educating future leaders. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, 4, 346–348.
- Ryan, J. (2011). Administrative approaches to diversity: Imposing and sharing meaning. In J. MacBeath & T. Townsend (Eds.), *International handbook on leadership for learning* (pp. 1125–1142). Dordrecht, Neth.: Springer.
- Ryan, J., & Rottmann, C. (2009). Struggling for democracy: Administrative communication in a diverse school context. *Education Management, Administration and Leadership*, 37, 473–496
- Stralser, S. (2004). Leadership and Team Building. In *MBA in a Day: What you would learn in top-tier business schools (if you only had the time!)* (pp. 38–56). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from <http://www.abahe.co.uk/business-administration/Leadership-and-Team-Building.pdf>
- Theoharis, G. (2010). Disrupting injustice: Principals narrate the strategies they use to improve their schools and advance social justice. *Teachers College Record*, 112, 331–373. Retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org/>
- Young, B. L., Madsen, J., & Young, M. A. (2010) Implementing diversity plans: Principals' perception of their ability to address diversity in their schools. *NASSP Bulletin*, 94, 135–157.