

## **UNMASKING VANDALISM:**

### **A CASE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP COMPLEXITIES**

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Waterfront Elementary School is located in a very affluent neighbourhood in a large urban multicultural school district. The school has some diversity in terms of its student population, but the majority of the students are White and come from upper middle-class families. Ms. Courtney Williams, the principal of the school was transferred to Waterfront Elementary School five years ago due to her expertise in the area of assessment and evaluation. Since her arrival, she has been applauded by the school community and school district for her knowledge and dedication to students' academic success. This case highlights the tensions, challenges, and struggles that she faces when she is confronted by upset and angry parents with regard to a vandalism incident in her school that could have far-reaching implications for her, her school, the district, and the wider community.

### **Teaching Notes**

This case study is adapted from personal education leadership practice and community work in which I have been engaged. The aim of the case study is to highlight some of the challenges and tensions that educational administrators and district leaders experience (and often avoid), especially with regard to issues of social justice. Leadership for social justice and inclusion is a complex process that requires great courage and reflectivity to unearth the multiple and intersecting inequities embedded in practices of silencing, minimizing, masking, containment, and continued marginalization. This case study can be used in graduate classes in the area of educational leadership, in undergraduate classes in social justice education, and as part of professional development opportunities for practicing educational leaders wanting

mentorship in social justice education. Participants engaging in the following case will have an opportunity to discuss the importance of interrogating one's social and institutional locations as well as one's social consciousness as part of social justice and inclusive approaches to leadership. Additionally they will gain a greater awareness of the concept of social justice leadership, including some of the many challenges and obstacles along with the many rewards.

I have organized the teachings sections into teaching/learning moments that interrupt the narrative being shared. There are a total of four teaching/learning moments. Ideally the case would be shared in class in three sections as part of full class focus, where each section would either be read aloud together or in small groups. Each teaching/learning moment would then follow to provide reflection or interruption opportunities guided by the instructor for meaningful discussion.

### **Case Narrative**

The Principal, Ms. Williams finds herself in a very challenging situation. Although she did not understand the intricacies and sensitivities of the incidents that took place at her school, she has greater awareness of the gravity of the situation now. How could she have been more prepared and proactive in addressing this kind of an outburst from the child's parents and even a member of her own staff?

#### *Waterfront Elementary School*

This school is located in a very affluent neighbourhood in a large urban multicultural school district. In fact it is considered one of area's most popular neighbourhoods due to its

proximity to the water and other desirable city attractions. Housing prices in this area start at well over 1.5 million dollars.

The school houses several unique visual and performing arts programs. It also has a mini-school program<sup>1</sup> and an IB curriculum.<sup>2</sup> The school has some social diversity in terms of its student population, but the majority of the students are White and come from upper-middle-class families. Although the school district has a multicultural policy based on the Canadian Multicultural Act, diversity education at the school mainly means including curricular adaptations to instructional practice for “special needs students.” The school has an impeccable reputation in the community and in the media as a school of high quality and high expectations.

The parents of this community are very well educated and very involved in the education of their children. In addition to the daily stresses of being an administrator or educator in this school, is the deep awareness of the high expectations of the parent community in all areas of schooling. Teachers are often seen working right through their lunch hours and breaks in addition to late after-school hours to ensure that the parents of the students in their classes are satisfied with the educational experiences of their children.

Ms. Courtney Williams, the principal of the school, came to Waterfront Elementary School five years ago. She was transferred to this school because of her expertise in assessment and evaluation in order to address parental concerns in this area. Ms. Williams has done incredibly well in this area working with school staff to align assessment and evaluation

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<sup>1</sup> Mini schools are enriched programs for highly motivated students. Each year over 1,300 students apply for approximately 600 Grade 8 spots. Admission is based on admission test marks, Grade 7 report cards, applications, and interviews (Vancouver School Board, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> “The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. To this end the organization works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment. These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right”—International Baccalaureate Mission Statement (International Baccalaureate, 2008).

processes with the provincial prescribed learning outcomes (PLOs) and to integrate them meaningfully into the district's new report card. She has been applauded by the school community and school district for her hard work, knowledge, and dedication to students' academic success.

### **Overview of the Case**

Given the context of the school and the success mentioned above, it was quite shocking when things unfolded as they did for Ms. Williams on December 5, 2012. Students and teachers were in the midst of the busyness of all the Christmas-focused events at the school and were anxiously awaiting the winter vacation. It was difficult for Ms. Williams to imagine that the school would be faced with such an incident or issue following the evening of the Christmas concert that had all gone so well.

On the weekend following the concert, a South Asian family was walking past their new community school. As Mr. and Mrs. Singh turned the corner, they were shocked by what they saw. On the wall next to the main entrance, in bright red letters were the words "P\*\*F\*\*\* off and go home!" The family was one of the few "families of color" (and even fewer families of South Asian heritage) in the school and they were quite taken aback as their 8-year-old daughter, Amrita, asked them what was going on in response to their reaction. They tried desperately to protect their daughter from the humiliation. They headed home and immediately called the police to have the incident investigated and left messages on the principal's phone in order to have the wall painted or words covered up as soon as possible. The parents could not imagine how someone could be so hurtful. Although they always felt "looked at" and their daughter exoticized, for the most part they had felt quite welcomed by the school and school community. They

weren't aware of any major problems at the school in this regard—although the day of the Christmas concert as they were leaving the school, they did recall one of the other South Asian parents at the school getting into a bit of a heated discussion with Mrs. Smith, the chair of the Parent Advisor Committee (PAC) about how Diwali, which, as they said, “is like Christmas for us,” was never given any attention in the school curriculum or as part of the school events. Mrs. Smith's position was that the family should take responsibility and organize something like the rest of the parents did for Christmas. She ignored their concerns that there was not any institutional support for such a undertaking especially given the Christian calendar. . . . Mr. and Mrs. Singh remember looking back at the main school exit as they were driving away that evening and noticed that the crowd was growing beside Mrs. Smith and the body language and facial expressions which were visible due to the well lit entrance area were showing signs of a “face-off” of sorts. They drove off and never gave it another thought until now when they saw the writing on the wall.

On Monday morning, the principal arrived at the school at 7:45 a.m. and checked her messages. When she heard the message from Mr. and Mrs. Singh she thought to herself—“oh no, not today – I don't need this with the Christmas hamper collection activities and the Christmas parent tea afterschool and . . .” She stopped herself mid sentence and headed down the long red and green colored hallway to the first of four meetings that were scheduled for that morning. After her first urgent meeting, she came back to her office and contacted maintenance around 9:00 a.m. She then welcomed everyone over the P.A. and asked anyone who might know anything about the “vandalism outside the school” to report to the office as soon as possible. The wall outside was finally painted over by 1:00 p.m. that afternoon. Unfortunately by then everyone had seen it and was talking about it with each other and their teachers. As far as Ms.

Wilson was concerned, the incident was addressed in a timely manner and everything was dealt with according to proper process—that is until the parents returned the next morning. . . .

On Tuesday morning Mr. and Mrs. Singh came into the school very upset and quite angry at the way the incident had been handled. They had concerns about the time that it took to cover up the walls and they were equally concerned with how little responsibility or care the school administration and staff had taken to address the incident at a school and classroom level. They knew that no one had come forward to take responsibility for the incident and that meant that for the school everything was done. Additionally, they were very troubled with the framing of this incident throughout the school as vandalism. They shared their concerns with Ms. Williams and the classroom teacher, but found little understanding, support or willingness on their parts to do more. They then took their case to the superintendent of the district. The superintendent listened to them closely and told them that he would discuss the matter with the school administrator and the case would be dealt with in a timely and appropriate manner especially given the larger socio-political context of the issue.

### **Teaching/Learning Moment 1**

It is important to interrupt the narrative here to discuss some of the questions below with the entire class. The goal of the discussion is to have the classroom participants examine whether the case was addressed in an adequate way and to explore some of the issues raised by the parents especially with regard to further action to address the situation at the school level.

*Questions for Discussion and Reflection*

- Should Mrs. Williams have done things differently? If so how?
- Why were Mr. and Mrs. Singh so troubled with how this incident was handled?
- Why were Mr. and Mrs. Singh so upset with how the incident was framed?
- How could it have been framed differently?
- What responsibility does the school have in addressing issues of this nature at a school-wide level?
- Do you think that Mrs. Williams' career ambitions and concern for her image as well as the image of the school played a part in how this incident was framed? If so, do you think this "grasping careerism"<sup>3</sup> could impact leadership for social justice in any significant way?

**The Narrative Continued (Section 2)**

The larger sociopolitical context to which the superintendent, Mr. Stevenson was referring was quite significant in this incident. In fact this was not the first time that he had an incident of this nature come to his office in the last 10 months and this was not surprising given what was going on in the media.

Mr. Stevenson was well known and well respected by his colleagues for his excellent interpersonal skills, his caring nature, and his vast knowledge in science education. He was also known to be someone who did "everything by the book" and did it well. He was now in his seventh year as superintendent after a full career as a teacher, vice-principal, and principal in the school district. Over the years, he had noticed that things were changing in his district and the issues of bullying were more and more prevalent amongst the parental concerns that came to his office. He dealt with each situation individually, but often felt very unprepared for these kinds of matters related, as he said, "to accusations of racism in his schools." The last thing he wanted

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful for the reviewers of my paper for suggesting the concept of "grasping careerism" and the addition of a question related to this area.

was media attention on his district especially in regard to issues of race and racism. Furthermore, and more importantly for him, he didn't want any connections to what was going on in the local and national media in this area. It would tarnish his district and the larger community and especially the impeccable reputation of Waterfront Elementary.

The socio-political context in connection to this issue was quite alarming as seen in the local and national press and in police and government reports. The portrayals of South Asian youth and their gang-related involvement in the area had recently been receiving extensive coverage in mainstream media. In fact, concerns about the involvement of "Indo-Canadian" youth in gang-related activities had led to the organization of both federal and provincial government task forces, as well as RCMP-initiated community programs. Schools and school districts were also being asked to do more. RCMP in the area reported that "more than 80 Indo-Canadian gangsters or their associates [had] been slain in the past decade" (Mason, 2005, p. A9). A former federal health minister described Indo-Canadian violence as a "debilitating problem where you can see young men dropping like flies" (Bolan, 2005, p. B5). According to *The Globe and Mail*, "the brazenness factor . . . sets Indo-Canadian gangsters apart. They don't care where they open fire" (Mason, 2005 p. A9). Further, claims such as those of an assistant chief at the U.S. border patrol office that "virtually all marijuana smuggling in the past fiscal year is either directly or indirectly tied back to the Indo-Canadian community" ("Drugs Spark Gang Violence," 2004, p.A2) was creating a significant context within which Indo-Canadian youth and their identities were being constructed and represented. Gary Mason (2005) of *The Globe and Mail* suggested that "most everyone agrees that the generation of Indo-Canadian youth currently involved in gang activity is as good as lost . . ." (p. A9). Reports such as these were clearly impacting public perceptions of Indo-Canadian youth and Indo-Canadians in general. A Global



National News poll revealed that “it is the Indo-Canadian community [that] people most [identified] with crime” (Newman, 2006, p. 1, transcripts).

To make matters even worse, Mr. and Mrs. Singh had a nephew in a high school in the district where the school had decided on a school policy to not allow more than five South Asian students to walk together in the hallways of their school. If there was one White student with these students they were allowed to stay together (and even have 6 South Asian students in the group) otherwise they were asked to separate or exit the school. The administration of this school said this policy was implemented as a response to police and government calls to districts to do something about “Indo-Canadian gangs” while the many parents of this school said it was a result of the internalization of the stereotypes constructed by the media and now perpetuated by the school. In this highly racialized context and given the multicultural policy of the school district, the way that Ms. Wilson dismissed Mr. and Mrs. Singh’s concern over the framing of the incident at Waterfront Elementary School was even more troubling for the parents. They wondered how the principal could not have seen the connections, but they were hopeful that the superintendent would now be addressing the issue more adequately, especially given the problematic racialization of the youth of their community in the media and in other schools in his district as “Indo-Canadian gangsters”.

### **Teaching/Learning Moment 2:**

#### **Critical Consciousness, Social Positioning, and Genealogical Location**

##### *Reading*

- Ryan (2006), “Inclusive Leadership and Social Justice for Schools.”

In this article, Ryan outlines the relationship between leadership, social justice, and

inclusion to develop the concept of inclusive leadership. A significant justification for his use of this concept is, as he states, the need for educational, structural and institutional change (both in terms of means and ends) to ensure inclusion. Additionally, he highlights that leadership for inclusion must be non-hierarchical and collectively focused on inclusion. In this manner he articulates that social justice would not be possible within exclusionary institutional or leadership agendas and further that “for leadership to be consistent with inclusive ideals, then, it needs to be seen and practiced as an equitable, collective process that is also organized to promote inclusion” (p. 9). In the last section of his article Ryan outlines distinct practices that are critical to inclusive leadership. These include advocating for inclusion, educating participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasizing student learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision and policymaking strategies, and incorporating whole school approaches.

Of particular interest to this section of the case are Ryan’s ideas of critical consciousness through what he refers to as critical conversations that “can help school communities acknowledge, recognize, critique, and change those invisible practices that impede inclusion” (p.6). This article and particularly this section of the article will be very helpful for the discussion activity below.

After reading the above article, employ the Bus Stop strategy below to discuss the questions that follow.

#### *Bus Stop Strategy: Process*

Have four or five volunteers come to the front of the class and pretend to be on a bus (either standing and holding the imaginary rails or sitting—the front and the back of the bus

should be determined for exiting purposes). These volunteers begin the discussion with the questions below. Members from the rest of the class may come onto the bus any time they have something to contribute in ways that support or contradict what is being said by those on the bus. Once a new class participant comes on the bus, the person closest to the front of the bus must exit (and go back to their seat). In this manner, almost all members of the class will have a chance to get on the bus and contribute to the dialogue (normally individuals can go back on the bus, but the instructor may wish to clarify that returning should only happen if those who haven't had a turn do not wish to contribute at that time). This strategy is enacted much like Forum Theatre where the dialogue continues and gets more and more complicated as the members of the class continue to get on and off the bus and share their diverse perspectives and responses. The role play continues until the bus driver (normally the instructor) says, "last stop." When this happens the role play is finished and a debrief takes place with the entire class. The debrief will involve a discussion of learnings from the Bus Stop dialogue with relation to the questions below as well as a discussion of questions (those below or others that may emerge) that may not have been addressed or addressed adequately during the role play.

*Discussion Questions for Bus Stop Strategy and the Follow-Up Debrief*

Why do you think Ms. Williams did not make the connection between what was going on in the media and the incident at her school? What do you think is the social positioning or genealogical location of Ms. Wilson? Do you think that her critical consciousness, social positioning or genealogical location, and experience or inexperience with marginalization is significant in this school incident? Furthermore, are there invisible practices and policies that need to be recognized and critiqued, and changed with regard to this incident?

Some of the following questions could further guide the Bus Stop dialogue and follow-up discussion as relevant for the class participants and the emerging dialogue:

- How do you think Ms. Wilson identifies herself in the world?
- How do you think others identify her—is this important?
- Which “communities” do you think she identifies with and desires membership in? How are the borders of these communities delineated?
- What are some specific ways in which she might move through systemic and institutional privilege or marginalization?
- Do you think that the larger socio-political context of this case could have any impact on such bordering and such membership?
- What are the costs and benefits of such bordering and such membership? To whom?

### **The Narrative Continued (Section 3)**

The truth is that Mrs. Williams was very aware of what was going on in the media, but somehow missed making any connections to the “graffiti” on her school wall. Perhaps the connections between the terms Indo-Canadian and P\*\* were unfamiliar to her or perhaps she did not realize how the issue would be relevant to a small group of parents in her school. However what was obvious is that, even after Mr. and Mrs. Singh’s discussion with her, she refused or perhaps resisted addressing the issue of “so-called racism” at the school level. She stated that “there is no racism or bullying at my school and we don’t have time for this, our community demands rigorous academic work. The vandalism was probably done by someone else. . . .”

Even after Amrita’s teacher tried to discuss ways that she could carefully raise awareness of the issue of racism amongst several classes and colleagues in the school, Ms. Wilson wouldn’t hear anything of it. She seemed afraid of how the parents of the community (implying that Amrita’s parents were somehow not part of “the parents of the community”) might react when their children told them that racism was a problem in their school—“which had no racism.”

Furthermore, although she would never admit it to anyone, she was also afraid that she might attract the attention of the “Indo-Canadian gangsters” from this community (“if she hadn’t already”) if her school got the wrong kind of media attention or if unintentionally she addressed things incorrectly. She was also worried about how bad publicity for her school had the potential to tarnish her school and—more importantly for her—her reputation.

Keeping her good reputation was crucial for her at this stage of her career. Being one of the most informed experts not only in evaluation and assessment, but also assessment for meeting the needs of diverse students, she was being encouraged to apply for a district principalship position in the next two years. The district team saw her work as progressive and transformative. She was so close that she could not really let something like this get in the way, especially since she knew deep down that there was no racism at her school and she saw herself as a leader working for inclusion.

All these issues were running through her mind on Wednesday morning when she answered the phone call from the district superintendent. She held her breath. In the past, for potentially eruptive incidences such as teacher complaints, the superintendent’s policy was always that of containment, but what was he going to tell her this time?

### **Teaching Moment 3**

#### *Reading*

- Theoharis (2007), “Social Justice Educational Leaders and Resistance: Toward a Theory of Social Justice Leadership.”

Through autoethnographic methods, this article examines the lives of seven principals who came to leadership with a social justice orientation in order to gain a greater sense of how

these principals enact social justice leadership, what kind of resistance they face as a result, and finally what strategies they develop to counter the resistance. The analysis and findings develop a comprehensive theory of social justice educational leadership which will be helpful in the following teaching/learning activities.

*After Reading This Article, Discuss the Following Questions*

- What do you think the district superintendent will tell Mrs. Williams about what needs to be done to address this situation?
- What is leadership for social justice?
- Will Mrs. Williams and Mr. Stevenson address this situation within the framework of social justice leadership?
- Under what circumstances is it defensible for a school leader to privilege their own career prospects over seriously responding to overtly racist actions?
- Does fear have the potential to obstruct leadership for social justice or does one not have a choice: for example, is choice a privilege and are there people for whom fear is not a choice?
- What is the relationship between power, privilege, social justice, social construction, structural and institutional racism, and hegemony especially with regard to this case?
- As an agent of the board (according to the School Act) does the administrator have a choice beyond what is required by the district leadership? What are the implications for social justice leadership?

**Teaching/Learning Moment 4**

The final teaching/learning activity below is intended to give all class members a chance to express their personal (and final) thoughts anonymously and therefore safely. It allows everyone a voice (this is important for those students who may not have been comfortable sharing earlier, especially given the topic) and then allows the reflections of all to be read collectively as a complex class narrative of leadership for social justice. In my experience it has always been a very powerful way to end the lesson.

Using the snowball strategy outlined below have students do a two-minute write on one of the following questions (or both questions—one on each side of the paper) before crumpling it up and making a snowball:

- What else might be masked with terms such as vandalism, bullying, and social justice leadership? How and why might these concepts be constructed?
- Are you prepared and willing, and do you envision yourself being a leader for social justice education? Why or why not?

*Snowball Strategy: Process*

- Anonymously answer the question(s) asked of you related to the reading and the discussion of this case (on the paper provided).
- Crumple up your paper to make a snowball.
- When the instructor counts to three throw your snowball on the floor into the middle of the classroom.
- Pick up one snowball from the floor at a time, read, throw, pick up a snowball, read, throw—continue this process until you are asked by your instructor to stop.
- Keep the last snowball in your hand and stand in a circle.
- Read the text on this snowball in turn as part of a collective class sharing.
- Open discussion of themes represented in the class members' responses as well as those that were absent.

**Summary Note**

Working from anti-colonial and social-justice frameworks, the case in this paper attempted to highlight how the concept of vandalism is constructed to mask many intersecting and significant issues of racism, social construction, internalization of stereotypes, social injustices, and colonialism. This masking (which is often a result of administrators' discomfort/resistance/ignorance/fear/ about issues of social justice or racism as in this incident), not only diminishes the violence imposed on racialized students' and communities' marginalized

bodies, but also maintains the power hierarchy of the colonizer/colonized in the context of Eurocentric schooling. The teaching notes highlight the importance of interrogating one's social, institutional and genealogical location and identity as part of the context and practice of social justice leadership. Further, the case attempts to highlight the challenges, struggles, tensions, and resistance that may be part of the experience of embracing social-justice leadership especially if a leader does not have or is not open to the needed social, critical, and historical consciousness required to understand hegemony, colonialism, and injustice. In short I would argue that social-justice leadership is not a style or an approach that you engage in but rather a epistemological and ontological process that engages you and from which you never have a choice to disengage.

### **Suggested and Additional Readings**

- Jiwani (2006), "Erasing Race: The Story of Reena Virk."
- Larson and Murtadha (2002), "Leadership for Social Justice."
- Oliva, Anderson, and Byng (2006), "Dilemmas and Lessons: The Continuing Leadership Challenge for Social Justice."
- Ryan (2010), "Promoting Social Justice in Schools: Principles' Political Strategies."
- Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell (2005), "Discourse of Denial: How White Teacher Candidates Construct Race, Racism and 'White Privilege.'"
- Solomon (2002), "School Leaders and Anti-Racism: Overcoming Pedagogical and Political Obstacles."



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