

PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE: CANADIAN CASES IN LEADERSHIP AND POLICY

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School administrators face complex challenges each and every day. Some of these issues are routine, and administrators deal with them as they arise. But many of these issues are anything but predictable, and they serve up new problems that stymie administrators. Many of these challenges emanate from the rapidly changing contemporary context in which schools operate. Agendas of high-stakes accountability, national and international competitiveness, standardized curriculum, the centralization of power (Gidney, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Pollock, 2008), rising levels of diversity (Harvey & Houle, 2006; Ryan, 2006), technological advances (Haughey, 2006), and the changing nature of labour relations (Wallace, 2001) have changed the work of administrators over the past few years (Ball, 2003; Court & O'Neil, 2011; Goodwin, Cunningham, & Eagle, 2005; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Goodwin, Cunningham, & Childress, 2003; Harvey & Houle, 2006; Haughey, 2006; Törnsén, 2010; Whitaker, 2003). While experience and training may assist administrators in responding to some of these challenges, this preparation may be of little help in many other situations. This is why it is so important to continue to generate learning tools for contemporary administrators and teaching tools for those who prepare them.

One way to support aspiring and current administrators is through the use of case study teaching (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994). Using case studies as a teaching and learning tool helps bring real-life situations into principal preparation and support programs. Case study

approaches provide students with time to interrogate contemporary issues, reflect on their own practices and understandings, and debate possible responses to the issues. Using case studies as a teaching tool is not new (Llewellyn, 1930; Weaver, 1991). Over the years, they have been utilized in business, law, and education, among other disciplines. What is unique about case studies is that they can be generated to reflect the contexts in which people are currently working. This CJEAP special issue focuses on case studies specifically for educational administrators and leaders in Canadian contexts. While Canadian education systems are similar to many Western countries such as the United States, England, and Australia, they also have their own unique policies, traditions, and nuances that set them apart from others. For example, Canadian provinces have taken up accountability policies and mechanisms in different ways than American states and other countries. Canada's constitution also influences education policy in unique ways, supporting, in some provinces, religious education and minority languages for French and English language students. Notions of equity and social justice also play out differently in Canada and a stronger teacher union presence in Canada means that principals navigate the work in their buildings differently than they do in other countries.

This special issue is dedicated to case teaching in the Canadian context. It features a case study approach that is designed to help those who train aspiring and current administrators. Written by academics, graduate students, principals, higher education instructors, and education consultants, the cases are intended to be employed by program developers, trainers of leaders, and university instructors to assist education leaders to interrogate their leadership practices, develop new leadership skills and knowledge, and consider alternative practices, solutions, and possibilities to current problems of practice.

The cases in this special issue cover a range of issues and topics. These include social justice, culturally relevant leadership and team building (Lopez and Button), policy implementation (Fushell), program implementation (Lapointe, Poirel, and Brassard), professional development and professional learning communities (Ferguson), inclusive learning and instructional leadership (Meyer and Young), social justice leadership and vandalism (Gill), equity and staff opposition (Tuters and Ryan), at-risk students and resource allocation (Higginbottom and Friesen), transformative leadership, self-reflection and antiracism (Briscoe), and principal succession (Northfield).

The authors present their cases in ways that can be used to develop the skills and knowledge of practicing and prospective leaders. They build their cases around descriptions of problems that administrators face and teaching strategies designed to probe these problems. The strategies include exercises that illuminate problematic situations and provide opportunities for students to devise potential solutions to the dilemmas. The exercises extend to those who participate in them the opportunity to probe, understand, and critique their own and others' views and values in ways that will inevitably inform their practice. Most cases begin with a detailed narrative including direct dialogue followed by the teaching notes; other cases include rich description only. One case has infused the teaching notes throughout the case study, while another presents the entire case through a dramatization.

Each case employs teaching notes to provide guidance in connecting theory to practice. Most cases provide at least one activity on decision-making (e.g., Lapointe, Poirel, and Brassard). All extend opportunities for intentional, structured dialogue and conversations. These include forms of class discussion that revolve around the posing of strategic questions (e.g., Northfield), small group discussions and reports to the larger group (e.g., Briscoe). Other more

elaborate guided interaction strategies include “Save the Last Word for Me” (Ferguson), a snowball technique (Gill), and the bus stop (Gill). Some cases assigned groups particular tasks that went beyond conversations. For example, Fushell includes in her teaching notes an opportunity for participants to figure out how policy can be created and how to compare policies from different jurisdictions through document analysis. Participants working with Higginbottom and Friesen’s case have the opportunity to engage in writing a mission statement around social justice as a way for students to clarify how they understand and feel about social justice. Tuters and Ryan challenge users to utilize debating as a strategy to probe the issues associated with teacher resistance. A few cases promoted the use of drama, from an entire script (Young and Meyers) to different forms of role-playing (Briscoe, Gill) as a way to present and work through real-life leadership events. Some cases encouraged independent learning. For example, Lopez and Button included individual work in an independent writing assignment. Briscoe challenges individuals to consider the influences that shape one’s self through independent readings and an activity modified by Edward de Bono’s (1999) work. Last, but certainly not least, each set of teaching notes includes a rich resource list. If nothing else, readers of this special issue will have an extensive database of resources at their fingertips.

We believe that these 10 cases can act as a springboard for practicing and aspiring principals to reflect upon, and work through some of the current challenges they encounter leading Canadian schools. We hope that these exercises will inevitably improve the practice of the administrators of our schools.

We would like to hear from those who have used these cases as instructional tools. Feel free to contact us or any of the contributors in this special issue and let us know what you think.

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