

BCQ

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It would be a relatively simple matter, for change theory, if leaders behaved predictably. But this is not always the case. In recent years, leaders, who lead against the grain of public expectation when it comes to matters of race, equity and social justice, fascinate me.

My context is post-apartheid South Africa. I have been studying two white, Afrikaner¹ principals who decided to radically change their schools into racially and culturally inclusive institutions in the face of tremendous pressure from the traditional communities served by these schools. My ongoing interviews with these principals attempted to dig deep into their personal stories, including family background, educational experiences, racial ties, and community expectations, and the shaping influences of their educational contexts. I was particularly interested in critical incidents, for example, moments of personal challenge or transformation in the lives of these principals that could explain their commitment to changing the racial complexion and culture of their schools at the levels of student enrolments, staffing and curriculum. I wanted to know why they did not take the easy route of what we call 'the counterpoint schools' - those lily-white schools across the road, whose governing bodies control admissions and appointments in ways that ensure racially exclusive and culturally homogenous institutions. I established five things about these principals:

One, these principals hold a strong sense of social justice, and of the imperative to open up opportunity in these well-resourced, all-white schools to all South Africans. They do what they do, not on the basis of some superficial attempt to boost student enrolments, and therefore retain government subsidies, but through deep commitments to change, to correction and to community.

Two, these principals are keenly aware of their own limitations, their personal prejudices, and their troubled histories as white South Africans. They do not pretend that the past did not happen, or that their personal lenses are untainted by years of growing up as part of a privileged and dominant racial minority in an African country.

Three, these principals resist the all-too-common standpoint of white schools that black students coming in do so on the terms of the school. That is, that black children acknowledge and accept the cultural, linguistic and social arrangements that dominate in their new school. These leaders understand the importance of inclusion and accommodation, and of the need to create a broader and more diverse school climate.

Four, these principals develop around themselves strong networks of support to enable them to make courageous shifts in their schools. It became clear early on in our research with these schools and their principals that leadership was

shared, and that the principal as the key force for change relied on a team of people for emotional, political and strategic assistance in implementing change.

Five, these principals themselves change, and that they change gradually, as they proceed to transform their schools for greater inclusion and affirmation. There was no Damascus-road experience or dramatic turning point in the lives of these white school leaders. These principals started off with an initial commitment to change, but gradually found their own perceptions, emotions, and actions being transformed through positive engagement with black students, black parents and black district officials.

These leaders challenge the notion of the great, charismatic leader who has a powerful vision and leads, by him/herself, willing followers to change schools with unwavering conviction to conform to the expectations of their communities. Quite the opposite. Accordingly, the leaders in this study move against the logic of their own biographies by drawing on the negative lessons of their prior experiences to create new educational contexts which are more inclusive, more equitable and more just.

¹ Afrikaners are white South Africans of mainly Dutch descent who arrived since the 17th century and who held political power under apartheid era since at least the 1940s.