Transformative Leadership and Diversity: The Need for Change Agents, Followership, and Tipping Points in Our Educational Institutions

Laura E. Wyper
Algoma University teaching faculty
OISE. University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at changes in leadership, followership and team decision-making required to create more equitable educational environments. Through a critical analysis of the literature, the article explores how our colonial roots are still with us. The author concludes that decisions at post-secondary institutions are still often made for the benefit of dominant groups at the exclusion of others. The article argues that transformative leadership and followership in administrative and other role modeling positions create dissonance and tipping points needed to lead to change. This is crucial to making our schools equitable and inclusive.

As schools are seeing many forms of student identity, including sixty or more language and cultural groups (Ryan, 2003a; Ryan, 2003b), diversity is expanding due to the Internet and a shrinking of the global village ((Ryan, 2003a; Ryan, 2003b). And as many people experience personal resurgence and cultural reclamation (Paci, 2009), our educational institutions are failing to keep pace in dealing with racism, inclusion, or having demographically representative staff (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2009). The historical, colonial, and systemic causes of racism that have created and perpetuated the current power imbalances continue to be ignored or denied (McIntosh, 1990) or are used to undermine the creative attempts of anti-racist and anti-colonialist educational endeavours. This is often the case with multiculturalism as it subverts the very diversity it is said to propound through token gestures that in the end collapse diversity into simplistic foods and music (Ryan, 2003b). For these reasons, real and lasting change needs to be seen and racism should be a concern for all administrators (Ryan, 2003c).

The Problem

Colonization and the legacy of colonization have led to the racist, and other exclusionary, underpinnings of North American institutions, as they are based on centuries of self-serving colonial power imbalances and sustained by “…the Eurocentric understanding of the self as superior and civilized and the encountered other as inferior and savage…” (Knopf, 2007, p. 308). The hierarchical nature of this power system has been woven into the very fabric of our society and largely goes unseen or blatantly
ignored by many (McIntosh, 1990, p. 31). This has led to inequitable learning environments and a lack of opportunity for many.

Historically, this strategy was used by dominant groups, largely European/colonialist, to safeguard privilege by justifying the treating of others “…in unfair, exploitive, and demeaning ways” (Ryan, 2003b, p. 24). As a part of this, many indigenous peoples within the larger populations also contributed to the exploitation and oppression in their effort to claim power rather than become oppressed (Wolf, 1982). Although this does not excuse any individual, group or country of their colonial forms of oppression, the dehumanizing of others has been used over the centuries to excuse atrocities ranging from stealing of lands, resources, and peoples –slavery-to cultural and demographic genocides.

Today, racism continues both seen and unseen as “…whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege” (McIntosh, 1990, p. 31). As such, racism is largely ignored, denied or seen as individual acts which then absolve others of responsibility. Furthermore, as every individual is an intricate human being, racism is often interwoven with many other forms of oppression based on religion, class, or sexual orientation or ability. Yet, “One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see” (McIntosh, 1990, p. 36).

The insidious nature of racist privilege and oppression, as a systemic issue, is then interwoven into societies’ institutions of power. As education has historically been one of these institutions “…those people who had the prerogative of defining certain groups and individuals as different sought to protect their privileges, in part, by using educational institutions to eliminate what they saw in these different others as threatening” (Ryan, 2003b, p. 25). This has included various assimilation policies from the atrocities of the residential schools to streaming into lower level classes based on race or poverty. Such policies were then used to explain students’ poor functioning from a biological standpoint, or to blame parenting and the environment. Today, this continues with social and cultural discontinuities theories in which a “difference in communication” is used to explain the lack of success of certain student groups (Ryan, 2003b, p. 27). All of these strategies and theories are racist in their implications and practice because in the least they divert attention from the systemic privilege of the dominant group and are largely blame the victim mentalities. In the extreme, they were / are a form of cultural genocide.

The personal damage that ensues as racism, the ripple effects of colonialism, and discrimination are internalized is profound and can range from an unwillingness to speak up or voice one’s opinions to continuous and paralyzing self-doubt (Mayer, 2007). Sadly “[t]his tendency seriously hampers success in education and can lead to such deep self-hatred that even the individual who has internalized self-hatred is not always aware of doing so” (Mayer, 2007, p. 38).

Although at times subtle in comparison to practices of the past, many of the same issues of power and privilege are being played out in schools today and can have equally devastating effects on the students and staff that experience oppression. This can be seen as both students and teachers from various racialized groups are “…systemically marginalized in the local and global communities in which they reside, and in the institutions and school systems in which they are a part” (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2009, p. 606). In many of these institutions both students and staff of visible minorities often feel
silenced by their White peers and colleagues (Delpit, 1988). Many marginalized people feel they are never really heard by the dominant group and thus just stop talking because:

They [white people] don’t really want to hear what you have to say. They wear blinders and earplugs. They only want to go on research they’ve read that other white people have written. It just doesn’t make any sense to keep talking to them (Delpit, 1988, p. 281).

In some institutions the European ethnocentric viewpoint predominates and there is no recognition that there are other viewpoints (Anonymous, personal conversation, July, 2011). Some professors are not willing to accommodate students from other than the dominant group and as the word gets out that professor ‘X’ doesn’t like certain groups of students, students from these groups then self-select out of these professors’ classes (Anonymous, personal conversation, July, 2011). Other teachers insist that students just need more English, which totally discounts culture in the classroom, or they simply do not want to accommodate International students. A colleague who advocates for students discussed how the argument always came back to “what we’re not doing for Canadians” (Anonymous, personal conversation, July, 2011). This shows the racist and inequitable undertones that imply that there is a hierarchy in that when it comes to meeting student needs, it is Canadians first.

In another school where most students spoke Innu-aumen at home, less than half of the teachers used translations in the classroom “…and only 10% had any training in English as a second Language…” (Philpott, 2006, p. 370). In this community, the school itself was considered a factor in why students didn’t attend. It was seen as “…foreign, devoid of culturally relevant curriculum, and having little to no relevance in their lives” (Philpott, 2006, p. 370).

Furthermore, educational policies, curriculum and assessments are based on dominant Eurocentric belief systems and knowledge bases (Ryan, 2011) regardless of how ‘liberal’ some policies are seen to be. Even with more liberal programming, it is a fallacy to think that providing schooling for everyone that espouses liberal, middle-class values is beneficial because doing so only “…ensures the maintenance of the status quo, to ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it” (Delpit, 1988, p. 285). This is one more example of the systemic nature of racism that encourages people to think unconsciously that everyone should be like “us”--the dominant group.

This lack of equity is often perpetuated through the attempt to treat everyone equally; yet, the difference between equity and equality is a key point, as equality is the idea that everyone gets the same thing whereas equity is the idea that we all get what we need, which may look very different from one person to the next. It means we don’t all need two pencils, a pen, and a notepad; instead, some students will need a laptop with voice activated word processing, FM systems in the classroom, large print (Author, 2011), an early entry to residence, or a shorter lease agreement as they are coming from another country on a time sensitive student visa (Anonymous, personal conversation, July, 2011). These differences can then make the difference between student success and failure. Equality may not meet everyone’s needs for success whereas equity should ensure everyone’s needs are met.
These are only a few examples of the issues that students and staff in our educational institutions face if they are not from the dominant group. Even when diverse non-European groups are demographically the majority there still is not corresponding staff representation in the schools. Students still find themselves looking, largely, at white faces (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2009). Although not being White doesn’t in itself make individuals better teachers and “...even in diversity there can be small-mindedness” (Anonymous, personal conversation, July, 2011), cultural representation can still help because these teachers can stand as symbols and role models. Also, for some students such teachers may be more approachable because they share culture (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2009). As one student explained:

…by suggesting that I did not need anyone with substantive knowledge of the Caribbean for my committee, the program director is implying that a Black woman (or Black man, for that matter) who might have this knowledge is not needed in the department. This reflects the inability of the university to understand diversity. Diversity is not only about having Black bodies like mine in the student population, it is about having the resources to respond to these bodies (Bramble, 2000, as cited in James, 2000, p. 281).

Even if there are potential role models in the schools, many students and parents of younger students have to overcome and simply deal with language, customs and behaviours that they are not comfortable with (Ryan, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). One international student spoke of how she didn’t like walking in the hallways at the local high school because she would see other students showing physical affection to each other that made her very uncomfortable (Yang, personal conversations, July, 2011). Others students face the stereotyping of who is academic versus who isn’t based solely on the cultural or ethnic group they originate from, as well as on all the other preconceived ideas of “what that student group is like” (Anonymous, personal conversations, July, 2011; Ryan, 2003; Author 2011). Having to face such discomfort and discrimination every day, when also dealing with language or other cultural issues, can be overwhelming and energy depleting. For other students, a long history of unfair treatment means they do not buy into the merits of education as a means to good jobs and better lives and thus often “...engage in other sorts of activities” (Ogbu, 1982, 1987, 1992; as cited in Ryan 2003b, p. 32) rather than concentrating on school. This translates into poor academic performance and high dropout rates, such as the 75% dropout rate for Canadian Aboriginal students in 2003 (Brunnen, 2003; as cited in Ledoux, 2006, p. 266). Clearly our educational institutions are in need of serious change to meet the needs of diverse groups and tackle individual and systemic racism, discrimination and exclusion in general.

**Transformative Leadership**

One of the solutions is to hone transformative leadership in all administrative positions in our educational institutions. As Delpit (1988) sees it, the positioning of self at as many gateways as possible to “…agitate for change – pushing gatekeepers to open their doors to a variety of styles and codes” is one solution (Delpit, p. 292). She does not believe that diversity in the classroom will necessarily translate into acceptance at gatekeeping points (Delpit, 1988, p. 292) and thus puts the ability to make and sustain change squarely in the hands of those who hold the power. The dilemma associated with this idea is that many administrators have risen to their positions through the use of their power and privilege. As
company men they are not necessarily willing to give up or share that power (Ryan, 2003c, p. 160). Many administrators are not willing to bring attention to issues of racism or effect change because they may “…undermine their secure positions of privilege and also cause them[elves] a certain amount of personal discomfort” (Ryan, 2003c, p. 153). Therein lies the rub and thus the call for all human resources personnel in our educational institutions to begin their search for transformative leaders who have proven track records in social justice work. These individuals need to be capable of being change agents in our institutions in order to create the types of dissonance or tipping points that make real, meaningful, and lasting change.

Transformative leadership is by definition that which evokes transformation and is directed towards social change (Foster, 1986, p. 52). As change agents, these leaders need to critique existing social circumstances and look towards more emancipatory ways of working and relating (Foster, 1986, p. 52). Because many administrators who work for social justice find it very difficult work with extreme physical, emotional, and personal tolls (Theoharis, 2007), transformative leadership seems like a way of sharing the load. In this model, leadership is communal in the sense that “…leadership is shared and transferred between leaders and followers, each one only a temporary designation (Foster, 1986, p. 42). To further this recognition that leaders do not work in a vacuum but are a part of a larger community, the notion of followership (Kellerman, 2008) is now being looked at as a key component that, combined with tipping points (Gladwell, 2000), will create lasting change.

Change Agents and Followership

In a transformative leadership model, power and decision-making become fluid and all members of the team can be seen as leaders. Followers can lead and leaders can follow. This fluidity means staff can critically analyze situations to make decisions, to take charge, to follow or to lead as needed, regardless of their place in a work hierarchy (Kellerman, 2008). As such “…what it takes to be a good follower looks a lot like what it takes to be a good leader” (Kellerman, 2008, p. 236). This suggests that every member of the team has a shared responsibility towards both leadership and followership as a process of decision-making. Those with the consciousness to analyze what is occurring around them and their place in it are likely also to be the individuals that will then “…act in support of their views” (Ryan, 2006b, p. 128). These are the change agents our institutions need.

This sense of a community approach to both leadership and followership focuses on the staff, faculty, teachers, and resource people that are a part of the larger educational team, not simply on the person considered the leader. As such, inclusion will require solidarity, that people forge affiliations with like-minded others with whom they can work to spread the word (Ryan, 2006a, p. 19) or build coalitions of difference in which dialogue and work ensues. But this work is not for the meek:

Coalition work is not done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn’t look for comfort….You don’t get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition, you have to give, and it is different from your home…If you feel the strain, you are doing some good work (Reagan, 1983; as cited in James, 2000, p. 210).
This type of work means leaving your comfort zone. Although group work is never easy, with a combination of transformative leadership and an activist style of followership anyone on the team can become the agent required to create the tipping point needed for change.

**Tipping Points Creating Change**

A tipping point is a time when sudden and dramatic change occurs. The concept is based on the belief that ideas and behaviours “spread just like viruses do” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 7). It also recognizes that small changes can become contagious and lead to dramatic effects (Gladwell, 2000, p. 9). One researcher found that when high-status role models became less than five percent of a community population there were sudden and dramatic negative results such as increased teen pregnancies and a doubling of drop-out rates; yet, when that same population changed anywhere between the 40% and the five percent range there was little impact (Gladwell, 2000, p. 13). We also must not assume that a lack of role models will slowly erode a community as, “…at the Tipping Point, schools can lose control of their students, and family life can disintegrate at once” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 13). This again shows how each member of a team is integral to the overall functioning and ability of team members to increase inclusive practices while actively resisting and subverting exclusionary practices. Anyone of us can be that one percent that makes the difference.

Once we have established our educational teams of change agents, the next important step is to understand the idea of equity versus equality. Educational change agents must recognize and resist the mistaken equivalency between equality and equity when working with our diverse students, as these terms are very different entities, as discussed earlier. We must look at people as whole beings rather than parts, “…not presuming to know how people identify themselves, or assuming comprehension of their particular experiences without asking them about it” (Khayatt, 2000, as cited in James, 2000, p. 269). Yet, without naming and recognizing difference, rather than collapsing people into the whole, we potentially imply that difference “…is bad and needs to be erased at best, or contained at worse” (Bramble, 2000, as cited in James, 2000, p. 276). Any educational institution’s ability to promote equity is compromised if “…difference and diversity are framed in ways that simultaneously recognize and name yet exclude and collapse differences…” (Bramble, 2000, as cited in James, 2000, p. 282). This challenge is ours.

Although the changes needed require a team approach, the ability of any single member of a team to be that one agent needed for a tipping point and for change to happen is also relevant and has been mentioned briefly. We must never forget our responsibility to become a change agent. One strategy to help us remember is situated practice (McGibbon, 2000, as cited in James, 2000). This kind of mindfulness enables us to come to terms with where we sit in relation to the various oppressions (McGibbon, 2000 as cited in James, 2000).

Although the following excerpt was a discussion about situated practice in health care, the reflections are relevant for educational change agents as well. I have added terms such as [student] to remind us [myself] of our [my] purpose as we [I] strive to
• continually seek to discover and clarify my own identities;
• attempt to be aware of how my identities enter into every encounter in my practice;
• recognize that my ability to understand and respect the identities of clients [students] in my practice is enhanced, or limited, by my ability to discover and acknowledge my own identities;
• try to see the identities of clients [students] from their perspective;
• recognize and address societal forces that influence me, my practice and the people seeking my help; […]
• be conscious of the possibility that if I do not engage in a situated practice that recognizes oppression, I may be reinforcing these oppressions on an individual and societal level. Conversely, engaging in situated practice can help to undermine these oppressions; and
• engage in critical examination of how being a helper positions me in my practice.

I am in a “power over” situation in my practice, where the patient/client [student] occupies a position of less power than me. Even the word ‘patient’ ['student'] connotes a power imbalance which includes who has the preferred health [educational] knowledge and under what conditions they are willing to share this knowledge (McGibbon, 2000, as cited in James, 2000, p. 198).

If we can situate ourselves in our interactions and relationships, we will become over time more conscious of our effects and more inclusive of others. I do not only speak to those of us who are White as there are many forms of exclusion as noted throughout; and besides, “…racism is not about skin colour alone, as demonstrated by the racism experienced by people with Jewish ancestry” (McGibbon, 2000, as cited in James, 2000, p. 191).

Further strategies that change agents can employ include creative compliance (De Angelis, Griffiths, Joshee, Portelli, Ryan & Zaretsky, 2007). With this strategy, administrative and other necessary duties are still carried out but in ways that potentially bend the rules just enough to allow for inclusion without truly going against the original intent. For some change agents a managing up or leading up occurs wherein they work to show change and suggest change to those above them (Kellerman, 2008, p. 248). If they happen to be working with transformative leaders their suggestions will be heard and roles will be willingly exchanged temporarily. And there are strategies for “…‘tempered radicals’ - to subordinates who strike a balance between conformity and rebellion. The strategies are resisting quietly, turning threats into opportunities, negotiating, leveraging small wins, and taking collective action” (Meyerson, 2001, as cited in Kellerman, 2008, p. 250), as there are strength, security and increased effectiveness in numbers.

Other mentioned solutions that educational change agents can employ include: the ability to stop denying difference and/or collapsing difference. Instead, we can name and acknowledge it. We can refuse categorization and disrupt privilege as usual while we work with and through differences for understanding (James & Haig-Brown, 2000, as cited in James, 2000).
Having said this, the last recommendation is usually the very place in which people become bogged down, burned out or stop altogether. This is largely because managing conflict, even for change agents, is not simple.

Transformative leadership and followership enable people to create societal change by using interpersonal skills and mediation. The approach does not force the issue even though it occasionally plants seeds and creates dissonance. The strategy encourages people to see all sides of an issue or problem. Transformative leaders and followers ask questions and consciously choose how to promote dialogue and build community (Gerzon, 2006). Some readers might dismiss this as fanciful theorizing. On the contrary, the approach takes determination, openness and honesty. It calls on people to listen and share power, and to care enough to follow through.

Where This Can Take Us

There is no easy answer to where we find ourselves in education today. We have been bogged down in our interwoven histories; and for some of us, in our refusal to give up or share power. Still, I do not want to imply that everything in our educational institutions is negative. Many important and creative solutions are being implemented, including the move by some institutions to recognize intercultural education rather than international education.

These institutions recognize the importance of an asset-building model of inclusion and understanding that highlights what we need to learn from one another to work together. Developing intercultural skills benefits everyone in a diverse educational setting (Garson, 2014). Yet the tendency to exclude--with racism at its core--could potentially create further fragmentation and conflict within our schools and among the public. Exclusion is not just about those outside the dominant power group. It offends all of us--our humanity.

This article is a call to action. Educational institutions should bring equity to the forefront when they hire people and develop curriculum and assessments. Of special importance is the recruiting of administrators and staff who have proven records in transformative leadership/followership and social justice. These change agents will create tipping points through critique, questioning and listening. We will thus witness a move towards antiracist and inclusionary practices and policies at all levels of education.
References


