**Responsive Leadership in Social Justice Education**

**Arts-Based Assignment**

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When thinking about this arts-based assignment, I wanted to create a visual representation of what I saw in my head throughout the semester when speaking about injustices in our public education system. In researching social justice issues within schools, I saw these situations as cracks, creating barriers for students to overcome at school that prevent them from being as successful as some of their peers who don’t face the same injustices; this success is represented by the graduation cap. While each “crack” is individual in the painting, there are plenty of “cracks” that cross over one another in the real lives of students that prevent them from being successful in school, creating more complex situations. I will attempt to highlight these crossovers in this paper. When reading about these issues, there were plenty of suggestions on how leaders can help these students, and I saw this as “medicine” that educators can apply or use to help heal the cracks. Throughout this paper, I will explain the meaning of each “crack” and highlight the different forms of “medicine” that educators can use to be leaders within their communities and provide mending support for these issues.

The first crack in the cap that I painted was regarding race. It should be no surprise that racial biases impact student behaviour, academic learning and social interactions (Berg & Parad, 2024). While other countries have their own issues involving race, Canada sees a consistent barrier in education for Indigenous peoples. Non-Indigenous people, especially non-Indigenous educators, must learn and listen to the trauma that Indigenous people have faced for generations (Atleo, 2022). While not everything can be fixed at a school level, it is our job in the classroom to face these injustices directly and develop plans to create better access to things like technology, field trips or external psychological support. Principals should be encouraging and providing professional development surrounding how to partner with community members, how to engage in activities when technology is limited and how to create relationships with those who have been injured by system injustices (Liu et al., 2024).

Costs surrounding public education can be gruelling for any family. There are areas of public education like field trips, extracurriculars, class projects or fundraisers that foster a positive learning environment for those who participate (Liu et al., 2024). The issue remains that not all students have access to the funds needed to support these educational endeavours and stress can be added to not only the families but the students themselves when they understand that other children are receiving opportunities at school that they are not (Navan et al., 2019). In my personal experience, educators are not often privy to this knowledge, and it seems to be quite secretive between families and administrators regarding any financial barriers that may arise. I believe that we can aid this situation by informing teachers at the beginning of the year of any potential financial concerns so that teachers can be aware and make better judgements on how to best accommodate the class without incorporating costs in the classroom. As well, principals and school boards should be offering professional development sessions to ensure all staff have the appropriate tools to help their students. It is also important to understand what to do if a child is experiencing a financial barrier and how administrators can help. Without this knowledge, it can become easy to get lost in a privileged point of view thinking that everyone has access to the same opportunities.

Learning disabilities are shown in the blue crack on the cap. This barrier can create a deficit thinking mindset for teachers and administrators and put kids at a disadvantage throughout their educational careers (Liu et al., 2024). Districts with more inclusive practices tended to have fewer legal issues, positive attitudes toward inclusion, and leaders with special training in special education. Improving inclusion may require both a commitment from districts and better support in terms of resources and training for administrators (White et al., 2023).

Lastly, the yellow crack on the cap says, “low SES”. This is a consistent issue being brought forward in the literature. Research shows that students who have a lower socioeconomic status (SES) have less success in academics, and creativity and have less access to extracurriculars in comparison to their higher SES counterparts (Castillo-Vergara et al., 2018; Lang, 2021; Odgers & Adler, 2018). Extracurriculars have been shown to increase academic achievement and create connections within a school. Having these programs outside of school hours or requiring additional costs can create barriers for marginalized students and impact their sense of belonging at school (Lang, 2021). As well, it can create a feeling of social isolation (another crack on the cap) and overlap with the “costs” crack. Low-income students are far more likely to report adverse peer relationships and thereby experience social isolation and exclusion (Schmiedeberg & Schumann, 2018). In terms of leadership, there are suggestions for policymakers to help alleviate the feeling of social isolation such as increasing bullying prevention programs within communities, having extracurriculars during school hours that are free of charge and involving families more within the school (Lang, 2021; Schmiedeberg & Schumann, 2018).

Throughout this course’s readings and research, it is clear that the way to improve the public education system is to be responsive to student needs. Teaching in a culturally responsive manner engages students in pointing out problems that affect certain groups of people and gets students involved in figuring out how to fix them. It raises awareness of these issues and encourages them to act against unfair situations (Howell et al., 2019). Creating Responsive Leadership Teams to address issues of inequality strengthens the knowledge and equity within a community (Berg & Parad, 2024). Leaders must develop a mindset that acknowledges the impact of racial power and sees students as unique. They should practice hearing marginalized student voices and perspectives and consider those voices in decision-making. Finally, leaders should provide access for all students and keep in mind critical race theory and dynamics that can impact the school environment. These frameworks emphasize a classroom, school and community that meets the diverse needs of all students, ensuring inclusion, fairness, equity, and justice (Berg & Parad, 2024).

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