

# Leading for Equity and Social Justice: Systemic Transformation in Canadian Education

Kenneth H. MacKinnon

Volume 46, numéro 4, hiver 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109154ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.6459>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for the Study of Education

ISSN

0380-2361 (imprimé)

1918-5979 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

MacKinnon, K. (2023). Compte rendu de [Leading for Equity and Social Justice: Systemic Transformation in Canadian Education]. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 46(4), xxi-xxiv.  
<https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.6459>



## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

---

### **Leading for Equity and Social Justice: Systemic Transformation in Canadian Education**

Edited by Adréanne Gélinas-Proulx & Carolyn M. Shields

Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2022, 300 pages (paperback)

ISBN: 9781487542511

#### **Reviewed by:**

Kenneth H. MacKinnon

Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership

University of Prince Edward Island

Educational leaders are facing increasingly complex issues which challenge their leadership. They struggle to deploy strategies and solutions which enable them to meet the needs of all students (Tuters & Portelli, 2017). This text provides a way forward to address true systemic and transformative change by carving a pathway for leading with and through an equity and social justice lens. What is most exciting about the text is its Canadian context and content. The authors engage relevant and contemporary issues in Canadian education systems, and this makes it highly applicable to educational leadership programs across the country. The purpose of the text is to highlight the ways in which students and families from non-dominant cultures are marginalized within our school systems and to suggest ways in which leaders might actively lead for true transformative and systemic change in the service of those stakeholders. Leaders are positioned as having a critical and impactful role in creating, determining, and facilitating transformative and

equitable change. This premise and importance of the book is supported in extant literature (Leithwood et al., 2020; Superville, 2020; Ryan, 2012).

The book is divided into three distinct parts, each setting the stage for the next. In part one the authors provide a comprehensive overview of transformative leadership theory and approaches that is supported by the work of one of the editors Carolyn M. Shields (2013, 2018). While this section of the text sets the stage for understanding transformative leadership theory, it does become somewhat repetitive as the central tenets of the theory put forward by Shields are repeated throughout the chapters. What is significant however for Canadian audiences, is that this perspective is given a distinctly Canadian context while previous texts addressing transformative leadership theory do not. For example, one chapter addresses transformative leadership practices in French-language schools within an Anglo-dominated education system, a uniquely Canadian context.

In part two, equitable and socially just approaches to leadership, power relations, the difference between decision making and choices, combatting deficit thinking, and the dangers of centering whiteness are all examined. Each chapter is focused on leadership practice informed through the lens of social justice. This perspective is shared in both K through 12 and higher education contexts. Transformative leadership theories are connected to theories of culturally relevant pedagogy and the power which comes through listening in a duo-ethnographic study. In this section, the authors point to very real challenges in their practice. While it is instructive in the sense that what is presented is relatable to most leaders, at times the connection to leadership gets a little lost. Nevertheless, this section represents a very impactful examination of what it means to lead in a socially just way.

In part three discrimination is decentered as several contemporary issues in education are actively addressed through a transformative leadership lens. These include Indigenous leadership, the inclusion of trans students in schools, supporting refugee and newcomer students in our schools, and navigating school leadership under Bill 21 in which public employees in Quebec are prohibited from wearing religious garments and symbols of any kind. In this section of the text, we see transformative leadership enacted as inequities in our education systems are identified. While the rest of the text highlights the many challenges leaders face, these chapters provide a glimmer of hope. While inequities are laid bare, possibilities for change are highlighted and this makes the text a very valuable tool, especially for those who are learning not how to practice transformative leadership but also engage in educational policy creation.

What is most important about this work is that it sets the stage for action. While it lays out the many ways in which colonial practices and structures as well as racism impacts students and families within our education systems, it provides suggestions for systemic change. It recognizes the complexities which come with leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and uses current and relevant educational issues to illuminate the hope which comes with transformative leadership. Shields' work in transformative leadership is central to this text and it is shown to stand the test in relation to meeting the complex roles educational leaders take up in Canadian schools each day. This is a testament to the viability and importance of transformative leadership theory as means of actively disrupting inequities and leading in truly socially just ways (Shields & Hesbol, 2020).

This text stands apart from similar books published around the same time particularly because of its Canadian context, but also in the way it positions the transformative power of school leadership. It is difficult to find contemporary texts which can be considered companion texts however one text written not too long ago is DeMatthews (2018) *Community engaged leadership for social justice: A critical approach in urban schools* which focuses in on school improvement practices which centre informed, social justice approaches. Similarly, Lopez's (2021) *Decolonizing educational leadership: Exploring alternative approaches to leading schools* is also a companion text, as it envisions a decolonized educational leadership approach. *Leading for equity and social justice* offers something new in its systemic reach and practicality. For this reason, I will be using this text in a graduate course I am teaching on educational leadership. We cannot talk about educational leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without centering social justice and equity, and this text does this beautifully. Its Canadian content makes it a highly relevant text to use in graduate courses across Canada and it would also serve as a helpful text in principal preparation programs. This book is both impactful and hopeful as it paves the way for leaders in their exploration of transformative leadership in action.

## References

- DeMatthews, D. (2018). *Community engaged leadership for social justice: A critical approach in urban schools*. Routledge.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A. & Hopkins, D. (2020) Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited, *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5-22, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077
- Lopez, A. E. (2021). *Decolonizing Educational Leadership: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Leading Schools*. Springer International Publishing AG. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-62380-7>
- Ryan, J. (2012), *Struggling for inclusion: Educational leadership in a neo-liberal world*, Information Age Publishing.
- Shields, C. M., & Hesbol, K. A. (2020). Transformative leadership approaches to inclusion, equity, and social justice. *Journal of School Leadership*, 30(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619873343>
- Shields, C. M. (2018). *Transformative leadership in education: equitable and socially just change in an uncertain and complex world* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Routledge.
- Superville, D. R. (2020). Principals need help building anti-racist schools: Anti-racist school leadership is about become more racially aware and taking action, *Education Week*, 40(6), 1-5. <https://www-lib-uwo.ca.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy>
- Swanson, J. & Welton, A. (2019). When good intentions only go so far: White principals leading discussions about race. *Urban Education*, 54(5), 732-759. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918783825>
- Tuters, S. & Portelli, J. (2017). Ontario school principals and diversity: Are they prepared to lead for equity? *International Journal of Educational Management*, 31(5), 598-611.