Chapter Topic: Advocating for new social movements of social justice, locally, nationally and internationally

**The Courageous Conversations Project: Interrogating Perspectives and Perceptions of Race, Poverty and Schooling in South Africa and the United States**

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*Creating freedom, community and viable relationships has its price. It costs time and courage to learn how to sit in the fire of diversity. It means staying centered in the heat of trouble. It demands that we learn about small and large organizations, open city forums and tense street scenes. If you step into leadership or facilitatorship without this learning, you may spend your time recapitulating the blunders of history. ~ Arnold Mindell*

***Background/Rationale***

We (the authors) met in 2009 during a People to People exchange event at Stellenbosch University near Cape Town, South Africa. Since that meeting we have been collaborating on the Courageous Conversations Project. Visiting each other’s countries annually, touring schools and communities and participating in university colloquies have raised our awareness of our own and other perspectives and perceptions of the relationships among race, poverty and schooling. We have met collectively and individually with university faculty, school administrators and regional directors to review the project and ask for guidance for both the purpose and details of the initiative.

Illustrative of the very personal nature of the work, the US author describes his experience upon visiting the Hector Pieterson museum in Soweto, a museum dedicated to the Soweto uprising in 1976 in which soldiers from the apartheid government fired upon students who were protesting the mandate that Afrikaans and English be the only acceptable mediums of expression in their schools:

*“I was touring the museum hallways with a delegation of black and white educators from the US, looking at the heartbreaking photographs of soldiers confronting school-age students; especially upsetting was the iconic photo of Hector Pieterson, in the arms of a fellow student, after having been shot and killed by the police. While I was disturbed by what I saw, I was composed and cerebral. I noticed that many of the black people who were touring with me were crying. It was then that I realized that the lived experience of being black was something that I could appreciate but never fully understand. My consciousness is a white consciousness, freighted with historical privileges and protections, and as much as I regard myself as a politically progressive and sensitive individual, I will always be on the outside of the black experience looking in.”*

The project is driven by what we perceive as social injustice on a systemic and massive scale throughout the educational systems in both countries, an injustice propelled by structural, not overt, racism (Wells, 2010). Rather than building on cultural differences to strengthen our educational offerings, we agree with Moll’s assessment regarding how far we have come since the landmark cases in the U.S. involving school segregation: “. . . current educational remedies, featuring regimes of standardization and testing to control schools, seem stagnant if not anachronistic, failing, as they do, to mobilize the social, cultural, and linguistic processes of diverse communities as the most important resources for positive educational change. And, in this failure, they also delay for all of us the fulfillment of the promise of *Mendez* and *Brown”* (Moll, 2010, p.451). Add “. . . and the promise of the end of apartheid” and Moll’s opinion has a two-country relevance.

Within this chapter we describe a template for action that we believe is replicable in any investigation of the influences of race and poverty on educational opportunity. Our belief is that the first step in any such investigation is the ability to confront social injustice head on, eschewing bromides and polite fiction that so often characterize discussions of race and poverty. We are ever-mindful of these “economies of niceness . . . ways in which . . . being nice [is used as a] currency . . . traded openly as a place-holding discourse to take the place of more critical work” (Galman, Pica-Smith and Rosenberger, 2010, p. 233).

The project is situated within the framework of critical race theory and is propelled by a vision to challenge the dominant discourse in each country – a discourse that attempts to normalize “whiteness.” This phenomenon is animated in fictionalized parables created by critical race legal scholar, Derrick Bell. One parable’s lesson is that in schools created for white children, African American culture and language are misunderstood and pathologized as deficient and African American student behavior is framed as oppositional (Taylor, 2007). Despite the daunting task of confronting this dominant discourse, the authors are committed to moving in a positive direction, fueled by the courage of the participants to be actors in uncharted territory. A not surprising (but nevertheless unsatisfying) finding thus far is that we have uncovered more questions than answers.

A tour of a New York suburb by the South African author provides a window into the growing awareness that both authors are experiencing as they work together. He finds a sobering similarity apparent in the social landscapes of both countries:

*“As the car drove through an impoverished neighborhood, a community with apartments over storefronts, run-down buildings and black people walking up and down the streets, I was not surprised, knowing that there were many such communities in the US. What was surprising was that within less than a hundred meters the boulevard changed into a leafy and inviting street of wealthy homes with manicured lawns which I was told was an exclusively white enclave. I had to stop and take a photo up and down both ends of the street. The proximity of the disparity was breathtaking, reminiscent of my homeland where poor black townships are within walking distance of magnificent homes, gated, secure and filled with white people. I recalled one of the South African principals in our project discussing proximity and school resource disparity: ‘It creates problems when we have a school that offers a wide range of activities, opportunities and outstanding results, while on the doorstep of the same community we have a school that has limited resources, poor results and offers learners no hope.’ My American friends seem to be living with the same challenge.”*

The nature and purpose of the work of the Courageous Conversations Project is manifold:

* to promote honest dialogue and reflection about issues of race and poverty in South African and US schools;
* to examine forces of resistance to providing equitable resources and instruction for all students regardless of race or social circumstances;
* to examine the historical roots of race and poverty in both countries and the (often subtle but powerful) impact the historical narratives have on the children of both countries;
* to examine the current socio-cultural influences on race and poverty in schools;
* to learn cross-culturally about workable strategies for achieving social justice.

While our work is informed by the scholarship of those who have examined issues of race, poverty and schooling, our approach to the project is spare, direct and unadorned. A few simple elements comprise the model:

* Situating the project in an historical context;
* Becoming aware of some of the “drivers” of social injustice related to schooling in both countries;
* Enlisting the support of school leaders who come from a variety of settings; and
* Creating opportunities for conversation, using protocols that stimulate open and honest deliberation and/or dialogue.

With these elements in place, we hope to create uncomfortable, unprecedented, cross-national, non-defensive, vulnerability-inducing conversations (i.e., courageous conversations) about how race and poverty affect educational outcomes for children. By creating dissonance we hope to stimulate a passion for solving problems that to date have remained intractable. Davidoff’s warning about the current paradigm of school leadership in South Africa seems most fitting:

*“ . . . the most important dimensions of leadership . . . have to do with vision, passion, love, imagination, and a burning sense of commitment to the social and human dimension of education – and the importance of leadership in this context. . . current approaches tend to focus more on skills development and conceptual understandings of specific paradigms, rather than providing opportunities for people in leadership positions to be inspired to inspire – for they themselves to undergo profound paradigm shifts through experiencing what it really means to lead into the future. Without such passion, very little is likely to change, and the old divisions which characterised education – and life more generally – in South Africa, are likely to remain. What we are looking for are ways of breaking the chains of the past, which find their way into the present, and are often – unwittingly – created and maintained internally” (Davidoff, 2010, p. 10).*

A few caveats about the project are in order. First, while there has been much written regarding the differences in the scourges known as racism and poverty, for purposes of the Courageous Conversations Project, we have chosen to link the two concepts. Indeed, in both South Africa and the United States, those traditionally thought of as the underserved (blacks and coloureds in South Africa and blacks and Latinos in the US) are also those who often suffer from the burden of poverty. Second, our investigation refers to authors on both sides of the Atlantic. While individual researchers and scholars who have investigated issues of race and poverty have mainly worked within their own countries’ contexts, the truths they unearth are applicable for the most part to both South African and US circumstances. Finally, the project is in its initial stages. We make no warrant regarding conclusive findings. We do, however, offer the ideas in this chapter as a draft plan of action, one that can be modified, re-contextualized, or borrowed from at will for those seeking to enter the breach.

***Historical Narratives***

Issues of race, poverty and injustice are woven into the historical narratives of South Africa and the United States. Hundreds of years of social oppression and tumultuous upheavals in both countries – enslaving and colonizing minorities, civil wars, power struggles between the powerful and the more powerful – bring us to the modern era where we glimpse as first hand witnesses the continuation of racial and social strife.

In 1946, Alan Paton wrote *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Paton, 1948/2003) as both a cry against injustice and a yearning for justice in his beloved South Africa (Callan, 1991). Two years later the imprimatur of apartheid became law of the land, a law which relegated 90% of the population to second class citizenship, gave rise to a social revolution and left the country today, as some see it, “. . . divided as before . . . racism. . . rife at an individual level and heavily entrenched in democratic South Africa on an institutional level” (Naidu, 2003).

A few years earlier, across an ocean, Richard Wright, in *Native Son* (Wright, 1940), wrote of the harrowing experiences of a young black man caught in the grip of racial forces he could not understand. It was 1940, 14 years before Brown v. Board of Education would mark the end of de jure school segregation in the United States, and a generation before the progress of the civil rights movement. Today, widespread de facto segregation stands as the greatest engine of disparity in American public life. Attitudes regarding race have shown little change even after the election of the first black US president, a national survey reporting that “stark racial divides” remain (Winslow, 2010).

The US and South African societies have undergone parallel scenarios in their respective responses to racism (see Table 1). “We can make separate more equal,” the call of those who do not want social change (Wells, 2010), began with Plessy v. Ferguson, which officially sanctioned separate but equal in the US.A US principal involved in the project discusses why separate but equal remains an intractable paradigm in the public consciousness, even for those who would ostensibly gain from integrating schools:

*“One option [to address school inequities] would be that wealthier communities could consolidate with poorer communities for purposes of schooling. However, there would be a firestorm of reaction from both communities. A lot of the black communities would be upset because of what they would see as patronage. They say: ‘Just give us the resources and we will do fine.’ It is unfortunate that consolidation would be so difficult to achieve because both the white students and black students would benefit. It debunks mythology about each community if kids go to school with one another.”*

In South Africa, the notorious Bantu Act sought the same remedy for social inequity, notwithstanding Alexander’s reminder that “ . . . no social system based on the separation of people into ‘groups’ could result in an equal or just sharing of that society’s opportunities and resources” (Alexander, 2004, p.6). Affirmative action was the US attempt at a course correction after non-discrimination laws were passed; the Redress Acts in South Africa were similarly situated to make right the injustices of the apartheid era. But just as the Bakke case challenged affirmative action in the US, there are those in South Africa who have challenged the continuation of categorizing social action by race, seeing it as a betrayal of the ideals of nonracialism (Dugger, 2010).

*Table1 Movements and legal milestones related to race issues in the United States and South Africa*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Era | United States | South Africa |
| Separate But Equal | Plessy v. Ferguson | The Bantu Act |
| Desegregation  | Brown v. Board of Education | End of Apartheid Rule |
| Redressing inequality | Affirmative Action | The Redress Acts |
| Challenging redress | Bakke decision | Support of ‘nonracialism’ |

*Note: While both countries have been visited by various movements, the make-up of the populations should be taken into account in any discussion of race and the body politic. In South Africa 90% of the country is African or coloured and in the US, while there is a growing black and Hispanic community, the majority (63.7%) in 2010 was non-Hispanic white.*

***The Narrative Today***

One easily senses the historical DNA of racism and division from both countries in today’s narrative as the US author discovered about South Africa during his first visit:

*“When I first arrived in South Africa I naively expected black and white folks to be in harmony with the wealth distribution being relatively evenly divided. How surprised I was to find the extremes. And how naïve I was to believe that after 16 years of democratic rule, things would be so very different. Coming from a land in which slavery was abolished 150 years ago and school segregation abolished 60 years ago I shouldn’t have been surprised. I was reminded of what Titus had to say in his caution to South Africans regarding relying too heavily on a de jure solution to social problems: ‘To start with the illusion that the U.S. Supreme Court could fundamentally alter the U.S. school system because of an ikon [sic] called the Bill of Rights, is to end up with a delusion that it can eliminate the vested economic, political and social inequalities in American society generally’ (Titus, 1974, p.7) “*

In South Africa, many believe the single most important issue facing the nation since the 1994 abolition of apartheid is breaking the grip of poverty on a substantial portion of the citizenry. Most economic and policy analysts agree that approximately 40% of South Africans live in poverty, with the poorest 15% in a desperate struggle to survive (van Wyk, May, 2010). The storyline of poverty easily bleeds into the schooling narrative. Graeme Bloch, an education researcher at the Development Bank of Southern Africa remarks: “If you are in a township school, you don’t have much chance. That’s the hidden curriculum – that inequality continues, that white kids do reasonably and black kids don’t really stand a chance unless they can get into a formerly white school or the small number of black schools that work” (Bloch, as cited in Dugger, 2009). This inequality is staggering when one looks at the statistics associated with black and white student achievement in South Africa. As an example, “. . . in the Western Cape, only 2 out of 1,000 sixth graders in predominantly black schools passed a mathematics test at grade level in 2005, compared with almost 2 out of 3 children in schools once reserved for whites that are now integrated, but generally in more affluent neighborhoods” (Dugger, 2009).

It is clear that after seventeen years of democracy in South Africa “matric results” (similar to graduation rates in the US) remain a stark reflection of the racial history of the country. The 2009 results clearly indicate that pupils attending former Model C, former House of Representatives (HoR), and former House of Delegates (HoD) schools stood a much better chance of passing matric exams than those in other schools (Roodt, 2010). Roodt suggests that this can be attributed to the fact that former Model C, HoR, and HoD were better resourced under apartheid, and still generally benefit from superior facilities, and other factors, including the greater independence arising from their semi-private status, and greater parental involvement. Of the 466, 474 African pupils who wrote the 2009 matric examination, more than 90% did so in schools other than Model C, HoR and HoD schools. This indicates that a pupil’s odds of passing matric are significantly affected by what type of school he or she attends.

The US has a similar story to tell regarding wealth and schooling today. The wealthiest one percent of Americans possesses a greater collective net worth than the bottom 90 percent (Kristoff, 2011). The percentage of Americans living in poverty in the US recently hit one in seven, or 44 million, a 15-year high. Long Island, the location of the US site for the current project, is home to the 32 richest zip codes in the United States according to the Forbes List of America’s Most Expensive ZiP codes (Endo, 2010). And as witnessed by the South African author, Long Island is also home to poverty-stricken communities, some neighboring extraordinarily wealthy communities. The contrasts on every social indicator between these worlds apart have been labeled by some, the “shame of the suburbs” (The shame of the suburbs, 2004). A look at the school profiles indicates the relationship between wealth and school success.

On Long Island only 9 % of the black students and 14 % of the Hispanic students were enrolled in the top 25 % of Long Island’s best schools in 2008-2009, according to the US Dept of Education. In 2009, one struggling district with a large minority population had a four-year graduation rate of 50 % while the white majority community next door had a rate of 96%. (In the adjacent county, a similar statistic is found between neighboring districts - 52 % graduation rate in the minority community and 95 % in the white community.) In the school districts in which 90 % or more of the students are black or Hispanic, on average only 2% of their students score at the highest level of the state’s eighth grade English language arts exam and 8 % on the math exam. By contrast, on average, 17% of the students in districts that are 90 % or more white or Asian score at the highest ELA level and 36 % at the highest math exam level (Gross, 2011).

***The Drivers***

What fuels the continuation of social injustice currently existing in the school systems of South Africa and the United States? Notably, Moll (2010) reminds us that all educational decisions involve relations of power and treatment of differences and have consequences for equity and social justice. Therefore, we ask, “What are the drivers that give force and energy to the structural racism and socio-economic divide that continue to make schooling experiences so uneven for the children of both countries?” We offer three such drivers which may shed light on this phenomenon.

*Zero Sum/No Room at the Top*

First, race and poverty appear to be particularly problematic when there is a perception of scarcity of resources. Conversely, in a “non-zero-sum mobility” environment, i.e., one in which there is a perception that there is enough for all (Alba, 2009), there may be less likelihood of racial and social tensions to emerge. To what extent do policy makers, educators, parents and students believe that a “zero sum” exists in providing school resources? And if there is the belief that there is just so much to go around, how does this affect attitudes when decisions have to be made about schooling? Some strikingly familiar themes emerge in Paton’s tale of the South African racial and wealth divide. Here he weighs in on the zero sum phenomenon:

*“Some say that the earth has bounty for all, and that more for one does not mean less for another, that the advance of one does not mean the decline of another. They say that poor-paid labour means a poor nation, and that better-paid labour means greater markets and greater scope for industry and manufacture. And others say that this is a danger, for better-paid labour will not only buy more but will also read more, think more, ask more, and will not be content to be forever voiceless and inferior.” (Paton, 1948/2003, p. 110)*

Is it possible that there is a basic mistrust of the powerless because they may become powerful, thereby threatening the elites who run each country? This appears to be a disturbing but plausible notion. “Societies inescapably generate elites. Those elites can be public-spirited and responsible or they can be selfish and shortsighted. An elite can have concern and care for the less advantaged or it can callously disregard them” (Frum, 2011). Or, the elites can (either consciously or unconsciously) develop a plan which purports to help the disadvantaged, but by its very structure keeps the disadvantaged in their place. The strategy is borne of a fear of zero sum room at the top. Okun (2010) uses a simple trope to demonstrate this phenomenon: “An analogy would be the ladder – its highest point represents our deepest aspiration while by its very nature accommodating only a limited number. Western culture posits this ladder as a big ‘T’ truth, human nature, an immutable reality, when it is, in fact, simply a single and very specific construct . . .“ (p. 7). In another words, if the elites allow everyone an entrée to the upper echelons of society, then there will simply be less room for the current occupants. We submit that one such strategy in the US is seen in the energy and drive that powerful and rich people have to close the “achievement gap.”

For years, the American public has been bombarded with the news that there exists an achievement gap between white children of privilege and children of color who are poor. Federal and state initiatives abound to address this inequity. Is it possible that some believe that there is room at the top for only a limited number and that by continuing to rank schools and students, we keep the air at the top rarefied for the privileged few? The lurching towards greater accountability may actually be driving the disparity (Wells, 2010). What some see as a well-meaning attempt to offer additional resources – and certainly additional attention – to needy children, others see as a subterfuge with a devious end in mind:

“*While the invocation of the achievement gap into the national and intellectual mainstreams began as way to name the nation’s failure to educate all youth equally, it soon devolved into a mechanism for normalizing Whiteness and further obscuring past and current histories of racial oppression. Instruments (or, perhaps more accurately, social weaponry) such as aptitude and achievement tests provided (and continue to provide) the blunt force for this invasive effort, both visibly and rationally upholding white-superiority ideology over all student populations regardless of race .. . the constant and continuous comparison of students of color (African and otherwise) to white students as buffered by test scores reinforces those differences in the extreme . . . A kind of white superiority- having been firmly established in the discourse of achievement- angles performance squarely in the direction of Whiteness, which occupies a central space in the performance paradigm, a space against which all other things, people, and places are measured . . . our continuing search for strategies to inspire the performances of youth of color in this country requires renewed commitment, particularly in relation to our much longer quest to redress historical inequities in education. But evoking the achievement gap discourse as matter of fact doesn’t get us closer to our goals. In fact, it moves us farther away because the construct of the achievement gap digs deep into those psychoexistential wounds-the same wounds that first severed the nation” (Kirkland, 2010).*

*The Convenient Lie*

*“It’s . . . hard to ignore the reality that poverty is an immutable obstacle in the path of improving public education, one that simply can’t be swept aside by the rhetoric of raised expectations” (Mahler, 2011)*

The second driver to consider is the “convenient lie” factor (Dodge, 2009). Much as there are inconvenient truths that many of us wish would go away, so there are convenient lies that we are willing to accept as facts. One such lie: If only the schools were doing a better job, then the ills of society would be cured. In a now famous statement, US President George Bush, during his campaign for the presidency, claimed that those who thought that schools in poverty stricken areas could not succeed, were practicing “the soft bigotry of low expectations” (Bush, 2000). That clarion call unleashed an army of crusaders who promote the canard that poverty is not the problem.

The truth is that good teachers and administrators are no match for “harsh social policies and the pernicious effects of poverty” (Berliner, 2009). Lack of fundamental community health and infrastructure needs, e.g., permanent roads, piped water and sewage, electricity (Mbunyuza de Heer Menlah, 2010) are not rendered harmless to a child’s welfare by a good school. Such is the stuff of magical thinking, which provides convenient cover for those who wish the social order to remain the same.

Advocates of the good-schools-are-possible-in-spite-of -poverty mantra often point to “high flying schools” that achieve high test scores despite serving disadvantaged populations. The fact is that the likelihood of becoming a “high flying school” in spite of poverty should give any thoughtful and honest individual pause: Of 60,000 schools considered, low-poverty schools are 22 times more likely to reach consistently high academic achievement compared with high-poverty schools. Schools serving student populations that are both low poverty and low minority are 89 times more likely to be consistently high performing compared with high poverty high minority schools (Harris, 2007).

Not only is poverty self-evidently destructive to a child’s well-being, but it produces a host of metastasizing branches that impede educational progress:

* The Century Foundation in “Turnaround Schools That Work: Moving Beyond Separate but Equal” (Kahlenberg, 2009) suggests that the current trend in the US for turning around schools ignores important factors, including the students and parents in high poverty and low poverty schools. Dramatic differences exist in behavior, mobility, peer vocabulary and parental involvement (in PTA membership and volunteering) between high poverty and low poverty schools.
* It is estimated that by the time a child is age 4, children of professional parents have heard on average 48 million words addressed to them while children in poor welfare families have heard only 13 million (Hart & Risley, 1995).
* Students are subject to conditions in poor communities which can have dramatic effects on their ability to perform in school: low birth weight; alcohol and cigarette use, diabetes and influenza during pregnancy; inadequate dental and vision care; difficulty providing enough food and therefore inadequate nutrition; the effects of pollution (e.g., high levels of mercury and lead, and PCBs, air pollution inducing asthma); family violence and stress, neighborhood violence; and transient attendance because of frequent moves (Berliner, 2009).

As Richard Rothstein (2008) opines: “There’s a lack of moral, political, and intellectual integrity in this suppression of awareness of how social and economic disadvantage lowers achievement. Our first obligation should be to analyze social problems accurately; only then can we design effective solutions” (p. 10).

*The Gini Index*

The third driver, which actually sets the stage for the first two, has to do with the gini index results. The gini index, a gauge of the disparity in wealth distribution between the top 10% and the bottom 10 % of a country finds that South Africa is #10 and the US is # 56 (in a recent iteration of the index involving 130 countries) in terms of greatest disparity, with the number one position reflecting the country with the greatest disparity. This, in effect, means that both countries, from a global perspective, have huge gulfs between those who have economic resources and those who do not. At the deepest level, this disparity forces those who believe in justice to confront their histories, their policies and the lack of progress towards equity. Table 2 shows the positions of South Africa and the US - and the company they keep. And, for another point of reference, the countries with the least disparity are also shown.

*Table 2 Gini index of selected countries’ wealth disparity - lower numbers signify greater disparity*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *#1 Namibia**#2 Lesotho**#3 Sierra Leone**#4 Central African Republic* *#5 Botswana* *#6 Bolivia* *#7 Haiti* *#8 Colombia**#9 Paraguay* ***#10 South Africa*** *#11 Brazil* *#12 Panama* *#13 Guatemala* *#14 Chile* *#15 Honduras* *#16 Peru* *#17 Dominican Republic* *#18 Argentina**#19 Papua New Guinea* | *#47 Nicaragua**#48 Iran**#49 Saint Lucia**#50 Kenya**#51 Singapore**#52 Burundi**#53 Thailand**#54 Cambodia**#55 Senegal****#56 United States****#57 Ghana**#58 Turmenistan**#59 Georgia**#60 Sri Lanka**#61 Mali**#62 Russia**#63 Tunisia**#64 Burkina Faso**#65 Morocco* | *# 121 Ukraine* *# 122 Finland**# 123 Hungary* *# 124 Bosnia and Herzegovina* *# 125 Slovakia* *# 126 Norway* *# 127 Czech Republic* *# 128 Sweden* *# 129 Japan* *# 130 Denmark* |

 *(retrieved from http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco\_gin\_ind-economy-gini-index on September 23, 2011)*

The impact of the uneven distribution of wealth on life chances should not be underestimated:

* Children who experience even a bout of poverty are less likely to graduate from high school, are more likely to become very young parents, have more difficulties learning and earn less money than their non-poor peers as adults. “Child poverty is in some ways a leading indicator of how the country is going to be doing down the road . . . Nearly all of the social problems that we worry about in this country are heavily correlated with child poverty” (McCarthy, 2011).
* Inequality within rich countries breeds a host of health and social problems, including lower life expectancy, higher rates of infant mortality, shorter height, poor self-reported health, low birth weight, AIDS and depression, mental illness, decreased level of trust, obesity, teenage births, homicides, imprisonment rates and social mobility problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011).
* “. . . the disparity between the haves and have nots was often as simple as black and white. Despite the end of apartheid in 1994 the bulk of the diamond mines, farmland and other natural resources remain under the control of the white minority Afrikaners . . . . Whites make up about 12% of South Africa’s 50 million people, yet they still hold down about 80% of all professional jobs. White unemployment is around 5%; black unemployment, 27%” (Khan, 2010).
* How many children and parents in impoverished communities can describe their school as this US principal from a wealthy community describes his? “Stable tax bases, continuity of leadership, better retention rate of faculty and staff, better pay, access to technology, appropriate and well-maintained facilities, lower class size, a full array of guidance and special education services, home life which is immersed in culture and literature, two parent families, (you can always reach a parent), home violence and neighborhood violence virtually non-existent. These are the resources of a wealthy district.”
* The Pew Research Center study shows that in the US the wealth gaps rise to record highs among whites, blacks and Hispanics (see Table 3). These findings are based on the Pew Research Center’s analysis of data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), an economic questionnaire distributed periodically to tens of thousands of households by the U.S. Census Bureau. It is considered the most comprehensive source of data about household wealth in the United States by race and ethnicity. This metric of disparity is truly breathtaking.

*Table 3 Median Net Worth of Households in US 2005 and 2009*

 2009 2005

Whites $113, 149 $134, 992

Hispanics $6,325 $18, 359

Blacks $5,677 $12, 124

 *(Pew Research Center, Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2011, retrieved fro*

*(Retrieved http://pewresearch.org )*

Part of the work of this project is to interrogate all facets of race and poverty consciousness that shape decision making in the past and now. There have been painful realizations in the journey thus far for those who have chosen to participate. It is no coincidence that the following story is told under the sub-heading “The Drivers.” The authors describe the first time they met, a meeting that ended with a realization that they are struggling to reconcile with the goals of their project . . .

*“We were dining in a South African restaurant with delegations of educators from both the United States and South Africa. Throughout the evening the authors’ talked briskly and resolutely about the issues of wealth disparity and the accompanying uneven resources available in schools. We confidently shared stories of our work within our respective countries to even the playing field, for after all, the well-to-do had no more rights than the poor. At the end of the dinner, the US author noticed that the car key his new South African friend was holding sported a BMW logo. Surprised, he asked his friend if he owned a BMW. When the answer came back in the affirmative – and the US author explained that he owned the same model BMW - both had to laugh self-consciously. As it turns out the two arbiters of moral righteousness both owned expensive sports cars. Does this matter? How can it not matter we told ourselves. How can we ignore our own histories and privileges and possessions and how they shape our attitudes about inequalities?”*

***Social (In)Justice and Educational Leadership***

*Social Injustice – “Undeserved inequalities heaped on children.” - John Rawls*

The Courageous Conversations Project attempts to elicit frank discourse on the subject of race, poverty and schooling, understanding that educational matters reside within the larger context of societal matters, i.e., the historical narratives and the challenges of equitable distribution of resources that still exist today. Believing as we do that school leaders can have a profound impact on not only the children they serve, but entire communities, we have chosen school principals in both countries to work with us on this project. The principals involved in this multi-year initiative have recently begun to engage in both domestic and international conversations about their experiences in schools. They have begun to share their perceptions and perspectives with one another, which has ignited a robust exchange. One example comes from a South African principal’s epiphany about his perceptions of the disadvantaged:

“*I was an economics educator for nearly 15 years . . . and never knew anything about the living conditions of people around me in townships. After this experience, I got involved with other learners who came from a previously disadvantaged background. This in turn introduced me to more people in circumstances and conditions that I never have experienced before. The more I got involved with young people from a different background, the more I realised that they had the same hopes and aspirations as the privileged learners in my school. The difference was that they lacked information, opportunities and support from their schools and communities. There was no way for them of realising their dreams without help from somewhere.”*

This same principal has his work cut out for him as he describes his current student body:

*“ . . . learners from our school are seldom exposed enough to the imbalances that surround them. They are unaware of the living conditions of others; they are unaware of the realities others are facing. They live in a world of their own where they never encounter poverty. The school uniform they wear is an equaliser as they all look the same in the school. They go home to their affluent neighbourhoods and live a 1st world life. They are never exposed to poverty, and they never get involved in anybody’s life who is less privileged. They are totally ignorant of the needs of the people around them.”*

A school principal, as leader of the educational enterprise in a community, has the unique opportunity to use his or her position as a “bully pulpit” to tackle systemic and structural inequalities and to “disrupt” injustices. According to Theoharris (2009), the injustices that need disrupting include: school structures that marginalize, segregate and impede achievement; a deprofessionalized teaching staff; a disconnect with the community, low-income families, and families of color; disparate and low student achievement. Rather than become a victim of flawed policies, a strong school principal can set an agenda to change policy and practice as it affects the children in his/her charge and rouse others to action as well. It is for schools to take the lead in this matter, as Bogotch reminds us: “. . . there is no denying the educational fact that the primary role of educators is to extend privileges and develop voice in *others*.” (Bogotch, 2008, p.14). We should see ourselves in the forefront of leading social change, not waiting passively for the impact of societal forces to shape our destiny.

An example of taking the lead in change comes from a principal of a well-resourced school in the US. He describes the white enclave phenomenon which, while apparently providing a high-performance and successful school climate, ironically, does not serve his students well for living in the wider world . . .

*“Equity is a priority in my school because of the students’ lack of experience, i.e., no contact with students or teachers of color. They have no idea of what the rest of the world is like. One student after graduation came back and said to me: ‘We could have used some background in how other people live; a little exposure wouldn’t have hurt.’ This is an extraordinarily isolated community geographically, and with the home prices, poorer folks could never afford to live here. Even though many kids in my current school are growing up in a privileged lifestyle, there is little if any racist language heard – it is a matter of ‘we just don’t want to live next door to them.’ Parents have to be taught to teach their children not to be afraid of those who are different from them. If we don’t tell our kids about this it won’t happen. When I talk to PTAs and parent groups, I like to suggest that the (100% college bound) kids in my school should be getting ready for the wider world. For example, I say to parents, ‘What if your child has a black roommate in college?’ When I put the issue in these terms it is not a condemnation of the community, just a bit of reality for the future to help their kids.”*

School leaders need to set direction for change to take place. George Counts, in “Dare the School Build a New Social Order,” asks us to consider this possibility: we seem to be more interested in *action* than we are in *direction*, so we go around in circles (Counts, 1978). As a planned movement to reduce and eliminate social injustice in schools, this project is *committed to moving in a direction* and is fueled by the courage of the participants to move beyond the comfort of the circle they have been used to. This moral compass directs us to an “aspirational space” (Alexander, 2004) to motivate others to join us in these conversations. This space bestrides the twin phenomena of poverty and race and attempts to unpack the economic forces at work as well as the family and social capital underpinnings of youngsters in South African and US schools. For the school leaders who are involved in this project we expect no less than steadfastness of purpose and a resolve to “make things happen.” They have pledged to contribute to the project in the spirit of social change.

The Courageous Conversations Project challenges the authors and their colleagues to become culturally responsive. In the initial stages of the project we are gathering the resources and background knowledge to make the steep climb towards cultural responsiveness. We intend on scaffolding this work through dissemination of literature and research coupled with numerous opportunities for dialogue about becoming such a leader. We intend on approaching the task from several angles, including supervision of teachers, sensitivity to written and oral communications, interacting with students, and disrupting extant injustices.

As the principals in this project take on the role of culturally responsive leaders they sign on to becoming role models for their teachers, no simple task, as Buehler, et al (2009) point out: “Beyond knowledge and skills, culturally responsive teachers must command affective qualities such as courage, will-power and tenacity” (p.409). This is particularly true for White beginning teachers who “work with students of color for the first time, the process of examining their assumptions about race can bring on emotions of uncertainty, insecurity, and fear. Such introspection, which is essential for culturally responsive educators, requires a degree of emotional risk for which many beginning teachers and teachers educators are unprepared” (p. 410).

A gauntlet awaits those school leaders who wish to engage in disrupting injustice. Many of the challenges center on incorporating language and cultural differences into the school and monitoring how staff and faculty respond to behaviors of students from different backgrounds:

* “ . . . to find their way into writing, children depend on the familiar and typified voices of their everyday lives – the voices of families, friends, media figures, and teachers. These voices literally reverberate in their own as the children orally articulate what they are going to say and monitor its encoding on the page. . . . a curricular and pedagogical knowledge of young children’s languages is important in identifying and helping young children meet the challenges they experience in figuring out how to make a voice visible on paper” (Dyson and Smitherman, 2009, p.978).
* Language is still a contentious and highly emotive issue in South Africa. Despite the fact that Xhosa is spoken by Nelson Mandela and 10 million other South Africans, a 16 year old was recently disciplined in her school for speaking in Xhosa, her native tongue. The “ . . . languages of South Africa’s colonizers still rule in the classroom and elsewhere, a recipe for resentment . . .” (Bryson, 2010, p.1)
* Jansen (cited in van Wyk, 2010) points out that in South Africa, there are hundreds of little incidents, unseen and unrecorded, that happen to younger and older students because of race every day in the South African educational system. He points to a formidable research literature which shows that in South African schools, the grouping of children, the dominant assessment practices, the learner preferences of the teacher, the display of cultural symbols, the scope of awards and rewards, and the decision of ‘who teaches what’ are all organised in ways that show preference based on race (as well as social class, religion and gender).
* At a recent conference, hosted by the US departments of Education and Justice, the assistant attorney general for civil rights unabashedly addressed the ‘disparate impact’ of discipline in US schools: “Regrettably, students of color are receiving different and harsher disciplinary punishments than whites for the same or similar infractions, and they are disproportionately impacted by zero-tolerance policies- a fact that only serves to exacerbate already deeply entrenched disparities in many communities” (Zehr, 2010, p.1)
* “For. . . minority children, especially in the contemporary social context, educational resources and opportunities must include integrating their language and cultural experiences into the social and intellectual fabric of schools, much as these have always been seamlessly integrated into the education of privileged White children. In education, power is transmitted through these social relations, representations , and practices, which determine whose language and cultural experiences count and whose do not, which students are at the center and, therefore, which must remain in the periphery” (Moll, 2010, p.454).

This work is not for the feint of heart. Understanding the educational implications of the challenges inherent in an initiative involving multiculturalism “requires open, honest, and public discourse rather than the more typical safe, constrained, and politically correct thinking often expressed in schools” (Shields, et al, 2002, p. 118). Furthermore, school leaders interested in social justice must practice dispositions that can lead to growth or change, particularly emphasizing courage and initiative for this project. Courage and initiative as a disposition in schools require “Discussing uncomfortable topics or issues . . . accepting the discomfort that stems from the need to change and seeking or accepting new or unfamiliar roles, responsibilities or challenges” (Martin-Kniep, 2008, p.4). This courageous disposition takes on added significance given the history of researcher attempts to investigate issues of race and poverty in schools:

*“. . . conversations in schools rarely addressed the complex issues raised by multicultural school populations. Frequently educators seemed uncomfortable when topics were raised, either changing the subject quickly or engaging the issues in highly emotional ways. Indeed, we became increasingly aware of a general lack of willingness to engage in dialogue about race and ethnicity, perhaps because educators consciously hoped to avoid the arguments and conflicts that often accompany such conversations, but more likely, because they simply did not know how to address the issues “ (Shields, et al, 2002, pp. 118-119).*

*Creating an Environment for Authentic Voices*

The overarching philosophy for the project, drawn from the tenets of critical race theory, is primarily interested in provoking change, not just recording information. It attempts to go beyond the dominant discourse to a place of honest communication about sensitive matters. Much as Albert Einstein came to believe that simple language had the power to convey ideas that were both deep and disturbing to push the boundaries of the physical world (Isaacson, 2010), we believe in the power of simple, unalterable truths to push the boundaries of the social world.

Questions, developed with the assistance of principals, public school directors and university faculty – see Table 4 below- are being used to gather data to inform the work and to stimulate discussion within and across project locations. (Note the sample below is used for the South African version of the survey; the term “equity and redress” is most popularly associated with the definition of equity in South Africa. For the US version, the word “equity” is used alone.) In addition, notes and commentary from other forums presented under the aegis of the Courageous Conversations Project are being compiled.

*Table 4 Guiding questions for the conversations, developed bilaterally by faculty, principals and educational directors*

1. How would you define educational equity and redress?

2. Is equity and redress important to you as a school leader? Explain

3. Describe some of the equity and redress challenges that exist within your school.

4. Describe some of the equity and redress challenges that exist between your school and other schools within your district.

5. What attempts, if any, have been made recently to address equity and redress issues in your district? Have these attempts been successful, in your estimation?

6. What is the role of government in ensuring equity and redress?

7. What is the role of parents in assuring equity and redress?

8. What are the major equity and redress areas that you feel need to be addressed in today’s schools?

9. How does funding affect equity and redress?

10. Give one example of the effects of an equity and redress imbalance on a student you know.

In addition, we borrow from those who have considered how to stimulate direct and frank conversations. “What is my role in creating change?” and “Can I be fearless?” (Wheatley ,2009) are two foundational questions that we ask. In addition, we refer often to the concept of equity audits wherein thoughtful and thorough protocols are used to burrow into a school’s culture; we arrive equipped with skills to avoid “equity traps” (Skrla, et al, 2009, p. 101) on the way to becoming “equity –oriented change agents” (p. 70).

***Opportunities for Conversation/the Medium As Message***

Principals who are participating in the study are drawn from the ACE program (a professional development program for school leaders) in South Africa and from two New York State professional organizations in the US. These trans-Atlantic school leaders will share many experiences during the course of the Courageous Conversations initiative.The uniqueness of the project may very well be its greatest strength. Attempting to discuss race, poverty and schools within one’s country, a conversation which will undoubtedly be laced with emotions associated with injustice, nevertheless can be somewhat predictable. Too often, the usual suspects – politics, financial hardships, historical inertia- are trotted out by partisans on both sides of the argument. As one South African principal noted:

*“It is easy to go into the blaming mode: parents from wealthier backgrounds blame people for just demanding more and more and for lowering standards. Parents from less-prosperous backgrounds can blame the past for the inequities. Both these groups of parents have a responsibility to instill a new set of values in their children.”*

In these “blame storming” (McDonald, 2009) conversations, talking points abound, suspended in a calcified discourse. However, by discussing and experiencing these matters across an ocean, there may be a phenomenon at work which operates like the opposite of the distortions found in a fun house mirror. In our case, we may be holding up a mirror which lends clarity and deeper dimensions to what is observed. At a church in South Africa, the US author had experiences which may be illustrative of this clarity and depth:

*“During my visits to South Africa, I attended evening church services set aside for university students. The first time I attended the service I was impressed by the upbeat and youthful presentation by the pastor (a rock band served as the musical accompaniment) and his message of peace and hope. As I looked around the 500-plus seat auditorium, I noticed that there were two or three black faces. I was overcome with emotion as I realized that I was in a house of worship, located next door to a preeminent institution of higher learning, populated by the next generation of South African leaders and intellectuals . . . and all the faces but a handful were white. I walked back to my hotel room through the university campus, stopped along the way, and cried on the steps of the education building. During my next visit to the church about a year later, I attended the same service, but this time when I looked at the few black faces in the sea of white, I tried to be more intellectual and less emotional – after all, I was a scholar involved in research. This worked until the rock band sang a song as the lyrics were projected on large screen TVs throughout the cavernous church. The lyrics read, in part: ‘ . . . may oceans of justice flood through your heart. May rivers of fairness touch every part . . .’ My emotions gripped me again and I found myself screaming inside: ‘OCEANS OF JUSTICE? RIVERS OF FAIRNESS? THEN WHERE ARE THE BLACK PEOPLE?’ ”*

Moll (2010) suggests that creating opportunities for honest conversation may be needed now more than ever: As he observed and participated in groups that discussed social justice issues he noticed that they became “. . . a setting to reflect upon and discuss how we thought and talked about differences, to challenge stagnant notions of culture, and to analyze within-group variability. In so doing, we came to realize the crucial importance of creating ‘additive’ conditions for learning, not only for students, but also for teachers. This is imperative in the rapidly changing demographic context of schools. It is also a tall order . . . especially in the current context, with all the imposed constraints of ‘accountability’ or ‘market’ models” (p.455).

The project leaders have visited each other’s countries on several occasions. Each time there has been a forthright discussion run by the visiting professor on the troubled state of affairs in his home country. This willingness to openly criticize one’s homeland in another nation sets the tone for others to follow. We have found that these presentations have yielded enormous frankness on the part of the principals and faculty associated with the project in each country.

While we are learning about our differences, we learn much more about our similarities. Children have physical, social and psychological needs that transcend national boundaries. This seems best expressed by a US principal who offers this simple but profound notion:

*“Every kid wants to be loved. If they can’t be loved they want to be respected. If not, then they want to be noticed. Watch how this plays out in every school and community and you get a sense of why children exhibit different behaviors.”*

Live webcasts with principals and faculty from both countries are being broadcast periodically. During these sessions, there is a palpable momentum in both locations to get to the bottom of things – to tell the truth. Questions asked provoke each side to unpack what their homeland is like. A website devoted to the groups’ mutual concerns has been developed, a place to share ideas and exchange documents. Excursions to both countries by visiting principals are in the planning stages. These media experiences and plans for direct contact have produced an atmosphere of trust, energy and enthusiasm for the work. We believe that this climate has begun to engender the type of courageous expression that will be at the heart of the project. Below are comments from school leaders in both countries, reflective of the initial stages of unpacking the truth about race, poverty and schooling.

A South African principal in a traditionally underserved community exposes some of the fundamentals of continuing resource inequality, including long term underinvestment in facilities and teacher training for South Africa’s poor . . . .

“*Racial groups in 1994 start out on an uneven playing field and equal treatment does not in and of itself go far enough. Hampered by decades of underinvestment in school facilities and in the quality of teachers serving black and coloured students, uniform funding formulas for current operating spending will not provide the same educational opportunity to these students as to white students – there should be fair equality of opportunity for social and economic advancement. Some of the pressing problems at my school are the lack of classrooms, hostels and sport grounds as well as appropriate learning support material. To set a realistic budget the staff raises funds by means of fundraising projects with little support of the parents. The focus of our primary task - to teach- now has moved to raising funds. The legacy of the past is also evident in the qualification of teachers. Many teachers received their education in the impoverished coloured schools that have since been closed. This resulted in a lot of mathematics and science teachers being underprepared in those fields. Within our circuit we have very rich schools which build extra classrooms, media centres and multi purpose halls out of own funds and money from rich donors. The affluent parents are able to enhance the quality of their child’s education by the high school fees they pay and it being used to supplement the resources. . . public schools in South Africa will continue to consist of two tiers, one privileged and well-resourced and the other poor and disadvantaged. The public schools with high levels of private income continue to have lower teacher learner ratios, attract better qualified personnel and have substantially better instructional resources.*

A principal of a well-resourced South African school waxes eloquently and forcefully for the moral imperative of the privileged seeking ways to help the poor and to develop empathy for their plight, while at the same time not lowering their own aspirations. This thorny dilemma begs the question: Can the wealthy and privileged maintain what they have while assisting the less fortunate?

*“Due to our past, schools and school communities experience a huge difference in providing opportunities. It is therefore the role of government to redress this imbalance. While the government is responsible for the redress of this imbalance between government schools, communities in more affluent areas are investing in their schools in various ways, making this divide between schools appear even bigger. Redress cannot take place by taking away from or equalising the more prosperous schools in the system. To punish a well-resourced school and to get them on the same level of under resourced schools is not redressing. More prosperous schools have a duty, as part of redress, to prepare their learners to enter into a world where there is poverty, imbalances and other challenges. These schools need to educate their learners, and expose them to the realities of their communities.*

*The challenge for me in this regard is how to redress the imbalance I know that exists without lowering standards in my school or taking away the strive for excellence that exists in my school, while at the same time assisting other schools and learners. The school would like to appoint people from different races to serve as role models for learners, but at the same time the school is not prepared to lower requirements just to appoint a less qualified person – this applies to all people of all races who apply at the school. The perception therefore exists that the school is excluding people of different races.*

*In many cases . . . applications [for my school] come from learners from less-resourced schools, and being the stronger learners in their schools, their departure weakens the society and schools they come from, thus creating more inequality. Until government and under-resourced schools acknowledge the role and importance of an educator who is disciplined, well-trained and has a healthy work ethic, redress efforts will remain fruitless. As this is very difficult for government to do, it seems easier to focus on well-resourced schools and trying to blame them for inequalities and imbalances, and trying to make them feel guilty or pay for achieving while others are not. They create an atmosphere where well-resourced schools are supposed to feel guilty about imbalances and should therefore accept anyone and everything for their schools – let us all rather be mediocre than having only a few performing schools.*

*It is strange that well-resourced schools are seen as unacceptable and not being part of the new South Africa, and that they are not operating within the spirit of an all-inclusive society, but the government (and school leaders from disadvantaged schools) send their children to these schools. By doing so, they acknowledge the quality of education provided by these schools and at the same time they show a vote of no confidence in other schools or their own abilities to address the perceived problems in the school system. What must be expected from parents in the South African context is to expose their children to the realities around them. They should make their children aware of the society we live in. They should encourage their children to become involved in the lives of the people around them. They should encourage their children to assist people around them with emotional, functional or financial support. Parents from less-prosperous circumstances should try to cultivate a culture of hard work and discipline amongst their children*

A US principal of a traditionally underserved community with a diverse population weighs in on issues of entitlement, shares a chilling reminder that society pays a heavy price through its prisons if we ignore the needs of youngsters - borne out by a recent NAACP report linking high incarceration rates with low performing schools (Wrobel, 2011) - and makes a suggestion for communicating between groups . . .

*“If minorities can afford to send their kids to a private education, then they increase their chances of their kids succeeding in college and beyond. Private schools are looking for minority kids. In many minority schools you find a lack of leadership and a lack of resources. In many of these places, the administrators are chomping at the bit to improve their schools, but they just can’t raise the money. In more privileged places they even have foundations to give their kids even more. One of the stumbling blocks to equity is a sense of entitlement. I am entitled because I am white, because I am a doctor, etc. The black kids say the same thing: I am entitled to what the white people have. The resources we expend on the penal system as compared to the school system should enter into the conversation. Put the money we spend on prisons into our schools and the entire equation would change. Turn the schools around and you would not have the need for prisons that we do today. What if we did this: once a week kids from a privileged environment mix with kids from an underserved environment. They meet to discuss their aspirations. The kids might buy into this. If you start this electronically – maybe through social media - the communities might buy into it.”*

***Conclusion/Just the Beginning***

As we develop our conversations, the authors reflect regularly on a caveat regarding the work. We need to remind ourselves that what we regard as noble work, nevertheless, does not allow us to presume to speak for those less fortunate. We keep our arrogance in check by remembering the advice of Sbu Zikode, the leader of a poor people’s movement in South Africa: “Supportive people should talk with the poor, not for the poor” (Zikode, 2010).

We close with some sobering thoughts for all communities to consider.

“Racism is not a biological fact. Racism is not an idea, nor is it merely expression of dislike or hatred. Racism is an ideology, an ideology with a history. It has no basis in biology, no genetic reality – there is more genetic variation among people of similar ethnic ancestries than between those with distinct ancestries. Moreover, the ideology of racism in America does not coincide with the history of slavery. Racism did not cause slavery nor did it die when slavery ended. Indeed, it became more virulent in the decades after emancipation” (Attie, 2010).

“Racism refers to the use of mainstream rank against people who don’t have enough social power to defend themselves. Racism is always social abuse” (Mindell, 1995, p.151).

 “Those who are racially marginalized are like the miner’s canary: their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all. It is easy enough to think that when we sacrifice this canary, the only harm is to communities of color. Yet others ignore problems that converge around racial minorities at their own peril, for these problems are symptoms warning us that we are all at risk” (Guinier and Torres, 2002, p.11)

This chapter contains a set of guideposts for action. Believing as the authors do, that social justice in the schools of their countries will not happen without painful reflection and dialogue, they have drawn inspiration from those who have examined the landscape. Trailheads appear that we know we must follow if we seek the truth. Bogotch (2008) implores educators to take the lead in shaping society. We have signed on for that duty. Our task, therefore, is to unpack the truth and set it out, unvarnished, for all to see. Only after the interrogation will come the healing and the solutions. This work has become a cri de coeur for the authors. The work is our passion and we have offered ourselves as examples of fallible individuals who harbor biases and resentments that need to be examined. We seek to make a difference. We are driven by our own undying belief that if our societies could shake the yoke of their respective narratives, come to terms with the drivers of inequity and engage in forthright conversations with school leaders, social justice will be served.

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