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Contexts and Discourses of Social Justice: An Administrative Challenge

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Educational administrators often face issues with implications of social justice, but are social justice decisions always clear? This question provokes a discussion in this article that is initiated using a dramatic scenario in which two groups of university professors are in conflict over a social justice issue. The groups view the practice of social justice from two opposing perspectives, each of which has its own moral grounding. The discussion of the scenario unfolds on the premise that the social justice discourse in the educational administration literature can be analyzed through two moral pathways. One follows a set of moral obligations that is institutionally codified and monitored. The other tracks a process of moral deliberation that is negotiated by members of a moral community. These two pathways yield varied decisions and outcomes, and the challenges presented by such differences are explored in this article. Using the work of Walker (2007) as a catalyst, suggestions are made to guide administrators in attempts to reinvent social justice practices.

The purpose of this article is to bring to light a twofold path of applying social justice interpretations and understandings from a university administrative setting into a school-based educational administration setting. To set up the purpose, a scenario describes a conflict between two groups of professors over a problem that has come to light in a Bachelor of Education (BEd) program. The issue in the scenario is not about students' voice or students' rights, but rather is concerned with discourse understandings and applications of two differing interpretations of a faculty member's moral obligations in addressing a social justice event. As such, the scenario focuses on the professor groups, not on the student. The reader is asked to consider the entrenched perceptions of what each professor group believes are the collective or personal moral obligations of the participant(s) to the various parties at risk.

The scenario has been written in a *theatre as representation* construction, which brings to life through dramatic roles the underlying but often unspoken tensions embedded in real-world issues, to be used primarily as a vehicle for administrative professional development (Meyer, 2004, 2008). The

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scenario, therefore, is deliberately bifurcated to show the polarized perceptions of morality, vulnerability, and obligation that often accompany issues of social justice that confront and perplex educational administrators. With educational administrators as the target group for the discussion, the article focuses on the social justice literature that has been generated specifically for that group. It does not, therefore, delve into the larger literature base or the plethora of concepts and discourses such as restorative, recognition, or representative justice; the politics of oppression, power, and exclusion; or related theories of social justice and inclusion.

A Contextual Conflict of Perceived Injustice

Disclaimer: This is a fictionalized rendition inspired by an actual incident. The identification of all persons, places, and institutions has been changed. Not all events described in this treatment occurred as written, and tensions have been intensified to distinguish positions.

Background of the Scenario

On a foggy December morning, Herbert Brecht sat in his office preparing final grades for his course in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) Teacher Certification Program. Most of his students were doing fairly well. However, one, Bahadur Pushna, had not submitted any of the written assignments. Before the fall semester began, all his professors had received a letter from the University Counselling Services stating that Pushna had been diagnosed from an early age with several learning disorders and labeled as a high-functioning autistic learner in the Asperger's class of disorders. In compliance with university policy on special needs students, a profile analysis of Pushna was prepared with suggestions for assignment modifications. It was distributed to all his professors. Pushna had asked for extensions, which were given, but no work was submitted. Brecht had informed the Chair of the BEd program of the situation. The Chair had informed Pushna that if he did not submit his work before November 1, he could not go on the fall field-experience practicum. However, as the practicum began, so did Pushna's participation in it. His advisor, Joslyn Peters, arranged to have him placed as a student teacher in a special-needs class under the supervision of one of her graduate students, a full-time secondary teacher, with a promise that the work would be submitted before the end of the fall term. It was not. Brecht submitted a failing grade to the Registrar's office.

At the beginning of the winter semester, Brecht received notice that a meeting was being held, arranged by Peters, to discuss Pushna's failing grade with all his instructors. Brecht thought this was strange. He went to Thompson, the Chair of the BEd Program, to see what it was about. Thompson had also received notice of the meeting but had no knowledge as to why Peters had called it or under what jurisdiction. From a quick inves-

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tigation, Thompson learned that some of the instructors believed that Brecht was discriminating against Pushna and wanted an intervention to alter the situation. Brecht was infuriated at the innuendo and refused to attend.

Later that afternoon, the Dean of the Faculty of Education received a terse e-mail from Peters stating that if Brecht did not attend, the University Equity Officer would be informed and a formal complaint would be brought against Brecht. The Dean, realizing that such a complaint would have a far-reaching negative effect on the Faculty, suggested strongly to Brecht that he attend. Although concerned that he was being targeted as a possible racist, Brecht reluctantly agreed. He informed the Dean that if he was being railroaded, he would bring legal action against the university, the Dean, and all those attending who advocated against him.

Scenario

Characters

Dr. Joslyn Peters, meeting Chairperson
Dr. Herbert Brecht, the professor whose course Pushna failed
Dr. Angela Thompson, Chair of the BEd program
Dr. James Gorant
Dr. Jennifer Jamieson
Dr. Edward Williams
Ms. Judy Kaminski, University Equity Officer

Setting

January, at the beginning of the winter semester in the Faculty of Education Conference Room at 1:00 p.m. The professors are sitting around a table. The pro-Pushna professors (Peters, Jamieson, Williams) are on one side; the anti-Pushna professors (Brecht, Thompson, and Gorant) are on the other. All were the first-semester instructors of Bahadur Pushna, a first-year education student (in a two-year post-baccalaureate preservice BEd degree and licensing preparation program) who had failed Brecht's course, his only half-credit (one-term) course taken in the fall semester.

Peters: Ladies and Gentlemen. Let us begin this unofficial meeting. I would like to welcome the University Equity Officer, Ms. Judy Kaminski, who will be participating in the meeting this afternoon.

Thompson raises her hand.

Peters: Yes, Dr. Thompson?

Thompson: If this is a "preliminary unofficial meeting," may I ask why Ms. Kaminski is present, who is first of all not a member of this Faculty? And secondly, why were we not informed of her being in attendance?

Peters: The meeting Chair thought it would be prudent to have an outside third party present.

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Thompson: As Chair of the Department in question, I was not informed. Any meeting as such should not have been called without the due process of my office. So this is really simple. Since you have called this meeting without my permission, I will not attend, and I will inform the Dean, the Vice-President, and the President of this breach of protocol, and I suggest that Dr. Brecht also remove himself, since this is clearly an attempt to undermine his position in this Faculty.
Peters (upset): You can take that action if you so desire, but are there any conditions under which you would remain?
Thompson: Yes, that Ms. Kaminski remove herself and there be no minutes of this meeting taken.
Peters: I cannot agree to that.
Thompson: Then I bid you goodbye *(gets up to leave as does Brecht).*
Kaminski (stands up): Clearly, a protocol has been breached. Dr. Thompson may be correct in her assumptions, but I will not be brought into an internal Faculty skirmish. If there is a breach of equity, there are the formal lines of protocol that should be followed, brought forth by the student, who interestingly enough is not present. I will remove myself. Good day. *(She exits the room).*
There is a deadly silence in the room.
Peters: Well, shall we proceed?
Prof Gorant (raises his hand and is recognized by Peters): So what is the real reason you all on that side of the room have called this kangaroo court?
Williams: I find that offensive.
Gorant: That's okay, Ed, I find you offensive.
Peters: Please, please, let's be civil.
Thompson (whispering to Brecht under her breath but loud enough for Peters to hear): Fat chance of that.
Another long silence ensues.
Brecht (raising his hand to be recognized and is by Peters): Since this seems to be about me, sort of, I'll start. And there will be no minutes taken, Joslyn, Jennifer, so put your pencils down. I will not say a word if I see one thing written. *(He waits them out. They put down their pencils and Brecht proceeds in a calm voice.)* Mr. Pushna enrolled in my *Arts in Education 421* course. He was virtually unable to grasp the concepts of this course. His in-class written work was horrid, but I gave him the lowest possible passing grades. It wasn't because he was a trouble-maker or lazy, but he has such learning disabilities that he cannot understand the content or its application in classroom programming. He received a passing grade in the group-work assignments because everyone in the group receives the same mark; he received the credit riding on their coat tails. There were three written assignments: two lesson plans and a paper that required the student to analyze any two works in an arts realm, and based on the paradigm studied thoroughly in class, to create

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an analysis of the works along with a unit plan of instruction. Here are several examples of such plans. I have taken the names of the students off the papers. *(He places the papers on the table.)* Pushna submitted one lesson plan. It was a disaster. I asked him to see me so we could salvage something; here is the copy of the e-mail with that request. He never came to see me. He never resubmitted that paper, the next lesson plan, or the major analysis project. At the end of the course, I informed the Pre-service Program Manager that he could not go out on his practicum until he submitted his work. Here is that e-mail. I never received a response, but I assumed that it was being followed. By the end of December, after several reminders to Pushna, I still did not receive any work, hence the failing grade. I closed the matter. Obviously, you folks think differently. *(He sits down and places the documents on the table.)*

Jamieson: These are the facts from your perspective, Herbert, but there are extenuating circumstances that you have failed to take into account in your assessment of the situation. First, Mr. Pushna has acknowledged learning disabilities that have been documented. He has received permission from the registrar's office and the counseling office to have professors accommodate his learning challenges. You have not done that. Second, he is a person of a visible ethnic minority. We have had little success in getting such persons into our program. We have to do anything and everything to sustain and support them. This is especially true since he also has documented learning challenges. We have been fighting for years to get minorities into our program. If we wash him out, that sends a very disturbing message to the minorities' communities.

Williams: What I don't understand, Herb, is that you have two children of your own with learning disabilities. I would have thought with your sense of compassion you would have taken a different course of action. This is so un-you. There is no sense of justice here.

Thompson: That is a very low blow, Dr. Williams, and a very unprofessional comment to make. I teach Pushna in *Principles and Practices*, and I concur with Herb. He is a terrible student. He has less than a 50% average. There is no way he can pass even with accommodation by the end of this year or any year. He does not have the ability to understand or to cope with the program. He cannot write a basic paragraph. The other students are nice to support him, but they'll get tired of carrying him. I also informed the Pre-service Manager, and he still went out on his practicum. I'd like to know how, and I'm the Department Chair.

Peters: I arranged the practicum. Since all his other courses are full-year, we felt that with his excellent growth in *Sociology, Diverse Cultures*, and *Educational School Practice*, we could place him. I arranged with one of my graduate students, who is a special education resource teacher, to have him in his class. It is a small group of students that he worked and grew with.

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Gorant (interrupting): That is not protocol, and besides, how could your grad student say no to his supervisor? That's a bit heavy-handed. And the Chair was not informed. That is not right. I should bring you to the Dean for insubordination!
Peters: I'll ignore that accusation.
Gorant: That's not an accusation. You and your friends here did not follow the department's guidelines and protocols and you should be ashamed … and playing a race card against Herb!
Jamieson: We're not here to discuss protocol policy. Our interest in justice is more important than some silly guidelines.
Thompson: Except these are the guidelines that you all insisted on. Am I incorrect? Should I pull out the minutes and the resolutions? And further, this is justice as defined by you, not anyone else.
Williams: That's rather Fascist of you, Angela. You are not taking our social justice mandate to heart. The Faculty has to put the interests of this minority student ahead of the established status quo. We have an unwritten policy here that rules were to be stretched, not broken.
Gorant: That is not quite correct. We have both university and Faculty of Education guidelines that insist that students must fulfill any course or program outcomes and expectations. To simply slide Pushna through the system—due to your version of stretching—is unethical. We are preparing education candidates for licensing by the province, or did you forget that?
Peters: Oh, please. Can we get back to the matter at hand?
Gorant: Are you referring to your misuse of authority, or is there something else on the agenda?
Williams: Brecht, what are you going to do? We're running around in circles here.
Brecht: I am not running around in circles. Pushna is not qualified to be in this preservice program, whether he is white, black, brown, East Indian, Chinese, or from Sarnia. He never should have been accepted into the program. His previous academic record should have instantly washed him out. You're the ones who consistently tout our post-baccalaureate two-year program with its very high admission standards. But he slid through that. It seems to me that he was accepted into the BEd to fulfill a minority student quota. In my view, you are manipulating him to serve a politically motivated "social justice agenda." From where I sit, Pushna serves as the poster child for people in this department who believe equity is fairer than equality. For me the bottom line is this: whom do we serve? In my eyes we serve the province that we prepare teachers for. When we bring our teacher candidates up to the Provincial Licensing Board, we are telling the Board that these candidates are minimally qualified to teach. Ultimately, we serve the students these candidates will instruct. Are we being fair to them to send out an incompetent teacher candidate? I say we are not being fair or honest to any future student

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who might have the misfortune to have Pushna as his or her teacher. We are also being unfair to his classmates who have fulfilled all the requirements of licensure. As a classroom teacher for over 25 years myself, I would be embarrassed to have Pushna considered a colleague. We are also being unfair to Pushna in making him believe he can teach as we take his tuition money to pay our salaries. It comes down to this—and I direct this to Dr. Williams. Yes, I do have two children with learning disabilities, and as a parent, I do not want him teaching my children. You want to keep him in the program, do so, but I will never pass him, and if you want to fight me on this, you better get a damn good lawyer.

Peters (feeling frustrated): I guess we're at a stalemate.

Gorant: No, Joslyn, you're at a stalemate. This group has no jurisdiction. If you want further action, you'll have to go to a full Faculty of Education Council meeting after you've exhausted the normal due process protocols through the Chair of the BEd Program.

Peters (very emotional): This is very upsetting. We are not fulfilling our moral obligation to this student. He is a vulnerable student with several disadvantages, and we are not accommodating him as we should. We tell our students to be open to diversity and yet we are not coming to his assistance. I suspect that he is so afraid of you, Herb, that he couldn't get within 10 feet of your office door without feeling completely scared and mortified. You are permitting an injustice to occur. I am ashamed of you. This is not over. We will not let you make him a scapegoat.

Brecht: Then I suppose you must do what you must do. I'm leaving. *(Herb leaves followed by Thompson and Gorant).*

End of Scene

Discussion

This dramatic scenario uses a social justice issue to interrogate the actions of university professors in the light of contested understandings of vulnerability and professorial obligations. The script expresses the concept of vulnerability through the problem of a racial-minority learning-disabled student who has failed to complete minimal course requirements for at least one course in the program. The course instructor sees this student's vulnerability as being nested in a larger set of obligations that the faculty holds to other preservice candidates, to the quality of the program itself, and to the children who might be taught by this individual in the future. Some of the instructor's colleagues see the student's vulnerability as being situated in the obligation the university has accepted with respect to that student, and they are concerned that the vulnerable student's rights are in jeopardy. The department administrator is concerned that due process must not be usurped. These multiple understandings of professorial responsibility high-

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light the complex character of the moral purposes underlying social justice discourses and practices.

The scenario was written to highlight the moral dilemmas that emerge when individuals or groups hold polarized views of social justice, especially when these polarized views are not explicitly articulated or presented for moral deliberation. Our contention is that in most moral conflicts, both sides stand on solid moral grounds based on their own understanding of moral responsibility, but neither side is completely correct nor universally applicable. Problems emerge when people hold their convictions with unwavering moral certitude, when they fail to subject their views to deep scrutiny, and/or when they refuse to consider that the outcomes may not in fact lead to social justice for all members of their community.

Although the scenario is set in a university faculty, it has relevance for educational administrators at all institutional levels. The tensions in the scenario are those that often develop when sensitive issues with social justice implications bring into play diverse sets of interests and agendas, diverse histories and experiences, diverse understandings of justice and equity, and diverse expectations for process and outcomes. Their position in the system places administrators at the nexus of these competing perspectives, and their responses are neither benign nor neutral. As Stevenson (2007) observes, "the school principal, with the authority and influence that their position confers, is clearly a pivotal individual in shaping the organizational culture" (p. 774). Fowler (2004) further explains that the implicit and explicit levers of power held by administrators cause them either consciously or unconsciously to shape consciousness and to mobilize bias for or against particular people, decisions, outcomes, or perspectives. It is for this reason that in this article we focus our discussion on educational administrators.

In the remainder of the article, we present our discussion in four sections. The first outlines dominant trends and issues concerning social justice in contemporary educational administration literature. We limited our literature search in this way because educational administrators are typically charged with the obligation to address social justice issues, and we wished to discover what the current discourse is saying to educational administrators (and, therefore, to professors of educational administration). The second section presents a view of social justice based on Walker's (2007) distinction between vulnerability-in-principle and dependency-in-fact. The third section analyzes the details of the dramatic scenario on the basis of some questions that draw on Walker's theory. The final section uses this analysis to suggest how to reinvent social justice discourses and practices for educational administrators and for professors of education.

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Contemporary Discourses of Social Justice

Although the issue of social justice has entered educational administration journals and texts only recently, some trends can already be detected in the literature base. The first trend of note is that social justice discourses confront and interrogate institutional racism and/or sexism. Solomon (2002), for example, found that school administrators acknowledged the presence of racism in their schools and communities, but were reluctant to address the issue directly or substantively with students and staff. Solomon positions their reluctance as a form of latent racism that, even when acknowledged, is seldom labeled as racism, and he asks school leaders to "present racism and its manifestations as a system of oppression that is entrenched in institutions such as schools" (p. 192). On a parallel track, with regard to the intersection of racism and sexism, Rusch (2004) notes,

> Throughout my preparation, I experienced points of rupture between my lived experiences as a woman and the theories, symbols, and images that framed leadership education in classroom settings. As in many educational administration classrooms, the experience was alienating and intersected by gender and race. The fault line was most visible when women and people of color sought voice during classroom discourse and frequently were unnoticed, silenced, or viewed with disdain. (p. 18)

The original concerns of racism and sexism have recently been conjoined with issues of social class (Shields, 2004) and sexual orientation (Asher, 2007). As Ryan and Rottman (2007) point out, "It is becoming increasingly difficult to understand and do something about sexism without acknowledging the many different ways that it interacts with other oppressive structures such as racism, classism, and homophobia" (p. 11). In other words, the social constructions of personal and professional identities, schools, and educational policies are not only inherently racist and sexist (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005), but are also inherently classist and homophobic. The presence and intersections of these various levels of stratification imply that the embedded power structures and dynamics in which administrators work generate a complex, intricate, and entangled set of vulnerabilities and relationships between and among individuals and groups.

The second noteworthy trend in the literature relates to the school administrator's role in addressing social justice and equity. In most of the sources we reviewed, the administrators are identified as the key players in redressing injustices and in reconstructing systems to provide greater access. Shields, Larocque, and Oberg (2002) present the challenge this way:

> Wise educational leaders will learn to create psychological spaces for genuine exploration of difference; they will initiate conversations where

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> problems and challenges may be identified and discussed; and they will create a climate in which staff and students feel safe in clarifying their assumptions to deal with cultural dissonance. (p. 130)

Similarly, Bogotch (2002) notes,

> The concepts of social justice and educational leadership provide for socially constructive agreements to emerge around specific problems, solutions, and courses of action. By connecting social justice to educational leadership, we can direct these possibilities toward creating new and just communities. (p. 155)

Although these are necessary tasks and admirable goals, they are also decidedly difficult to achieve, especially in the light of competing obligations and colliding interests. When spheres of responsibility pull administrators in different directions, Ryan (2007) contends that they typically revert to rational decision-making on the basis of institutional policy and organizational goals. After all, he says, "An administrator's job is generally one that puts out fires rather than starts them" (p. 96). Furthermore, Evans (2007) argues, "It seems reasonable that school leaders' own history and background, beliefs, work history, role identities, and group affiliations figure prominently as they frame and interpret issues and events and construct their roles in the manner they do" (p. 162). These arguments imply that when school administrators carry the burden of responsibility for redressing injustice and inequity, they are likely to carve out a pathway to accomplish the task that reflects their own personal beliefs, values, and tacit understandings of vulnerabilities and obligations. Consequently, a discourse that charges them with the primary obligation to restructure systems, to reculture schools, and to redress injustices seems likely to lead to disappointment at best and abject failure at worst.

The third notable characteristic in the literature is an implicit assumption (at times an explicit statement) that if educational systems were constructed more equitably, all the diverse groups would receive appropriate education and would, therefore, demonstrate appropriate levels of achievement. Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, and Nolly (2004) make this observation:

> Although many have blamed causes external to schooling for the achievement gaps, there unquestionably are inequities within our public schools, such as inequitable distributions of teacher quality or inequitable distributions of students in programs such as special education or AP courses, that must be addressed if the achievement gaps are to be removed. (p. 155)

Skrla et al.'s equity audit is an exciting tool for uncovering unjust distributions and inequitable practices and outcomes at local levels. However, although seeking equity for disadvantaged groups is an essential task,

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attention also needs to be paid to individual experiences and outcomes. Otherwise, Bates (2006) contends, the discourse "decontextualizes learning for many students, decoupling it from the worlds in which they live" (p. 149). Blackmore (2006) further points out that the politics of presence can obscure the actual learning outcomes for specific students, and that the more nuanced question is, "which girls and which boys benefit or are at risk?" (p. 192). Thus it is impractical to separate social justice from educational theories and practices, and the question of whether schools are dealing appropriately and effectively with children should turn on the extent to which each individual student is successful in school. If inequitable distributions in achievement across groups are evident, then steps need to be taken to redress that imbalance, but monitoring the achievement profile of specific groups is not more important than knowing the achievement profile and learning style of each individual child. As it stands, the current discourse effaces individual children and does not take direct aim at pedagogic questions relative to individual children—nor thereafter to groups of children.

Our fourth observation is that the literature is relatively silent on the societal obligation of educators and educational administrators to prepare students for success in the world as it is. For the most part, the discourse is about reconstructing the world so that it accommodates and reflects the realities of the underprivileged groups. Solomon (2002) puts it this way: "Antiracism involves interrogating social and political power relations and seeks to disrupt the power structures that maintain a race-stratified society" (p. 193). We share the concerns of all the authors we reviewed about the imperative of bringing forth a just, equitable society, but this is a difficult, long-term process. In the meantime, children continue to live in a world that is stratified along many lines and that does not provide equal chances for individuals or for groups. In this way, a discourse that is directly concerned with improving the future circumstances and chances for targeted children takes the spotlight off what can and should be done in the here and now to prepare all the children in our care to function well in whatever world they occupy.

Charting Moral Obligations

When we related our consideration of the above literature to the details of the dramatic scenario, we found ourselves grappling with some key questions: To what extent did the various characters in the scenario pay attention to different vulnerable groups that could and would be affected by the decisions made by the characters? Were the identification of the problems and the decisions concerning redress being made in a thoughtful, reflective manner in the light of various (at times conflicting) understandings of social justice? Was there a clearly defined pathway for moving the deliberations forward respectfully and effectively? To what extent did the various charac-

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ters consider what the student was learning, had learned, needed to learn, and/or perhaps could not learn? Did the characters think about the student as a unique individual or as a faceless member of an underprivileged group? To what extent were the characters concerned with preparing this student to be successful in the educational world into which he hoped to move? We found a way to consider these questions in Walker's (2007) distinction between *vulnerability-in-principle* and *dependency-in-fact.* Walker argues that these two perspectives on moral obligation chart the terrain of moral responsibility differently.

People who adhere to the principle of protecting the vulnerable see social justice as a *set of moral obligations* that exist in an inclusive (educational) community. According to Walker (2007), this view obligates administrators and educators to facilitate access for and to empower all vulnerable parties (e.g., variously disadvantaged students) so as to achieve equal educational outcomes (e.g., successful completion of a university degree). From this perspective, questions of social justice are considered in terms of distributive theories of justice such as that proposed by Rawls (1971). Rawls proposes that justice is achieved through the value of fairness, which provides every individual equal rights and access to the goods of society and which allows for unequal distribution only if the imbalance benefits the least advantaged individuals of society. Freire's (1994) articulation of strategies for confronting and overcoming oppressive educational and political regimes also relies on a distributive model of justice to serve the moral purpose of protecting the vulnerable. In spite of recent articulations of recognition justice (Bates, 2006; Ryan & Rottman, 2007), it is our contention that distributive justice, whether understood from Rawls' or Freire's or some other framework, is the dominant moral theory underlying the current discourse connecting educational leadership and social justice. For example, educational administrators are continually interpreting federal law (such as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms) and subsequent provincial legislation that assures or assumes rights and privileges to students of minority, learning-challenged students, or other marginalized groups. When real or perceived injustices occur in areas of assimilation, affirmative action, and discrimination, education leaders many times go first to legal interpretations as opposed to moral, social, theoretical, or contextual ones.

Walker (2007) presents an alternative perspective that is grounded in the principle of articulating actual dependencies and positioning social justice as a *process of moral deliberation.* This process charts a set of nested vulnerabilities, articulates and confronts potential or actual conflicts, and assesses the potential outcomes of diverse actions. The purpose of the process is to negotiate a pathway for action that connects vulnerability and responsibility, that sustains relationships, and that balances outcomes for all vulnerable parties. Walker's thesis is that outcomes, although they matter, are not the

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most important consideration. Instead, members of a community must first be concerned with the path they walk individually and collectively as they confront, negotiate, and address moral conflicts. She contends that whereas consideration of vulnerability-in-principle effaces individuals and obscures context, the focus on dependency-in-fact demands that attention be paid to *specific* contexts, people, relationships, and practices. This level of specificity renders it difficult if not impossible to efface people, to diffuse responsibility, or to ignore duty. Because educational administrators are often shielded by their institution from the moral fallout of their actions (see Bauman, 1993, for the protective mechanisms), positioning their obligations in the dependency-in-fact principle seems to be a preferred way to connect educational leadership and social justice.

One of Walker's (2007) strategies for shifting the focus from vulnerability-in-principle to dependency-in-fact is to articulate what she calls *geographies of responsibility*: "mapping the structure of standing assumptions that guides the distribution of responsibility-how they are assigned, negotiated, deflected—in particular forms of moral life" (p. 105). She argues that the point of mapping out the pattern of responsibilities is not simply to identify and describe social and professional obligations, but more importantly, "to be able to appreciate what is gained and what is lost, what is secured and what left to chance, when responsibilities are shaped in one way rather than another" (p. 106). Recognition of the large, complex, interconnected, and tangled array of obligations in educational contexts is, we believe, a necessary part of any deliberations that attempt to address or redress matters of social justice or equity, because without a comprehensive map of the geography, it is impossible to think about those who stand to lose as others gain or to understand what is left to chance as something important is secured. In the educational arena, it does not make sense to us that as we attempt to increase advantage for certain groups and individuals, we put others in jeopardy, even if we do so unknowingly. If our geographies of responsibility are truly pedagogic in character, then a focus on true, authentic, relevant learning can bridge the gulf between educational practices and social justice, and this—an overarching concern with the connection between learning and life outcomes—is what we see as the primary social justice concern for educational administrators and professors of education.

We have been pleased to see a learning-centered approach to social justice emerging in contemporary literature. Green (1985), for example, advocates a shift from attending to moral policies to considering the formation of conscience. He notes,

> though policy *problems* may be technical, the participants in policy debates are moral *persons*.... The policy decision, though *informed* by technical reason, will be *determined* by the moral, emotional and

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> prudential character of men and women set loose to advocate their views in a political setting. (p. 25)

Starratt (2007) makes a stronger link:

> I want to pursue more thoroughly the analysis of the inherently moral nature of the core work of the profession, namely, cultivating learning. Indeed, we will find that the moral good of the learner is intrinsically tied to the moral good of learning. (p. 166)

These arguments imply that in every discussion about or consideration of social justice, educational administrators, practitioners, and professors must first think about the nature of their own understanding of equity, fairness, and justice, and the degree to which their understandings are rooted in a concern for deep, authentic learning for all students.

A second useful shift in the literature relates to a recent concern for the experiences of students in school as they are in reality. One example of this shift is found in Shields's (2004) contention that when differences are accepted as normal aspects of life rather than as problems to be resolved or ignored, educators are better equipped to begin the difficult process of reflecting on how their own practices engender, perpetuate, or redress inequities. Blackmore (2006) also exemplifies this shift in her contention that "addressing diversity normatively would mean discussing what fairness and diversity means amongst staff and students, and consideration of how they are operationalized through policy and practice" (p. 195).

These recent approaches, along with Walker's (2007) conceptualization of moral obligations, move the ethical landscape away from theories of distributive justice to models of discourse ethics. According to Rebore (2001), discourse ethics bring to the forefront the necessity for members of a moral community to negotiate contested understandings of right and wrong, of justice and injustice, of rights and obligations, and of address and redress. It requires attention to the processes by which people come to recognize and sort out competing moral claims and vulnerabilities. In the case of the characters in our scenario, it calls forth an entirely different discourse in their practice, their pedagogy, and their professorial roles.

Contested Pathways Toward Moral Obligation

To move our discussion from theory to practice, we return to the dramatic scenario presented above. The scenario depicts two distinct moral perspectives on social justice. One group, which we call the pro-Pushna professors (Peters, Jamieson, and Williams), views social justice from the theory of distributive justice. The second group, the so-called anti-Pushna professors (Brecht, Thompson, and Gorant), sees the issue in the genre of discourse ethics. The members of the former group put the burden of responsibility for

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action (and leadership) on what they believe are the established definitions and protocols of fairness as broadly proclaimed by the university. Their position is that the action of ensuring fair and equitable treatment for one specific challenged student can serve as a model for their professorial colleagues (and by association, their student teachers) to achieve greater equity in the educational world and in the world more generally. Their issue is that fairness for this one student is the barometer of fairness for all. Their position is justified by the institutional definitions of social justice, and they are upset that Brecht has failed to abide by the commonly understood codes of conduct.

Members of the latter group situate the burden of responsibility for action in a broader context, which takes into account the relationships of constituencies in the larger educational community. Their concern is not only fairness for Pushna, but also their moral obligation to his peers and to future students: those who would be taught by Pushna. They see the issue of fairness as being more contextual: what is fair for one student can only be considered in relation to fairness for other vulnerable parties. Their concern is that proclamations of moral authority cannot be justified if other parties suffer as a consequence of the end-decision, and they see the need to negotiate the working parameters of social justice for this particular case before moving to a decision.

We situated the pro-Pushna professors as being centrally concerned with the dominant social justice question of access for disadvantaged students. Redressing imbalances of access in a BEd program is an essential goal. We contrasted this perspective with the anti-Pushna professors' concern for the effects on current and future students if Pushna were allowed to continue with his program of study and eventually to pursue a teaching career. Maintaining quality-control standards in a BEd program is another essential goal. In the scenario, two essential goals have come into direct conflict, which raises this question: When everyone is right in their beliefs and no side is wrong, how can such a conflict be resolved, at what costs, and to which constituents? As Bates (2006) puts it, how do we "address the central problem for twenty-first century societies: that of constructing harmony from diversity" (p. 150)? Bogotch (2002) presents the challenge thus: "The results of our work in education, just and unjust, are generational (i.e., temporal), always fragile, and fleeting. Therefore, all social justice/educational reform efforts must be deliberately and continuously reinvented and critiqued" (p. 154). We begin the process of reinventing these particular social justice issues by critiquing the dramatic scenario through the questions with which we begin the second section of our discussion.

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1. To what extent did the various characters pay attention to different vulnerable groups that could and would be affected by the decisions made by the characters?

Members of the pro-Pushna group see two affected vulnerable groups: Pushna and themselves as the protectors of the vulnerable Pushna. They believe that if Pushna does not pass Brecht's course and is thereby removed from the BEd program, the banner of social justice falls and their role as flag-bearers of social justice fails. Members of the anti-Pushna group see several constituent groups as vulnerable in their respective opportunities to succeed in their pursuit of learning and success in life. Pushna is vulnerable because his career choice is in jeopardy; his classmates are vulnerable because the quality-control standards of the program are in question; the potential future students of Pushna are at risk because Pushna could fail as a teacher; and Brecht is vulnerable because his professional and professorial integrity is at stake. The issue in the scenario is that the characters on both sides failed to discuss the entangled vulnerabilities or the differential effects of different decisions.

2. Were the identification of the problems and the decisions concerning redress being made in a thoughtful, reflective manner in the light of various (at times conflicting) understandings of social justice?

Members of the pro-Pushna group ground their understanding of social justice in distributive theories. They believe that students cannot all be treated the same way with the same performance expectations, and they rely on the university's stand on providing accommodation to ensure equity in student assessment and to increase Pushna's chances for success in the BEd program. From their perspective, the problem lies in Brecht's unwillingness to give Pushna a passing grade. Members of the anti-Pushna group ground their understandings of social justice in their obligations to all constituents: Pushna himself, his peers, their professional teaching and assessment standards, and the provincial mandates for teacher certification. They are not opposed to justice for Pushna, but from their perspective, the problem lies in continuing to encourage Pushna in a career path for which he appears to be unsuited and that could put future students at risk. The issue in the scenario is that these various understandings and problem sets were never articulated, and the discussion was combative and confrontational rather than thoughtful or reflective.

3. Was there a clearly defined pathway for moving the deliberations forward respectfully and effectively?

Members of the pro-Pushna group believe that the pathway is defined by the goal of securing access for a disadvantaged student, and they believe that the process is respectful in that the meeting is attended only by the directly involved professors and is informal. Members of the anti-Pushna group

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believe that the pathway is defined in relation to Brecht, whom they believe has been wrongly labeled as a perpetrator of unjust actions, whose professorial decisions have been questioned inappropriately, and who has been singled out as deserving to be punished for his actions. On these grounds, they see the deliberations as both disrespectful and ineffective. The issue in the scenario is that no clear pathway had been approved by the stakeholders, no agreement was reached on the goals for the meeting, and the discussion was positional rather than deliberative.

4. To what extent did the various characters consider what the student was learning, had learned, needed to learn, and/or perhaps could not learn?
Members of the pro-Pushna group believe that Pushna's learning is progressing and that his learning challenges can be addressed through an individual-program-planning (IPP) protocol and assignment accommodation and extension. Members of the anti-Pushna group believe that Pushna's inability to cope with the content demands and assignment requirements is fundamentally problematic and that IPPs, although acceptable in elementary, secondary, and first-cycle postsecondary learning situations, may not be appropriate for licensing teacher preparation programs. The issue in the scenario is that the discussion focused on grades and performance rather than on a thoughtful analysis of the student's learning capacity or of current and future effects of the student's learning profile. *Learning* in and of itself was at best a marginal concern in the discussion.

5. Did the characters think about the student as a unique individual or as a member of an underprivileged group?
Members of the pro-Pushna group see the issue in terms of the potential learning outcomes of Pushna and his access as a visible minority to the goods of society that a teaching career can provide. They see him as the ultimate individual, who because of his race and disability requires special accommodation and support. Members of the anti-Pushna group see Pushna as a unique person whose membership in any group, privileged or underprivileged, is irrelevant. They see him as a teacher candidate who has failed to meet minimum program requirements and whose candidacy should be revoked to protect future students. The issue in the scenario is that the discussion failed to analyze thoughtfully Pushna's short-term needs or long-term interests, but rather used his circumstances to justify particular positions in a professorial conflict.

6. To what extent were the characters concerned with preparing this student to be successful in the educational world into which he hoped to move?
Members of the pro-Pushna group want Pushna to succeed as a student, a potential teacher, and an example of a challenged student who succeeds because of the care and consideration afforded by social justice actions. Members of the anti-Pushna group see no success potential and no degree of

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accommodation that will change the outcome of Pushna's inability to teach. The issue in the scenario is that the discussion focused on current polarized positions and failed to move into the question of Pushna's potential for success as a teacher and the potential effects on his career pathway and self-concept if his teaching experiences proved to be unsuccessful.

Reinventing Social Justice

The above critique and its guiding questions lay a foundation on which to reinvent social justice issues and practices from Walker's (2007) perspective. Her turn to discursive ethics foregrounds the idea that ethics and morality are hammered out between real people and in real relationships. In the dramatic scenario, the social justice issues were overlaid with how the professorial relationships played out in the light of some tacit, powerful, and conflicting assumptions of professorial obligation. The multiple layers of moral concern in the scenario transcended the characters and their needs and stretched the characters' capabilities individually, interpersonally, and collectively, but their constituent patterns of behavior and unarticulated assumptive bases kept them from recognizing the geography of their moral terrain. Walker's words are instructive here:

> Morality allows and requires people to understand themselves as bearers of particular identities and actors in various relationships that are defined by certain values. People learn to understand each other this way and to express their understandings through *practices of responsibility* in which they assign, accept, or deflect responsibilities for different things.... Practices of responsibility are constructive; they may reproduce existing terms of recognition or they may shift them. (p. 101)

The bearers in the dramatic scenario had distinctive identities in relation to their causes, and before they could resolve the conflict raised by the competing claims, they needed to move beyond their identities to hammer out some understandings of the moral ground they shared, to reconcile the space between their identities, to deconstruct their practices of responsibility, and to negotiate toward consensus. This is also the challenge faced by educational administrators as they attempt to bring their educational community together as a moral community. The role of the administrator from this perspective is to engage the community in discourses that map out, assess, critique, and reinvent geographies and practices of responsibility.

This, of course, is a daunting challenge, but Walker's (2007) strategies can help to inform the process. In addition to the strategy of mapping geographies of responsibility, she argues for "a study of the relation of representational practices to moral perceptions [that] I call *moral graphics*" (p. 186). Articulating these moral graphics can demonstrate how patterns of representation "'ensoul'—personify, subjectify—some people for others in

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morally disturbing or vicious ways, whether as 'objects,' as diminished subjects, or as disqualified (or peculiarly qualified) agents" (p. 186). A reflective study of how the various characters understood and represented other characters (including Pushna) shows that individuals were imaged in particular ways not because they were necessarily so, but because their being so served particular interests and justified particular standpoints. For educational administrators, articulating clearly the patterns of representation and images of others that exist in the educational community and reflecting on the moral implications of these patterns and images can uncover how social justice issues might have been manipulated to wield power, to control agendas, to script lives, to limit access, and/or to destroy people. A brutally honest moral graphic can also push people past their own sense of rightness to recognize how they might consciously or unconsciously have misrepresented other members of their moral community. This awareness can bring them to a sense of their obligation to those individuals as well as to those whose cause they are interested in promoting.

Recognition of specific patterns and histories of representation shines the spotlight on how specific people are viewed and treated as members worthy of moral consideration or not. Walker (2007) puts the matter this way.

> If some widespread and familiar practices of representation affect some people's morally significant perceptions of and interactions with other people, and if they can contribute to those perceptions' or interactions' going seriously wrong, they bear on fundamental questions of ethics ... What makes some of us take some of us to be worthy of lesser or different moral consideration than some others? These are questions about who various of us take to be "us" and who "them." (p. 187)

By asking people to see *all individuals* as being worthy of the same moral consideration as *all others*, Walker collapses *us* and *them*: we are *all* part of the same moral community, each deserving of the same level of moral care and consideration. She also collapses *is* and *ought*. Whereas traditional moral theories contend that the *ought* is an ideal that informs the *is*, but cannot be derived from it, Walker argues that *ought* and *is* are inherently and intimately linked because "morality itself consists in practices, not theories" (p. 15). She goes on to say,

> If we know such things are deeply wrong, it is because we have found our way to another actual human practice of responsibility that condemns these others.... It is that practice in this world we need to know how to defend and make real. (p. 16)

In this regard, the task for educational administrators is to bring members of the community together to map out who is taking actual real-time responsibility for what and to whom, and with these data in hand, to reinvent

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practices of educational responsibility that advance effectiveness and equity. It is the context-specific data that push people past their personal agendas, patterns, and histories to be able to reinvent their practices.

Turning Walker's (2007) notions back to the dramatic scenario shows that the social justice issues were marginalized by the conflict between the two groups. The two groups, by establishing clear *us-them* and *is-ought* distinctions, lined up on opposite sides of a putative moral debate. We deliberately labeled them the pro-Pushna and anti-Pushna groups to highlight the destructive and deeply offensive character of such an approach to social justice concerns (or any kind of debatable concerns, for that matter). In the scenario, Pushna became the representational necessity and moral *cause célèbre*, and he was effaced and marginalized in the meeting. Both groups felt morally compelled to protect those who could not protect themselves, but in their drive toward a predetermined outcome, the professors on both sides of the conflict failed to consider Pushna as a living, learning, breathing person. Despite their quest for justice, Pushna's unique personal history, current reality, and potential future were lost in the historical patterns of representation and moral persuasion that had emerged over time in the faculty. Such personhood, with its associated attention to specific details of specific cases by and with specific people, is what is lost when social justice becomes a cause rather than a way of life. For educational administrators, reinventing social justice issues requires recognizing the deep connection between *us* and *them* and between *is* and *ought*. It requires recognizing that moral issues, including social justice issues, carry "a far greater *descriptive* and *empirical* burden, in pursuing details of actual moral arrangements, than is commonly thought" (Walker, p. 14). For administrators, this means going back to the lives and real-world experiences of specific people in specific places and times. It means taking the time to sort out competing moral claims, map out geographies of responsibility, articulate patterns of representation, move past personal desires, and reinvent practices of responsibility that do not erase any members of the moral community and that bring forth justice for all. The questions that frame the analysis of the dramatic scenario can help to guide their actions as they move from social justice theory to socially just practices.

Before we put the heat on educational administrators, however, we must first deconstruct our own moral discourse as professors of education. The academy is a particularly appropriate place to work out an effective process of discursive ethics, because as professors, we enjoy the foundational constructs of academic freedom and tenure. This gives us the safety to wave flags of cause, to participate in rallies of need (real or implied), to be loud or silent without repercussion or sanction. We have a true safety net that the people we attempt to protect do not, and this safety net charges us with the social obligation to "speak truth to power" (Wildavsky, 1987). The dramatic

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scenario in this article demonstrates that social justice discourses (and other moral matters) are contested because all proponents come to the question from particular personal standpoints, identities, histories, assumptive sets, and value bases. To take a stand on a social justice issue, then, becomes a matter of conscience because "Conscience is reflexive judgment about things that matter" (Green, 1999, p. 39). But although one's stand might be guided by conscience, the question remains as to whether it is morally appropriate. As members of the professoriate, before we can speak truth to other sources of power, we must first deconstruct our own power dynamics and power games—and then move forward, individually and collectively, respectfully and reflexively, in our quest for justice.

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