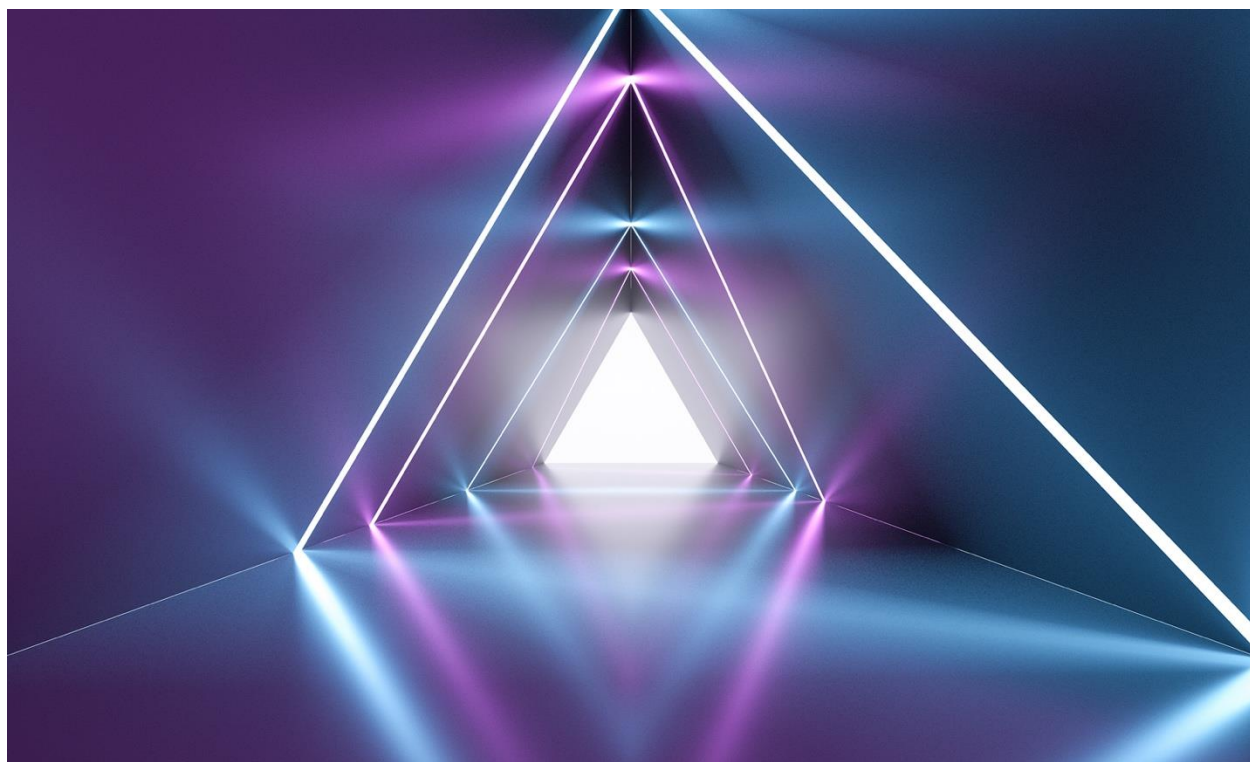


# Leading as Co-Conspirators: Discovering the Prismatic Equity Work of Activist School Leaders

A Report Submitted to the Ontario Principals Council

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# Introduction

## Purpose of the Study

This study emerges from a partnership between the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) and the authors of this paper who bring experiences as teachers, school leaders and university instructors/researchers. Equity and anti-oppressive leadership practices are a critical issue for the OPC because their core purpose is to support principals to foster exemplary leadership practices in public education in Ontario. While there is agreement on the importance of supporting the growing diverse identities of students, staff, and communities in Ontario, many school leaders continue to question how to responsively take action in response to this growing need. School leaders are asking what this work looks like on the ground and how they can prepare themselves to actively engage equity leadership. We approached in this work from both a practical and academic stance, and as co-conspirators alongside the OPC and participants in the study as we created a collaborative space. This project investigates how school leaders embody and enact equity, anti-oppressive, and activist leadership stances in their daily practices. It offers actionable leadership stances and recommendations to support the development of activist leadership identities grounded in equity work.

## Background and Rationale for the Study

Equity action by leaders has been well documented by OPC through their professional learning opportunities, courses, webinars, magazine articles, etc. However, this equity work is not a straight line, nor is it a finite task. Current research tells us that leaders must have the moral courage to be self-reflexive, and to enter equity conversations without solutions in mind. It is ongoing, generative work that requires leaders to listen to the lived voices of the oppressed (Bose & Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz, 2021; Gelinis-Proulx & Shields, 2022). In Ontario, Canada the work of

school leaders is guided by the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) which reflects current leadership practices (Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013; Katz et al., 2018). While the OLF provides a great deal of guidance around leading schools, it is not helpful in developing equitable practices as leaders. To fill this gap, many school systems across Ontario have created documents and led professional learning opportunities which guide the engagement of equity leadership. There is a need to add to these resources as school leaders continue to grapple with issues of equity and while they recognize the need to act, they are unsure about just how to act. Professional learning is important and necessary, but more is needed to guide school leaders on this trajectory of activist leadership.

To capture the complexities of engaging equity-informed school leadership, we coined the term, *prismatic equity work*, that draws upon a prism metaphorically. Prisms disperse a single beam of light into an array of colour hidden within. Depending on the angle of refraction due to the prism's shape and size, a multiplicity of possible rainbows will emerge. Similarly, equity and anti-oppressive leadership, reveals the complexity and diversity within a school community – surfacing the multiple identities, histories, and systemic factors often hidden beneath surface-level practices. In this way, both reveal what is not immediately visible. Consequently, both a prism and equity and anti-oppressive leadership can shift our perception and awareness of multiplicity – that there are multiple perceptions and multiple truths. School leaders therefore navigate system inequities, oppressive situations, biased staff perspectives, courageous conversations, etc. based upon their own prism of assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, world views, lived experiences, intersecting identities, etc. And, since equity work does not occur within a vacuum of isolation, the strength of a leader's equity competencies either invite and empower "co-conspirators" (Garrett-Walker, 2022, para. 8) or they are ignored. We believe that it is only

when a leader leads with equity activism and urges others who *are ready* to act, that prismatic equity work can be actualized, lead to sustained anti-oppressive action, and intensified leadership capacities. We have used the metaphor of the prism to engage the complexities of this equity and anti-oppressive work, noting that there exist diverse perspectives and positionalities within it.

The figure below reflects our prismatic activist leadership approach in visual form. As the act of doing equity work passes through the prism, it is transformed into an activist leadership stance when it is met with what we term as heartwork framed in accountability and resilience.

Figure 1: Activist Leadership



Note: This image is created by Keith, MacKinnon, and Kowalchuk (2025) to represent the critical elements embodied by a leader (e.g., heartwork, accountability, resistance) that collectively light and amplify relational-centric paths of equity work and activism.

## Methodology

In this study we engaged a lens of Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI). We were keen to hear stories of equity leadership from school leaders across Ontario, and we wanted to ensure that we were engaging a critical and reflexive stance when listening to them. CNI is rooted in the tenets

of critical race theory and is a generative process that involves the use of story as a portal to view experiences (Stavrou & Murphy, 2021) of systemic oppression and inequities. As researchers, our role was to create space for school leader participants to contribute their efforts (Love, 2019) so that each story shared allows for new stories to be lived and appreciated. We engaged in this work as co-participants, all learning together and as we engaged with one another. Our collective efforts led us towards a role of co-conspiracy. The research process became our collective activism.

## Data Collection Methods

We engaged two methods of data collection:

***Focus groups.*** We conducted a focus group with four participants to explore how these leaders engaged equity competencies in their daily work. Focus groups provide an opportunity for leaders to engage in collective dialogue and derive meaning from their work. A recent review of methodological methods in the study of educational leadership points to the use of qualitative methods as a means of understanding processes and the underlying meanings of leaders' work (Karimi & Khawaja, 2023). We felt that focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to reflect upon and engage in sense-making of their equity work. We shared some guiding questions with the group and asked them to share their stories of equity, activist leadership with one another.

***Interviews.*** We engaged 11 school leaders across Ontario in individual online interviews. We asked a series of open-ended questions which created space for each leader to share their leadership stories. Interviews have long been used by scholars of educational leadership and continue to be one of the most used methods in the field of educational leadership (Karimi &

Khawaja, 2021). Recent research points to the validity of online interviews as being just as effective and revealing as in-person interviews (Fan et al., 2024). We found school leaders to be very comfortable with engaging in online interviews, particularly having just emerged from a global pandemic which forced us all into using online modes of connection.

## Data Analysis

The focus group and interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom as a recording device. They were then analysed in a reflexive manner, acknowledging our own biases as researchers, confronting any assumptions we might make around equitable practices. Each of us reviewed the transcriptions individually and then collectively as a group to discuss. Our reflections and discussions drew us to the stories the school leaders told. These stories then, through our prismatic, collective stance, illuminated themes of that we describe as heartwork; and, supported by expressions of accountability and resilience. What follows is a discussion of these findings.

## Sampling

We recognize that our sampling was small and hence does not reflect a comprehensive look at activist leadership. Nonetheless, this study was informative in the ways it revealed a leadership stance that enabled principals to engage equity work. We interviewed a total of 11 school leaders from schools across Ontario with the majority working in elementary schools. One of the participants worked in a central role while all others held the position of principal. We also conducted one focus group with 4 participants, and all worked in elementary schools. Participants in this study worked in urban centres in both southern and northern Ontario.

## Findings

This study investigates how school leaders embody and enact equity and anti-oppressive leadership actions in their daily practices – the heartwork – that draws upon the leaders’ prism revealing complexity and exposing the impact of systemic inequities and lived experience. This heartwork emerged throughout all of our interactions with participants, and we found that it was bolstered and supported by a strong stance of accountability and resilience. In this section of the report, we share what we learned about each of these activist stances as they tell the story of activist leadership in Ontario schools.

### Stories of Heartwork

*“It doesn't matter how uncomfortable I am. I have got to do the work.”*

These words from one participant showcased the kind of courage and dedication they had to engage in equity work. This quote speaks to the challenges school leaders face each day and tells us that activist leaders are not deterred by difficulty. They lean into their own heartwork as a form of wayfinding through equity tensions which strengthens their moral compass.

### Heartwork Illuminates Action

When it comes to equity action to overcome oppressive tensions, several leaders commented that this work was more effectual, sustaining, and transformative when a collective team of individuals (e.g., student groups, teachers, school council, community members, etc.) led the way. Although the heartwork of the leader helped to foster the conditions of giving, care, and nurturing within the school, leaders' stories spoke to the collective power of co-conspirators (Garrett-Walker, 2022, para. 8) engaging together to listen, (un)learn, act, and restore. This is not about cheerleading and groupthink while blindly following the will of the masses. Being co-



conspirators is about working collectively, navigating differences, and facing complex situations together. Here is what two principals shared:

- [School leaders] build an equitable collaboration with families and communities ... equity work though is really about including the voice of all stakeholders, and that involves parents and families;
- Equity seeking groups should play a more vital role in a lot of the decisions that are happening.

Several examples from leaders were shared on how to engage co-conspirators including

- The creation of student-led affinity groups across K-12 (e.g., Black Student Union, cultural heritage groups, neurodiversity community, gender and sexuality alliance associations, family structure groups such as students with single parents, same-sex parents, adopted, or those who have experienced a loss of a parent, etc.)
- Co-creating Town Halls to engage the school community beyond traditional school council meetings, community facilitated book talks, teacher outreach events (e.g., Chai and Chat, Story-Time for Grandparents, Open Library Visits for younger siblings not yet in school, etc.)
- Virtual Campfire Read-Alouds either live or pre-recorded, and individual or small group Fireside Chats with Administration.

These shared stories and authentic relational experiences from an engaged educational community are evidence that small, courageous streams of equity actions can illuminate, while supported by a leader's heartwork, and reach outward into spaces previously shrouded in darkness.

## Heartwork Sustains Leaders Through the Messiness

Similarly discussed in our other two research findings, school leaders admit that equity work is messy (Castillo, 2023). Since heartwork is heartedly dependent upon the leader, how leaders choose to center it will have a significant impact on the school's equity outcomes. For example, some school leaders we interviewed shared the belief that *“a lot of the equity work is in addition to [my] work,”* while others saw it more seamlessly embedded. Another leader stated that *“I think there are still some people who are struggling with making [equity work] a priority and understanding how ... to embed it in their practice.”* Through the sharing of stories, particularly in the focus group we facilitated, all culturally diverse participants commented on how immensely grateful they were for a psychologically safe place to share, listen, and support one another as co-conspirators. Individual leaders during interviews commented on how much they valued the professional learning offerings from the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) and how much they relied on strategic directions, school/community mission statements, ethical frameworks through self-reading at the graduate level (MEd / PhD), etc., to help navigate the messiness. While heartwork aims to foster the school conditions for equity work, an activist leader must also continue to learn, sustain with courage, pause to contemplate or ask when needed, and “hold on” to system values, beliefs, policies, and community curated agreements through respectful, relational and generative interactions.

## Stories of Accountability

During our conversations with school leaders, the notion of accountability came up multiple times. This word has many different meanings and associations, and it inspires a whole range of emotions, feelings, and responsibilities amongst leaders. The leaders we spoke to overwhelmingly reflected an understanding of accountability that questioned the status quo in its commitment to justice, and the importance of engaging others in the process. As researchers, we

reflected on these understandings of accountability through the lens of the prism. The leaders' equity work passes through the prism and is transformed by a sense of accountability that was deeply connected to their conviction as a leader, their sense of justice, and their relationships with students, staff and community. This sense of accountability is a central part of the heartwork as the data revealed a strong reference to accountability to self, accountability to justice, and accountability to children and families.

### Accountability to Self

Being an activist leader is about taking action, but it is also about being true to one's convictions as a leader. One principal talked about being true to oneself to be prepared to make difficult decisions. *"I think you really need to be true to yourself and know what your values are...know who you are and feel really strongly and be proud of your convictions."* What really strikes us as important here is the need to remain true to one's convictions as a leader so that you know what needs to be done in response to incidents of racism and/or discrimination. Being true to yourself is critical if you are going to be able to take action, to support those who were harmed and to hold accountable those who did the harm. Later, the same principal stated, *"Because if you don't really believe and take to heart umm discrimination and racism and feel the impact and empathy towards people that are victims of it, then they won't care enough to do the work to address it and interrupt it."* Notice here that this principal calls upon leaders to take racism and discrimination to heart, to feel and understand its impact. You must believe in its presence when the harm reveals itself and not wish it away. You must care, otherwise you will not be able to act.

Accountability to self requires the following:

- Know what you value;
- Develop a strong moral compass;

- Take racism and discrimination of all kinds to heart;
- Use your convictions to inspire action.

### Accountability to Justice

Another element of accountability that was revealed within our conversations was what we have termed accountability to a sense of justice. The leaders we spoke to were deeply connected to their activist work. Every action they took, decision made, relationship built were enshrined within a strong sense and understanding of that which is just and good for students. Being accountable to justice is about engaging in deep critical listening, clear and thoughtful communication, and building fruitful relationships (Theoharis, 2024).

One school leader made the following suggestions taken from our conversation:

- Note the importance of compassion;
- Be proactive and anticipate how you can support;
- Find a critical friend;
- Recognize when you need help.

School leaders are called to lead with compassion, particularly for those who are victims of oppression. Part of this compassion is to be proactive and know how you can help. It is not enough to simply demonstrate empathy for those navigating injustices. To keep us accountable for this work, we need critical friends to keep us on track and to help us recognize when we need help to accomplish our goals. The same principal who made the suggestions above later states, *“We are all the voice of equity in the school, and we all have to be prepared to confront and challenge people who will try to derail the conversation and the work.”* We have learned that to be an activist leader, we must understand this work to be collectivist. Attempts to derail this work

will succeed if we do not engage in a collective response based on a strong and unwavering sense of justice.

### Accountability to Children and Families

One racialized principal shared a story about a white, cis-gendered female teacher who is well meaning in their intentions however their perspective is harmful towards a certain group of children in the school. The principal recounted this memory during our conversation and while we are not sharing the whole story to maintain anonymity, the story reflected a common misconception teachers have around students. If we impose our white, colonial understanding of what it means to work hard and complete tasks, we ignore differing perspectives around what constitutes hard work. Without a critical stance, well-intentioned actions can be harmful. The principal who shared this story described the approach she took in this case. *“I never come from a place where I think you're horrible human being...But you can't let it go when you're the principal or the vice principal, you can't let it go and I'm not one to let it go, umm I won't necessarily interrupt that moment...but I will never, ever, ever, let it go.”*

In this instance, the principal engages a strategic response to this teacher that does not derail their relationship but challenges the teacher to perhaps think differently about this issue. The principal is accountable to the relationship and demonstrates accountability to the children in the school by not letting this issue go. It is perhaps easy to let it go and move on, not wanting to ruffle feathers. The activist leader finds a way to address the problem in a way that creates the necessary change.

When being accountable to children and families we learned the following:

- The school leader is the voice of their students when the student voice is absent

- The work is emotional and innately human—this is about children not numbers
- Silence is not an option—school leaders cannot let things go

## Stories of Resilience

### Facing the Resistance

*“You can have PTSD from doing this work”.*

One participant shared these words with us because activist leadership is complex, difficult and demanding, and school leaders need to find a way to forward – to become resilient – to adapt, recover, and lead in the face of adversity. Walker (2020) concurs noting that resilience is not about bouncing back, particularly when one is being oppressed. Walker positions resilience as an ability to adapt, re-arrange, and change while managing disturbances. It is important to remember that resilience involves change and so it moves beyond resistance in its goal to change the outcome. Resistance to change is what school leaders persist against and why they need to develop resilience. When we viewed the understandings of resistance of the school leaders through a prismatic lens, it was not acts of extreme resistance that wore school leaders down, but rather the persistent, everyday systemic and emotional resistance they experienced at every turn while actionizing their equity work.

*“No one was getting out of their chair for me to sit in,”*

This is a strong statement made by one participant, referring to the ways school leaders experience exclusion, and a lack of access to opportunity. Systemic resistance often prevents leaders from doing the work they were called upon to do. They are systemically denied access to spaces and excluded from the table and decision-making processes that impact their daily work lives. But there is something of resilience in this statement. We can almost hear the principal say something like, *“But that isn’t going to stop me!”* and yet, another participant shared, *“You can’t*

*be a leader and an advocate for equity. If you want to be successful, you have to adjust your beliefs to the process.*” Clearly some leaders feel that leadership and advocacy do not always go hand in hand as there are many barriers in place within the systems we work.

*“I was paying attention to the conversations that I was having with people and to the resistance and the emotional toll it was taking on me and on the students themselves and on their families.”*

These words from one participant point to the kinds of resistance they faced in their roles which had a negative emotional impact on them as leaders, but also students and families. Participants shared stories of struggle, when they did not feel seen. When they and their students were subjected to deficit thinking and various microaggressions. One principal felt that they were not seen as human beings with feelings and emotions. And yet, in the face of this resistance, we saw how these leaders remained resilient.

## Enacting Resilience

In this study, we found that resilience is a foundational competency for school leaders working to responsively act to support diverse identities. As Walker (2020) suggests above, resilience is not just about recovering, it is about sustaining courage - to adapt, to re-arrange, and to make changes while managing resistance. In this study we understand that the act of choosing to be resilient is one of freedom. As one school leader explains, “...teaching can be a process of liberation”. We suggest that leading is also an act of liberation. The power of choice reigns true amongst the participants in this study.

Similarly to how school leaders use their moral compass to guide their ‘heartwork’ leadership, and their self-knowledge to guide their accountability, together these underpin a *mindset of resilience*. Through a prismatic lens, this mindset sees resistance as layered and

systemic. It embraces complexity and tension and prioritizes process, voice and justice. The school leaders claim that an understanding of oneself – a deeper understanding of how our beliefs and values are influenced and how we understand both power, privilege and our worldview - is critical to a mindset of resilience.

Leaders expressed their resilience in the form of trust, particularly of co-conspirators saying, *“You have to trust the people out there who’ve done some of this [equity] work.”* They recognize the importance of tenacity stating, *“It [resilience] is about daily life”*. They recognize the need for humility, *“I think there needs to be humility”* and a lot of courage, *“How can you be an equitable leader if you’re not taking risks?”*

- Resilience requires that we trust those taking the journey alongside us.
- Resilience needs to be our daily guide as leaders.
- Humility allows us to recognize our own faults and misgivings
- Courage spurs us on to take risks even in the face of resistance

As one participant states,

*She was fearless when it came to her leadership. She wasn't popular; people didn't like her. But you knew as a school leader, that if you were doing the work and if there was any type of resistance, be it from students, parents, or staff, that she had your back.*

Walker (2020) positions resilience as the ability to adapt, reorganize, and transform while managing disturbances. Importantly, he claims that resilience involves change – not just endurance – and therefore moves beyond resistance by aiming to transform outcomes rather than merely opposing them. A resilient school leader is fearless. They are not always the most popular person in the building, but they trust their co-conspirators and those doing the work. They are humble and yet courageous. Their resilience is about daily action. They are activists.



## Recommendations

As co-conspirators alongside participants, we engaged school leaders from across northern and southern Ontario to discuss their equity work with us, with the aim of deepening our understanding of what it means to embody activist leadership. To determine the presence of activism, we used our prismatic view of the work revealing a pathway towards a light-filled expression of activist leadership. We learned that at its core lies the heart and the heartwork which emerges. Even in the face of hardships and resistance, school leaders led with conviction. They engaged their whole selves and were accountable to their values and beliefs. They prioritized justice as a guiding principle and engaged the community in their work. Despite encountering resistance, leaders exhibited remarkable resilience, staying firmly rooted in their activist stance. We were deeply honoured that the participants shared their stories of leadership with us and are wiser for having engaged in these meaningful conversations.

As co-conspirators in this work, we offer the following urgent calls to action for school leaders committed to equity, social justice and activist leadership. These are not checkboxes – they are daily practices that require courage, reflection and community.

- Look inward to examine your heartwork and let it illuminate your leadership, transforming your decisions with clarity, compassion and a newfound conviction;
- Activism is not something you do alone. Build relationships with community and lead in community with staff, students, and parents to allow their voices to shape the work;
- Remember that the heartwork is supported and enhanced by your sense of accountability, bolstered by resilience. Let accountability steeped in resilience become your leadership stance and anchor your equity work in this stance. It will fuel your actions and enable you to face resistance;

- Choose transformation over compliance. Your resilience will create space for resistance as you disrupt the status quo and address inequities. Leadership that centres equity and activism challenges power imbalances and redistributes it. Marginalized voices are elevated, and injustices are challenged.

Prismatic equity work is not about perfection—it is about purpose (heartwork), presence (accountability) and persistence (resilience). These practices are both a compass and a commitment.

To all the school system leaders, policy makers, and those who support educational leadership: equity and anti-oppressive school leaders cannot do this work alone. Your responsibility is to not just allow this work – but rather to actively protect, resource, and walk alongside it. We also have some recommendations for school systems and all who support school leaders in their work. These recommendations are intended to support school leaders in their activism:

- Provide space in which school leaders can be in community and collaborate with one another for it is in these spaces where heartwork flourishes;
- Actively support and trust school leaders who are engaging accountability and be there to bolster their efforts when they face resistance;
- Walk alongside school leaders as they disrupt power imbalances to change the status quo and be willing to look at policies and procedures which inhibit this work.

Equity and anti-oppressive leadership is not sustainable without equity and anti-oppressive systems. If we expect school leaders to be bold, we must be equally bold in how we support them.

## Conclusion

We hope that you have found this report informative and we invite you, the reader, to join us as co-conspirators as we learn more about how to enact activist equity competencies in our daily work as leaders. We encourage you to look through the prism when managing complex and challenging situations for this is where you will find a way forward. We all approach this work through different lenses as informed by our lived experiences and identities. It is hoped that the calls to action shared in this report will help guide the development of a leadership stance that will aid you in doing the work of equity. The activism begins first within ourselves. Our leadership stance will pave the way for change to occur. We know and understand that the work is hard, emotionally draining, and filled with challenges. Lean on one another and remember that we are not alone in this work. We are co-conspirators and as such, we rely on one another to guide our next steps, keep us accountable when we are not critically examining our biases, and we will support one another through transformation, remaining resilience in the face of resistance. We wish you well on your journey.

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