

Book Review

Activist Leadership for Inclusive Schools: Canadian Insights

Edited by Zuhra Abawi, Ardavan Eizadirad, Stephanie Tuters, and Andrew B. Campbell
Canadian Scholars

300 pages, 2025

Paperback, eBook, PDF

ISBN 978-1-77338-463-4 (softcover), ISBN 978-1-77338-465-8 (EPUB), ISBN 978-1-77338-464-1 (PDF)

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Activist Leadership for Inclusive Schools emphasizes leadership as an ethical and political activity rooted in justice, equity, and anti-oppression, rather than simply an administrative function. In doing so the volume offers an examination of race, Indigeneity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, mental health, and cultural diversity, aiming to connect theory with practice for a broad audience, including academics, school leaders, and community activists. Moreover, the editors characterize activist leadership as an intellectual perspective and a collection of practical strategies for addressing systemic injustices.

Edited by Zuhra Abawi (Niagara University), Ardavan Eizadirad (Wilfrid Laurier University), Stephanie Tuters (University of Toronto), and Andrew B. Campbell (University of Toronto), the text brings together complementary expertise in social justice education, culturally responsive leadership, anti-oppression practice, and equity-focused school improvement. Combining real-world leadership experience with scholarly authority, the book draws on both research and the lived experiences of activists.

Rather than providing a single viewpoint, the chapters encompass a diverse range of voices, with contributors bringing expertise in queer theory, critical race theory, mad studies, and culturally responsive leadership, and it is through this diversity that the authors weave together theory with case studies, practical tools, and reflective exercises, bridging the gap between scholarly research and the practice of leadership.

One of its distinguishing features is the synthesis of interdisciplinary approaches that are not usually combined. For example, the application of queer theory alongside mad studies brings together concerns of professionalism while challenging norms that position emotional vulnerability and empathy as integral components of authentic leadership. Some chapter authors adopt a practical approach by providing ways to foster just school cultures through the creation of equity-focused collaborative structures, redesigning institutional frameworks, and through the consistent application of culturally responsive pedagogy. The close of the book moves away from traditional academic writing to use poetry as a means to incite action. This strengthens the ethical dimensions of activist leadership, highlighting the author's main claim that leadership and advocacy are closely linked.

A defining contribution of this volume is the refusal to limit activism to a superficial or symbolic role in leadership; instead, the editors position it at the center so that every section—policy, pedagogy, and identity turns on the questions that justice demands. Leadership scholarship has long addressed equity through different frameworks, as seen in Shields (2010, 2017) who stresses moral courage and transformative change, while Khalifa (2020) highlights the centrality of culturally responsive practice. What sets this book apart is its insistence on positioning activism as the core principle of leadership identity across policy, pedagogy, and identity, thereby moving the field beyond a focus on personal leader qualities toward addressing inequities through structural and collective approaches

Moreover, most chapters go beyond advocating for inclusion; they outline strategies for dismantling barriers, whether through equity-focused recruitment practices, responsive place-based curriculum reconstruction, or by embedding mentorship programs that pair novice educators with experienced equity leaders to sustain long-term systemic change. The book also highlights vulnerability as an essential component of workplace practices, professional identity, and leadership. Specifically, leaders who express their feelings and think about their development journey tend to connect with others on a deeper and real level. Consequently, this challenges the view that an effective leader has to be emotionally off and neutral.

Although the book puts emphasis on activism, one of its concepts may be challenging for readers who are less accustomed to dense theoretical frameworks. Moreover, while the sections on mad studies and queer theory offer valuable insights, they occasionally rely on unfamiliar academic language. For example, the discussion in Chapter 6 uses a highly abstract theoretical framework without accompanying classroom-based scenarios, which may limit its accessibility to practitioners. In the same way, for Chapter 9 discussing policy responsive culture reform, the analysis would be significantly strengthened by including a case story from a principal or teacher who tried to apply the policy in order to emphasize the nuanced, real-life details of the implementation as well as the results. As a result, practitioners seeking practical, ready-to-use tools, may feel isolated.

Furthermore, while several chapters are rich in qualitative evidence and narrative, some chapters over-rely on theoretical frameworks, which can create distance from the lived experiences of practitioners and teachers. That said, the focus on graduate students, practitioners, and policy makers reflects the ample and inclusive aims of the volume, which are admirable, even if they result in uneven accessibility across chapters. This book will, rightly, be considered first and foremost for graduate students and scholar practitioners. Even general practitioners will encounter important perspectives which, though not always readily applicable, offer valuable insights into the relationship between theory and practice in school leadership. *Activist Leadership for Inclusive Schools* redefines leadership itself, insisting that it be seen as overtly political and grounded in justice. Advocacy, a readiness to encounter uncertainty, and the commitment to challenge inequitable systems are not supplementary principles, they are the indispensable work of the role. The book enriches scholarly engagement with a variety of theoretical approaches, and it also contains practical strategies which are adjustable to multi-faceted school systems, suited for various level faculty members. However, the convenience does vary from chapter to chapter, with some being more practical than others.

In the broader educational leadership literature, *Activist Leadership for Inclusive Schools* distinguishes itself by positioning advocacy at the very center of leadership identity. While influential American works such as Theoharis's *The School Leaders Our Children Deserve* (2024) and his earlier article on social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2007) have shaped the field, they often focus on individual leaders navigating systemic resistance. This book repositions those frameworks within Canadian policies and cultures, interlacing critical race, queer, and mad studies. The editors demand a far-reaching critique

of exclusion and ground that critique in locally informed strategies—offering a distinctly Canadian intervention within a literature that has mainly centered on U.S. contexts.

Graduate students, researchers, and leaders focused on educational equity and social justice will find this book particularly relevant, as will policy influencers and community activists. It is strongly recommended for university libraries, graduate programs cultivating educational leaders, and professional development contexts, as the book not only shares vital knowledge but also confronts assumptions and motivates readers to step confidently into roles as change leaders. Each strategy and case are designed for modification, making the lessons useful in Canada and adaptable to global contexts.

The book offers a valuable interpretation regarding leadership as an ethical and political action shaped by advocacy, vulnerability, and a will to disrupt built systems. It combines theory with practical approaches and emotional impact, particularly through narratives and a poetic ending, even though some parts need more data to anchor the concepts or clearer writing. In the context of educational leadership, it has timely relevance, particularly amid current discussions of equity, inclusion, and systemic change in Canadian schools, offering clear diagnostic and prescriptive analyses for scholar-practitioners working within the equity paradigm. Ultimately, the adoption of activism as a fundamental aspect of leadership reshapes the opportunities for positively impacting educational policy and practice in the way.

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