Several weeks have passed since the chapters in this volume were written, and since then a number of potentially landscape-changing events have occurred. These events have the potential to influence the course of equitable leadership in Canadian educational institutions. One was the murder conviction of Derek Chauvin, the white police officer who pinned George Floyd, an African American man, to the ground for over nine minutes until he died. The entire event was captured on video, contradicting the erroneous initial police version that he died from medical complications (McDonnell, del Rio, Eligon, & Hassan, 2021). The incident and subsequent video prompted outrage in the United States and around the world and was accompanied by demonstrations against racism generally and racist policing and judicial systems in particular (McDonnell et al., 2021; Trinh, 2021). For some, the guilty verdict in the case of Derek Chauvin represented a change in the trajectory of judicial decisions on police actions against racialized groups. Up until this time, the actions of law enforcement personnel in encounters such as this had, for the most part, been endorsed by judicial systems; there have been few convictions of police officers who have injured or killed racialized individuals. The most notorious of these not guilty verdicts was for the beating of Rodney King in the 1990s by members of the Los Angeles police, which was also captured in vivid detail on video.

The US has not been the only country immersed in issues of race and racism. Contrary to a common belief, Canada also has racism issues (Boutilier, Gillis, & Hasham, 2021; Bresge, 2021; Joy, 2021a); it has seen its share of incidents over the years, and in particular, in the past few months. One of these incidents involved the shocking murder of a Muslim family that was out for an evening walk in London, Ontario. Reports indicate that the accused, a twenty-two-year-old white male, drove his truck up onto the sidewalk, intentionally running down the family, killing four of them and seriously injuring the fifth, a nine-year-old boy (Casey, 2021). This was not the only tragic racially motivated event in recent years, however. There have been a number of incidents including the
Quebec City mosque massacre in 2017, where a gunman killed six worshippers and wounded five others, the 2020 murder of a man at a mosque in Rexdale, Ontario, the recent harassment of Black Muslim women in Edmonton (Mosleh, 2021), and increased harassment of people of Asian heritage as the COVID-19 pandemic has continued beyond 2021 (Karamali, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020).

One other significant event, or series of events, to emerge in Canada has been the discovery of children’s remains near the grounds of former residential schools for First Nations children. Employing ground-penetrating radar technology, investigators uncovered the remains of 215 children at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in southern British Columbia. Other discoveries quickly followed, one revealing 715 graves near the former Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan, and another 182 graves uncovered near the former St. Eugene’s Mission School in British Columbia. Tragically, these discoveries undoubtedly represent the tip of a much larger iceberg. More of these discoveries are certain to emerge. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) indicates that there may be as many as 6,000 of these unmarked graves on the grounds of what were once 130 residential schools across Canada. These revelations highlight Canada’s shameful racist history, wherein First Nations children were forcibly removed from their families and communities and placed in these often-distant institutions in the mistaken belief that they would provide the children with a better education than they could receive in their own communities. Instead, children emerged from these government-sponsored religious institutions traumatized; that is, if they managed to survive their residential ordeals at all, which many did not.

So what does this mean for our institutions and communities? And what does it mean for the future of educational leadership and equity in Canada and elsewhere? On the surface, it would appear that these recent events might prompt the privileged among us to take seriously issues of not just race but also gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, language, culture, and ability, among others, and to do something meaningful about them. These shocking events have spurred, at least in the short term, some of those who are not marginalized on a daily basis to acknowledge the presence of racism – and perhaps other forms of oppression – in their communities. Indeed, there has been no shortage of condemnations of historical and contemporary racism in the media and from politicians as of late (Connolly, 2021). Some reactions have even moved beyond mere rhetoric. In 2021, thousands of people – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – took part in marches on Canada Day to mourn the thousands of children who perished in residential schools. Canada also appointed its first Inuit governor general in 2021, Mary Simon, from Kuujjuaq in northeastern Quebec. And in the US, as we have seen, the judicial system convicted and sentenced Derek Chauvin to twenty-two and a half years for the murder of
George Floyd. The trajectory of attitudes towards, and actions on, equity issues, then, would seem to be changing, at least on a superficial level.

Despite this apparent promise for equity issues, marginalized groups continue to be cynical, or at best, cautious, about the future (Bowden, 2021; Francis, Kwong, Vega, & Osman; Mester & Spillman, 2021; New York Times Opinion, 2021). They have seen opportunities come and go, without any real changes in their day-to-day lives. Rhetoric around improvements fade after whatever crisis of the time has passed and the status quo endures. For some, though, recent events and these latest revelations and actions represent a “sliver of hope” (Mester & Spillman, 2021). Most acknowledge, however, that if this hope is to be realized changes need to be systemic (Joy, 2021b). Agents of change need to acknowledge that racism, and inequities generally, are systemic in nature – not the product of the actions of a “few bad apples,” but of enduring patterns built into the very fabric of our institutions and communities. The systemic or structural nature of racism and inequity is not a straightforward matter, however. It is complicated by the relationship between the lives of individual people and the institutional arrangements that shapes these lives. Shohat and Stam’s (1994) view of the nature of systemic racism still applies today. For them, racism is both individual and systemic, interwoven into the fabric both of the psyche and of the social system, at once grindingly quotidian and maddeningly abstract. It is not merely an attitudinal issue, but a historically contingent institutional and discursive apparatus linked to the drastically unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, the unfair apportioning of justice, wealth, pleasure and pain. It is less an error in logic, less about “attitudes” than about the deferring of hopes and the destruction of lives. (p. 23)

Systemic change requires nothing less than the development of a new social order – something that many authors refer to in their chapters in this volume. Ideally, this new order would bring with it institutional patterns and individual psyches that promote equity. In this enterprise, people's behaviour and institutional norms, policies, and practices would be aligned with equity.

Educational institutions and, in particular, the leaders who guide them have an important role to play in promoting equity at this crucial juncture of history, and the chapters in this uniquely Canadian volume are valuable tools in this endeavour. In many respects, the chapters that follow provide us with a useful set of guidelines for this important undertaking. Employing Shields’s (2003, 2010) idea of transformative leadership, this volume lays out a way forward for educational leadership to stimulate, support, and foster equitable practices in educational institutions and beyond. Among other things, the chapters emphasize the systemic nature of (in)equity, the importance of critique and advocacy, and the necessity of operationalizing leadership as a collective endeavour.
Following Shields (2003, 2010), the chapters in this volume emphasize the systemic nature of inequity and the necessity of generating system-wide change. The authors acknowledge that inequity cannot be reduced to poorly behaving individuals, so-called “bad actors.” Instead, inequity extends beyond these individuals – a part of wider patterns that are woven into institutional and community norms, policies, and practices. Changes to equitable patterns, then, in the transformational view that measures reach “deep and wide,” requires targeting not just individual people but also the structures, policies, and far-reaching practices that give rise to the actions of these individuals. In this volume, Atleo provides a way of understanding these sorts of transformations. She relates a 4,500-year-old story of the establishment of a new social order: A young hawith (“chief”), discouraged by a rapidly diminishing seal population – the main source of nourishment for his household and the wider community – finds a way to lay conventional wisdom and practice aside and establish a completely new way of “being, seeing, and doing.” In doing so, he is instrumental in establishing a new social order – one that was capable of sustaining his and other households in the community, allowing many to participate on an equitable footing in a new resource economy. The lesson for the equity-minded here is that equitable institutions and communities can only be realized with the advent of a new social order.

The chapters in this volume also emphasize the importance of a critical understanding of the institutions and communities in which people work and live. Establishing systemic changes and instituting a new social order requires the development of a critical consciousness in all members of the school and school community. Reflecting critically on the circumstances in which they find themselves, including the sometimes difficult-to-identify inequities, allows members of the school community to recognize unstated, implicit, and subtle points of view and the often taken-for-granted conditions that provide the basis for such views and practices. Reflections of this sort can occur when administrators and teachers engage others in critical conversations, sponsor activities that are specifically designed to facilitate such conversations, foster conditions where people feel safe having these sometimes difficult conversations (Ryan, 2016), and ask pointed questions like: “What is happening here?” “Who says this is the way things should be?” “What other purposes are being served?” “Whose voices are being excluded and silenced?” “What action can we take?” and “Who can we enlist to support us?” (Smyth, 1996).

The chapters also highlight the importance of the advocacy component of leadership. Those who act in leadership positions – formal or informal – are not the moral ciphers leadership scholars once thought they were, or at least thought they should be (Greenfield, 1978). Leadership involves much more than simply putting policy into practice. More than this, though, not all policies are equitable, life in schools is a lot more complicated than pre-established frameworks
often assume, and equity-minded educators often encounter resistance to their initiatives. The consequence is that those who work in leadership positions need to actively promote equity in their schools and communities; they need to become activists. Among other things, they need to actively attempt to persuade people to embrace equity, provide them with helpful information and resources on equity-related issues, use appropriate language in these efforts, and do their best to avoid preaching at others (Ryan, 2016). Given the fluid power relationships that do not always favour the equity-minded, leaders will need to be strategic in their actions. This means that they will need to position themselves appropriately, work to understand organizational politics, and judiciously choose courses of action that will help them achieve their equity goals.

Some of the chapters also hint at approaching leadership from a collective orientation. This is different than the way in which the general population, organizations, and scholars have often conceptualized leadership. The generally accepted view of leadership sees it as an individual enterprise – as something that resides in individuals (Ryan, 2006). A collective orientation towards leadership does not try to suggest that individuals do not exercise leadership or are not involved in what some would consider leadership activities. Leadership obviously relies on the actions of individuals, and it is in the interest of everyone that particular people exercise the (leadership) skills that they possess. But centring leadership on individuals is problematic for two reasons. First, endowing particular individuals with power over others is inherently exclusive, and ultimately inequitable. Equitable organizations and communities become possible when power is distributed and everyone has the opportunity to influence actions that will have an impact on them. The other reason that individual leadership will not advance equity is that organizations will have to start over when a dominant leader moves on, even if that person was a promoter of equity. For equity to sustain itself, it has to be built into leadership structures rather than rest with a single individual or select group of individuals, so that when individuals in formal (or informal) leadership positions depart, little will change when new members join the organization. This equitable power distribution should ideally extend to the communities that schools serve, making it possible for community members to be part of the leadership structure.

If politicians, policymakers, educators, parents, and community members in Canada and elsewhere are to usher in more equitable schools, institutions, and communities, then they need to take seriously the leadership insights of the authors of the chapters of this volume. Now is the time to push for equitable change. This window of opportunity might not last. We need to take advantage of this moment and make the changes that will make our schools and communities more equitable – and better – places.

James Ryan
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