

## 4.7 Removing Disadvantage – Seeking Reconciliation

**Leaders in education are called to pursue social justice and wellbeing of all, showing love for the disadvantaged, marginalised and vulnerable. They create and implement a curriculum that liberates and empowers children and communities. Barriers are removed by wise pedagogy, transformative pastoral care and wise allocation of resources. Leaders build schools that enable disparate communities to live well together, rooted in dialogue, empathy and love. Their schools become beacons of restoration, filled with peace-seeking, environment-saving, community-loving activists.**

### Removing Disadvantage

Both the Old and New Testaments insist that God's desire is for generosity, love and practical action towards the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed and the immigrant. "The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18), so in staying close to those who are suffering we stay near to God. In announcing his own ministry, Jesus quotes the sleeves-rolled-up action-packed mission of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19), and our vision for education must show special concern for the disadvantaged. In starting a new church community in Galatia, Paul was questioned by the other apostles as to his actions and motives. He writes, "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along." (Galatians 2:10). Wisdom, knowledge and skills, hope and aspiration, and the support of a community that gives children dignity, and treats them as unique and precious – leaders understand that these combine to liberate children, giving freedom to learn, grow, relate, create and flourish. Their curricular decisions reflect this pursuit of emancipation.

Removing disadvantage has implications for admissions policies and the extent to which they reflect the pursuit of social justice and equity. Jesus tells the story of an unlikely party: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind and you will be blessed." (Luke 14:13).

Social justice requires proactive advocacy, seeking justice and compassion, having the courage to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are poor." (Proverbs 31:8). It opens up learning experiences that may otherwise be unlikely, empowering children with what Professor Michael Young calls "powerful knowledge" (Young and Lambert 2013: 39), building cultural capital for the benefit of the whole community.

This is so central to the biblical message that it does not simply define the intended ethical behaviour patterns of believers, but the very nature of the worship that we are to bring to a God who, the Psalmist says, "secures justice for the poor" (Psalm 140:12). Isaiah is stern: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free. . .to share your food with the hungry. . .to provide the poor with shelter. . ." (Isaiah 58:6-7), while Micah is concise: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Leaders who remove disadvantage make tough decisions together about admissions, partnerships, relationships, resources, and curriculum. They take a road less travelled but do so with a deep sense of vocation and thrive in networks who can support one another in this journey of love in action. There may be no more tangible way of extending God's kingdom in a community than the removal of disadvantage through the transformative beacon of a school minded to choose this path: it becomes a sign of the possibility of abundant life for all.

1. How can our schools show 'generosity, love and practical action towards the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed and the lonely'?
2. How do you define disadvantage in your community? What are the issues and how does your leadership approach help to address these?
3. To what extent does our curriculum help to 'liberate children, giving freedom to learn, grow, relate, create and flourish'?
4. What role does a school play in the expression of God's kingdom in your community? How does this relate to the role of the local church?

## Seeking Reconciliation

Reconciliation is the healing of broken, wounded or distrustful relationships, in honest recognition of past hurts. Our society has many such relationships at all levels, such as polarised politics, divisions centred on wealth, class and culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, family, health and disability, and conflicting responses to controversial issues such as the environmental crisis, immigration, or crime. All of these affect schools. So, can schools be places where reconciliation can be learned and practised? They have daily opportunities to attempt to do so.

Christians trust that God is a God of peace in the fullest sense, far more than the absence of war and conflict, and that there are resources for peace-making and peacebuilding in both Christian and other traditions – religious and non-religious. A healthily plural school is where both staff and children are learning to put energy, thought and imagination into forming a culture of reconciliation. Be reconcilers! is an imperative for all.

A Christian understanding of reconciliation first of all hopes in God, and in Jesus as embodying peace – with God, within ourselves, with others, and with creation. Our first response is to trust that this peace has the last word – this is the good news. So we can face and repent of our own part in alienation, conflict and bad relationships. Then we can wholeheartedly be reconcilers.

School leaders need to face difficult questions, and work out with staff, children, parents and other stakeholders how best to tackle them. How are deeply held yet historically-divided identities to be treated in school? Leaders can work out ways in which deep divisions and related conflicts can become occasions for resolving some of them, improving the quality of our disagreements about others, and learning how to be a community where we live in mutual respect, understanding and peace. A school that does that is making one of the most important of all contributions to its members and to society.

1. What are the key issues or relationships in your community that are in need of reconciliation? What is your first move towards this?
2. To what extent does faith/religion help us think about ideas of reconciliation and inclusion, when it may have a historical reputation for reinforcing or contributing to social division and conflict?
3. What would it mean for your school to become a 'beacon of restoration, filled with peace-seeking, environment-saving, community-loving activists'?
4. What part does humility and authenticity play in facilitating reconciliation in a community?

