

Dr. Cheryl Champ: A Social Justice Leader with a Vision

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In today's climate of divisive rhetoric, there is a need for social justice that values building a bridge across differences through dialogue and action. Social action begins with a vision to transform society and actively contribute to the development of awareness, knowledge, and tools for creating and sustaining change over a long period of time (Zuniga, 2013). Dr. Cheryl Champ is one of those visionaries, working to outline conceptual frameworks for diversity and social justice in education. As the former Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction at Sewanhaka Central High School District, Dr. Cheryl Champ explored new possibilities for transforming barriers that keep large portions of the student population from fully participating in the educational process into an educational system that values equal opportunities and social justice. As Champ stated, "a social justice leader is someone that is committed to critically examining the practices of their organizations to identify policies, structures, and beliefs that are creating barriers to equitable access to opportunities and equitable outcomes, and who can foster change within the organization to mitigate and eliminate those barriers with the goal of promoting a more just society" (online communication, December 6, 2016). Her passion for social justice is inspirational, and her contributions to creating equitable access to educational resources have transformed Sewanhaka into a district that values equal education and resources for all students.

Champ began her career in education as a music teacher in various schools in South Carolina and North Carolina. Prior to becoming a teacher, she was "a music kid" (personal communication, November 21, 2016), playing various instruments such as the clarinet, saxophone, and boudouin, although her prime instrument had always been the cello. She valued her relationships with the teachers so pursuing a career in education was a natural next step for

her. After she got her college degree, she taught violin, cello, and bass for ten years, and from there she moved on to administration.

As an administrator, she worked in different types of settings, including rural, urban, and suburban, where she was exposed to a variety of different educational issues. By accepting the position as the head of administration, Champ broke gender barriers and became the first female principal in the history of Westchester County Lakeland High School District. As Lorbert (2013) indicated there are powerful and effective ways to challenge the limiting gender roles and power structures that marginalize women. Champ presents a strong image of female leadership and, although she claims she has never made gender an issue in her educational career, she serves as a role model and believes girls can achieve any level of success they want. Socially constructed gender roles have recently been challenged by the first woman who has made a run for the White House and Champ proudly displays the picture of Hillary Clinton on her cell phone case, even after the outcome of the election. One of the most crucial strengths of social justice leaders is to be persistent and never lose faith in their ideals. Champ promotes the vision of Hillary Clinton who believes “women’s rights are human rights” and although, as Clinton said, “we have not shattered that highest and hardest glass ceiling”, Champ is prepared to bridge whatever gender gap, or glass ceiling that may exist and takes action to ensure gender equality in education.

Champ entered the education system with a vision of ensuring that every student, regardless of his or her background, will receive access to equitable resources. As Socrates, one of the characters who represents an ultimate mentor according to Millman (2006), “the secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new” (p. 113). The steps Champ had taken to build a new vision for equity and social justice in the Sewanhaka Central High School District impacted the people she worked with and inspired them to mobilize

resources to bridge the vision with reality. Working with Champ, people get the feeling that their contributions matters and they also understand the foundations her principles are based on.

Visionary leaders like Champ help people see how their work fits into the broad context outside of their school or district. Her commitment and enthusiasm to move people towards shared dreams is not only admirable, but contagious, and it inspires people to join in her vision and become agents of change.

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