

Cover page

Title: Minority school leaders: Contribution to the development of an inclusive multi-cultural environment.

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The purpose of this paper is to share findings from two studies. One study investigates how Minnesota school administrators are addressing cultural diversity and English Language Learners. Data was collected through an electronic survey sent to superintendents and principals. 326 surveys from a possible 998 were completed for a return rate of 32.6%. Respondents were asked to identify their leadership position and type of district (urban, suburban, rural, or other). Respondents were also asked their perception concerning (a) personal awareness of English Language Learners (ELL) and cultural diversity needs, (b) district efforts through finances and professional development to address ELL and cultural diversity issues, (c) awareness of higher education efforts to address cultural diversity issues, and (d) level of interest in attending training on ELL and cultural diversity. The second study focuses experiences and perceptions of school leaders of color. Data were collected through focus groups and individual interviews. Questions include (a) what challenges do people of color face in securing leadership positions; (b) what challenges do people of color face in their current position; (c) how important is it to have a person of color in a leadership position where the majority of students are students of color; (d) how can people of color be encouraged to seek school leadership positions; and (e) what suggestions would you make regarding recruitment of people of color into administrative preparation programs? This paper shares their perspective on the importance of having a person of color in a leadership position. Results from the two studies indicate a need for Minnesota school leadership to reflect a more diverse student population and for school personnel to develop inclusive, multi-cultural environments. Recommendations for addressing the absence of school leaders of color include (a) school districts identifying people of color within their

teaching ranks and encouraging them to seek administrative licensure; (b) districts and professional organizations establishing mentoring programs for aspiring school leaders of color; and (c) universities collaborating with local school districts to recruit aspiring school leaders of color for preparation programs. Recommendations for establishing a positive multi-cultural environment include (a) elimination of stereotypes, (b) implementation of teaching strategies that meet the learning needs of all students, (c) acknowledgement of the different cultural backgrounds of students and how they enrich learning, and (d) use of the dynamics and influences of the family with addressing the achievement gap.

Minority school leaders: contributing to the development of an inclusive multi-cultural environment

The percentage of minority school age children rose from 26% in 1980 to 35% in 2000; the United States Department of Education projects this number will increase to 64% by 2100 (Usdan, McCloud, Podomostko, & Cuban, 2001, p. 15). The change in student demographics has posed a number of challenges for school systems as they address such issues as language barriers and cultural differences.

Usdan, et al. stated, “Clearly, schools will have to create programs and systems responsive to the special needs of a diverse, multi ethnic student body” (2001, p. 15). Lee (1994) outlined the factors necessary to implement multi-cultural education in schools. She contends it is essential for school leaders to evaluate basic beliefs and determine how they affect instruction for all students, especially students with diverse backgrounds. Issues for consideration include (a) beliefs about the demands of democratic society; (b) knowledge of what it takes to succeed in America; (c) traditional motifs about key periods in history; (d) beliefs about the critical knowledge base for learning in preparation for the twenty-first century; (e) awareness of how children and adolescents learn; and (f) an understanding of the role of language in learning and value judgments about different variables of English and languages of linguistic diverse immigrant groups (p.10).

The need to address the changing demographics within the school environment involves more than considering culture. Singleton and Linton (2006) contend that teachers need to establish a high level of expectations and implement more effective instructional practices to close the racial achievement gap. It is necessary for teachers and administrators to examine the instructional strategies that these cultures bring to the

classroom and the ramification of instruction. Singleton and Linton further note that to achieve equity in educational programs there is a need to recognize that both white educators and educators of color can add to the conversation regarding inclusive multi-cultural environments.

A challenge for educators in creating multi-cultural inclusive classrooms is to understand the educational ramifications of multi-cultural environments. Shields, Laroucq and Oberg (2003) note that multi-cultural educational practices have focused on the “superficial cultural differences like food or fashion and have ignored the underlying issues of racism and cultural conflicts that need to be addressed in schools” (p.117) and that educators are not willing to be engaged in a discussion of race and ethnicity because “they simply do not know how to address the issue” (p. 119).

Challenges that accompany the establishment of a positive multi-cultural environment include the need to be attentive to such issues as parent involvement, testing, achievement gap, and English Language Learner needs. For example, Bainbridge and Lasley, II (2000) insist that to consider the achievement gap only in regards to skin color is a continuation of “self-perpetuation prejudice” (p.50). Singham (1999) argues that addressing the achievement gap needs to be approached socially, economically and psychologically; there is no one way to address it.

There are several components of the school environment that need to be addressed when creating multi-cultural inclusive classrooms. Singleton and Linton provide strategies in the following areas:

1. Culture and Climate—(a) encourage students to talk about differences without making judgments, (b) teach how to maintain positive interaction among people

- of different racial/cultural backgrounds, (c) establish school policies that reflect a value for differences among people and establish school board policies that are racially sensitive, (d) hold educators accountable for demonstrating high expectations for students of color, (e) establish a staff that is reflective of the student population.
2. Curriculum—(a) multi-cultural education goes beyond the food, fun and festivities, (b) students of color see themselves, their lives and community in the curriculum, (c) the school’s curriculum is viewed as pluralistic and ever changing to meet the needs of an ever changing student body.
 3. Instruction—(a) teachers model an acceptance and appreciation for different ideas, opinions, and learning style, (b) teachers make an effort to understand the racial and cultural characteristics of students, one student at a time, (c) instructional strategies do not conflict with values, beliefs or cultural practices of any students, (d) students of color feel valued by their teachers and challenged by teachers’ high expectations.
 4. Assessment—(a) variety of assessments are used that are culturally responsive, (b) teachers of different racial/cultural backgrounds collectively evaluate students’ performances to ensure that the same standards are being applied, (c) culturally responsive teacher/student/parent conferences are established.

The changing demographics of schools make it incumbent on school personnel to understand how establishing a positive multi-cultural environment affects teaching and learning. They need to be intent on creating a climate and culture that feels safe and one that effectively addresses the issues associated with a multi-cultural environment.

Tatum (2007) presented the concept of the ABC approach of creating inclusive classrooms. A= affirming an identity, students need to see themselves in the classrooms and in the community. B= building community, this is community where everyone has a sense of belonging and feeling of importance. C= cultivating leadership, this is the responsibility that education has in preparing all persons to be engaged in a democratic society. Tatum contends that these three are essential in creating an inclusive school environment. Also necessary are teachers who communicate high expectations and inspire their student to achieve: “Environments that acknowledge the continuing significance of race and racial identify in ways that empower and motive students to transcend the legacy of race in our society even when the composite of the classroom continues to reflect it” (Tatum, 2007, p.21).

The changing student demographics constitutes not only a need for an analysis of the environment required to effectively meet the needs of students of color but also an analysis of who should be in school leadership positions. The contribution school leaders of color can bring to multi-cultural environments in schools should not be overlooked.

Usdan, et al. stated,

Clearly, schools will need to have to create programs and systems responsive to the special needs of a diverse, multi ethnic student body. Effective leadership in a contemporary multi cultural environment will require different understanding of more complex issues compared to 30 years ago. (2001, p. 15)

D. Brown (2005) noted,

[W]ith the face of public school students becoming more colored, the face of teachers becoming less colored and the face of leadership remaining for the most part white, the effects of race and gender on leadership credibility in diverse organizations we calls schools can no longer be ignored. (p. 53)

School leaders need to embrace the multi-cultural issues that parallel the change in student populations by modeling the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to assure all students are learning. This role modeling becomes even more powerful when the leadership reflects the diversity of the student population. Regarding leadership, Singleton and Linton state, “individuals and schools must be part of an entire community of courageous, passionate and mutually supportive leaders in the district.” (p. 245)

Purpose and Methodology

This paper shares findings from two separate studies. The purpose of the first study was to investigate how Minnesota school administrators were addressing cultural diversity and English language Learners in their districts. Data for the first study was collected through an electronic survey sent to superintendents and principals. A department level database of superintendents and principals was used to administer the survey. A total of 326 surveys from a possible 998 were completed for a return rate of 32.6%. The survey instrument consisted of 17 questions. Respondents were asked to identify their leadership position and type of district (urban, suburban, rural, or other). Respondents were also asked their perception concerning (a) personal awareness of English Language Learners (ELL) and cultural diversity needs, (b) district efforts through finances and professional development to address ELL and cultural diversity issues, (c) awareness of higher education efforts to address cultural diversity issues, and (d) level of interest in attending training on ELL and cultural diversity.

The largest administrative group to respond to the cultural diversity survey were elementary principals (42.8%), followed by secondary principals (22.8%), other (those with split duties and different grade configurations) (16.9%), superintendents (16%), and

middle school principals (1.5%). Respondents from rural school districts (47.1%) constituted the largest representation by type of district, followed by suburban (37.8%), urban (12.3%), and other (2.8%).

Respondents shared perceptions on their level of preparation in the areas of cultural knowledge and diversity. Seventy-two percent of the respondents stated that they had received training in the areas of cultural knowledge about the diversity of their students. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents stated their staff received professional development in the area of cultural knowledge of the diversity of their students. Sixty percent stated the district provided cultural diversity training for administrators.

Regarding institutions of higher education, respondents overwhelmingly agreed (84.6%) that institutions of higher education should provide cultural diversity training to school administrators. However, only 34% responded that it was their perception that institutions of higher education were providing assistance in diversity training for administrators. Eighty-seven percent stated that institutions of higher education should providing training to administrators in the area of working with culturally diverse families.

The second study is in progress. The study was initiated based on (a) the fact that the student demographics of district populations are not reflected in school district leadership and (b) the fact that the literature supports the importance of school leaders of color with the implementation of programs and systems responsive to the needs of a diverse, multiethnic student body. The study is a qualitative, multiple-case study. The purpose of the study is to capture the voices of experience school leaders of color—specifically their experiences as leaders and their perceptions about meeting the needs of

a diverse student population. Data is being collected through focus groups and individual interviews. Questions asked include (a) what challenges do people of color face in securing leadership positions; (b) what challenges do people of color face in their current position; (c) how important is it to have a person of color in a leadership position where the majority of students are students of color; (d) how can people of color be encouraged to seek school leadership positions; and (e) what suggestions would you make regarding recruitment of people of color into administrative preparation programs?

The following statements reflect participants' views on the value of their position and reflect their responses to the question, "How important is it to have a minority in a leadership position where the majority of students are students of color?"

"You've got to have people that care about kids regardless of where they come from. That's the number one thing. In a school it is important to have people of color in leadership positions, be they teacher leaders or whatever, they need to be in positions where kids can say, 'I can be that.'"

"It's important to have people who understand where the different kids are coming from. You just need somebody who understands it from that child's perspective. "

"When I say, 'I'm the principal,' the response is 'Wow, are you really the principal?' There is a look of shock in their eyes because on TV every person that is a role model doesn't look like me."

"My frustration, at least in my current position, is that a lot of the students who come down are students of color, mostly African-American males. Because of my background, because of my soft-spoken nature, I take every opportunity to understand what their reality is so that we develop that respect and that connection first. "

I think it is critical, not just important, but critical to have leaders of color, because students need to see examples. I mean, throughout society – Africa and here – we can talk about role models; you have to have a role model. If students don't see it in action, then they think they don't need to apply it to anything."

Leadership for a positive multi-cultural environment

There is evidence as reported by the cultural diversity survey that districts have provided training for administrators and staff in the cultural differences of a diverse population. This training is a beginning step in developing a positive multi-cultural environment. The training in diversity and cultural backgrounds, however positive of an effort, is not enough. There must also be an intentional initiative to address the instructional needs of a diverse student population. A leader, realizing the “achievement gap” is more than a color issue, needs to establish a safe nurturing environment focused on student learning.

As our society reflects a more diverse population, the students in our schools are mirroring that diversity but our school leadership is not. In Minnesota, demographic data reveals rural, suburban and urban schools with student populations comprised of 50% or more of students of color. With a limited number of people of color in school leadership positions, it is critical for preparation programs to take an active role in the recruitment and preparation of people of color for school leadership positions.

Conclusions

School personnel need to begin to address the changing student demographics by developing inclusive multi-cultural environments. It is critical that they understand and implement effective best practices and strategies that improve student learning for all students, including students of color whose learning needs may differ. School leaders are also responsible for establishing and maintaining a school culture that respects and embraces a multi-cultural learning environment.

The effort to address the absence of school leaders of color, who can and are instrumental in creating multi-cultural inclusive learning environments can begin with (a)

school districts identifying people of color within their teaching ranks and encouraging them to seek administrative licensure; (b) districts and professional organizations establishing mentoring programs for aspiring school leaders of color; (c) universities collaborating with local school districts to recruit aspiring school leaders of color for preparation programs, (d) universities and local school districts collaborating to offer professional development opportunities for aspiring school leaders of color, (e) local school districts and professional organizations seeking and encouraging people of color to accept leadership roles and (f) universities continuing to research the effects school leaders of color leaders have on student learning.

As noted from the cultural diversity survey, professional development efforts for educators have begun. However, professional development alone will not suffice to establish a positive multi-cultural environment. School leaders and teachers need to assure the (a) elimination of stereotypes, (b) implementation of teaching strategies that meet the learning needs of all students, (c) acknowledgement of the different cultural backgrounds of students and how they enrich learning, (d) use of the dynamics and influences of the family with addressing the achievement gap, (e) implement of curriculum and instruction that supports an inclusive, multi-cultural school, and (f) support for teachers in their efforts to provide a nurturing environment.

Higher education preparation programs also have responsibilities in connection with the development of inclusive, multi-cultural environments. The programs have an ethical and a professional obligation to begin addressing and modeling the creating and modeling an inclusive, multi-cultural environment. This can be accomplished by institutionalizing a multi-cultural inclusive environment, creating a safe environment that

allows for 'courageous conversations' about race, and communicating a belief that exemplifies the institution's understanding of students and families of color; Preparation programs also are responsible for preparing pre-service students to teach and lead in an inclusive, multi-cultural environments. This can be accomplished by preparing students to establish high expectations and to implement effective instructional practices that close the achievement gap. Preparation programs can also prepare students to have a strong voice and advocate for multi-cultural inclusive environments.

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