Leading for Equity and Social Justice: From Rhetoric to Reality

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Abstract

School systems across the world are facing a plethora of global changes that dictate rethinking instructional practices and professional leadership roles. School reformers are constantly facing the challenges dictated by the universal culture that exerts a huge power on learning and teaching, and leading. This article introduces a comprehensive framework for leaders who seek to achieve equity and social justice in the diverse schools. Drawing on pertinent research and literature in the field, the discussion introduces a comprehensive, equitable and culturally responsive, leadership model conducive to producing promising educational outcomes. Implications for school reform are drawn while suggesting specific guidelines and ingredients for educational success.

Introduction

The United States' universal culture is based on the diversity of various microcultures that may interact meaningfully within the overarching framework of democracy. Yet, very often history tells us that much more needs to be done to ensure a harmonious interaction among diverse groups and cultures. Social and educational institutions tend to be the laboratories for testing the maxims upon which the U.S. macroculture is based. In particular, schools have always been viewed as the change agents in the pluralistic society.

Undoubtedly, the culturally diverse nature of the U.S. society is dynamic and evolving. Schools are seen as a microcosm that symbolizes these dynamic changes and represent a concrete "slice of life" in the democracy in which we live. Students in today's classrooms represent a wide range of linguistic, sociocultural, and ethnic variables in the culture of schools. Since the premise of the pluralistic democratic society is to value the diversity that exists in all aspects of life in terms of equity and social justice, it is imperative that all participants are actively engaged towards a common goal. This underscores the significant roles leaders play in the process especially societal expectations require them to be in the forefront of advocacy and empowerment as they lead for social justice and equity.

However, there are those who argue that living in a democracy gives them the right to be ignorant. In schools, there still continues to be a denial of "societal benefits to vast numbers of Americans based on characteristics as arbitrary as

ethnicity, gender, and/or class" (Daly & O'Dowd, 1992, p. 179). This is, of course, due to the long history of monocultural stratification embedded in the culture of public education since teacher and administrator preparation programs have fallen short in preparing participants to meet the demands of democracy and pluralism (Wasley, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; King, 1995), despite the abundance of rhetoric in school reform to establish equity and social justice.

Educational Leadership: From the Roots to the Fruits

Historically, many democracies such as the Greek civilization and many others have integrated emancipation of individuals in schools by creating multiple opportunities to engage all participants (students and educators alike) in various dimensions of discourse. Accordingly, schools are seen as places for interaction within democratic principles that value individuals as individuals and provide an environment for developing civic and ethical responsibilities in the republic. Leaders are critical in facilitating the process which is necessary for the civic functioning and educational mission of schools.

In the etymological sense, many dictionaries define the word "*educate"* as being associated with learning and teaching (see for example: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/educe) that are keenly linked to leading and empowerment. Originated in Latin, the word consists of a prefix *"E"* meaning *"out, or exit",* and a root stem word *"duce, or dux"* meaning *"to lead forth."* Put together, the word *"educate"* essentially means to *lead someone out of their ignorance*. As such, the word meaning is by no means restricted to its denotative or connotative levels. Instead, it is a loaded term that conjures up a wide range of expected abilities, responsibilities, and promising possibilities. In short, in its inflectional usage, the word assumes a profound role of the actor, describes the action, and characterizes the acted upon person(s). For example, the word *"educate"* means that *"one teaches and leads."* Likewise, when reference is made to an *"educator"* the implication is that one assumes the role of a *"leader."* Similarly, an *"educated"* person means that he or she has been *"empowered, and led out of their ignorance."*

In the Greek philosophers' terms, there are several major requirements for responsible teaching and leading in educational contexts. They revolve around promoting cultural competence, ethical literacy, good citizenry, and cultivating democratic principles and values such as building relevant knowledge, respect, empowerment, unity, diversity, empathy among others. In schools, this is manifested in the interaction process within the classroom in which an environment for critical discourse is created as a meaningful way to engage all participants in creating solutions to *here and now* social problems. Rhetorical devices shape the mode of learning and teaching within three main domains: *logos* (the power of 'word' or 'language')*, and pathos* (the power of 'emotions' or 'dispositions'), *ethos* (the power of 'character traits' and 'morals'). Embedded in these devices is the confluence of various cognitive, affective, and moral realms of human development as necessary ingredients not only for students, but also for teachers, educators, leaders and others.

As the foundations of leadership are incubated early on in the lives of citizens, educational leaders are expected to safeguard the process as they lead by example. First, *the logos of educational leadership* require teachers and leaders to be intellectually appealing given their exemplar of knowledge about what they teach and how they lead at school. This in turn requires students to *cope with* the exigent yet rewarding intellectual nuisance as they are challenged to learn and become educationally and socially competent. Second, *the pathos of educational leadership* require teachers and leaders to be *affective* in the learning/teaching contexts - displaying personality traits and dispositions conducive to meaningful human interactions. This means that the teacher and leader must create needed intellectual and emotional tension in students to explore their unlimited cognitive and social abilities (i.e. an expected high level of critical literacy and rigor in educational tasks). Unless intellectual tension is balanced with its cognitive counterpart, students may find it damaging to their self-image and their potential in what they can do. This needed equilibrium is the pivot around which educational leadership roles turn. Finally, *the ethos of educational leadership* is the culmination of the teacher's and/or leader's ethical, moral, and professional appeal to all participants as they lead in the learning/teaching environment. Teachers and leaders who are professionally ethical entice students to learning, provide a good model for respect, honor and value diversity, believe in all students' optimal potential for success and excellence, provide the necessary caring environment, prepare students for civic functioning, and strive to meet learners' cognitive, emotional, social, and academic needs. All of these professional characteristics and personality traits are not only conducive to mastery learning and teaching, but are also congruent with establishing equity and social justice in society at large. In short, a democratic framework is based on pluralism and unity through diversity.

Multiculturalism: A Framework for Equity and Social Justice

In today's society, students, teachers, leaders and all participants in schools start their daily routine with the *Pledge of Allegiance* reciting the words that have a special meaning to them. The pledge affirms the mission and vision for equity and social justice in schools and society at large. Frequently recited rituals and slogans abound (including the visually displayed mottos, icons and symbols) in the daily lives of participants in educational and social institutions. They are seen and heard allover in and outside schools given their power and intent. These are not passive words that are arbitrarily articulated and used in daily discourse. Instead, they carry overtones that have far-reaching implications and goals. They also tend to fulfill various human needs and aspirations for better opportunities.

Perhaps, one of the most important platitudes in the American pluralism and democracy is the Motto of the United States: *E Pluribus Unum*. These few words richly characterize a unique civilization; they also overarch a solid foundation for a diverse society, its educational and social institutions. Members of society have ample opportunity to harness their potential and contribute in unique ways to the advancement of the democratic society within a unified and common goal and vision.

The U.S. Motto symbolizes an unlimited set of possibilities and expectations for its pluralistic and democratic civilization. It establishes coherence and unity while valuing diversity and appreciating differences. Individuals and groups are recognized and valued based on their contributions to the continuum of democracy. Various talents, abilities, and synergies are utilized to carry out and fulfill the mission of society at large. This reflects the diverse nature of the society that must value and cultivate these differences (Ogbu, 1995; Grant, 1995; Grant & Gomez, 1996; Suzuki, 1984). Thus, all participants who bring a huge linguistic, social and economic capital, should be viewed as assets rather than liabilities to the educational system.

Perhaps, schools are the most vital places to establish the foundations of diversity of all kinds and shapes. They are also major civic and social labs that create citizens whose role is to preserve the mission of *E Pluribus Unum*. Recognizing this premise, Cortes (1990) suggests a multi-faceted vision within the multicultural construct. He outlines *Five-pillared Educational Vision* through the process of multiculturation. This vision includes the following:

1. *Empowering Acculturation* of all Americans to an all-inclusive, equitable Unum;

2. *Sensitizing Acculturation* to help all Americans develop better intercultural understanding and become more dedicated to living with concern and sensitivity in a multiethnic society where racial and cultural differences co-exist with national and human commonalties;

3. *Institutional Acculturation* of the multiethnic present and future;

4. *Resource Acculturation* of drawing on the strengths of both Unum and Pluribus to work towards a stronger nation and better world;

5. *Civic Acculturation* by developing in the students a greater dedication to building a better, more equitable society for all.

Because teachers and leaders are a major part of this nourishment and nurturing process, they must undertake their social and educational leadership roles in an empowered democratic fashion. Schools also must create conditions conducive to empowering the minds and hearts so that individuals gain the freedom to attain their full intellectual potential, respect and value others, and more importantly deeply care about and act towards equity and social justice. This cognitive and social democratic upbringing begins in the early stages of the child's education. Schools have the responsibility to nurture the child's liberties and pursuit of happiness through empowerment and liberation from any cognitive or sociocultural limitations and pressures.

People of different races, languages, cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities generally share the same aspirations and wants. Despite their visible and marked

heterogeneity, humans have unmarked underlying common purpose to attain an empowering meaningful life full of dignity and pride.

In order to promote unity through diversity, individuals and groups must fully engage in the democratic process based on their common goals. At the same time, cultivating diversity through unity requires interactions outside one's prism of background experience and cultural schemata. Therefore, opportunities for discourse should be amply provided to dialogue and reflect beyond any limitations that might be overtly or covertly imposed by the social stratification.

Needless to say, democratic values should be embraced by every member and group in the pluralistic society (Suleiman, 2009; Suleiman & Moore, 1997a,b). Thus, one of the major aspects of civic upbringing is developing multicultural literacy and global perspectives. In schools, the foundations of curriculum, instruction, and assessment ought to be keenly linked to pluralism and democratic principles (Darling-Hammond, 2001, 2006; Darling-Hammond et al, 2008; Nieto, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2012). Similarly, while teachers and leaders seek to create citizens in terms of the democratic principles and values, they themselves should inculcate a comprehensive multicultural and multilingual competency to effectively accomplish their educational mission (Banks, 1997, 2007; Chisholm, 1994; Garza & Barnes, 1989; Grant & Gomez, 1996).

Multicultural Competence: From Building the Skill to Becoming Skillful

Multicultural competency is not merely a basic literacy skill that should be promoted early in life; rather, it should be reflected in *skillful* interaction among individuals and groups. Regardless of the social milieu in which one is raised, it is almost impossible to insulate anyone from the diverse world of reality around them. Even if deliberate attempts were made by adults to shield children from exposing them from the world of differences, eventually they will have to become part of the society that is multicultural in nature. By the same token, when conscious efforts are made to educate children and help them recognize and appreciate human differences, they ultimately become more sensitive and better citizens who can undertake their effective role in society.

Ethnic or cultural encapsulation is counterproductive because it allows individuals to act on their conscious and subconscious biases. It deprives individuals and groups from having a wider access to human experiences, global cultural patterns, and universal thought processes. On the other hand, multiculturation and multicultural competency can provide participants with wider options and solutions, allow more flexibility and adaptability, and thwart discord and alienation.

The process of developing multicultural awareness is an on-going journey. It begins with an understanding of oneself through identifying with others who are different. Self-awareness can be promoted and enhanced by acknowledging and recognizing others. It can also be facilitated or hindered by the social stimuli in the surrounding environment. For example, children can develop respect to others based on how this value is promoted and enforced by people around them. They also can learn prejudice based on conditions that exist in their social environment.

In some cases, there are evident behaviors that can convey negative messages and enhance stereotypes about different groups. In other situations, subtle messages and sociocultural cues with negative and offensive implications are inherently reflected in interactions among participants in the social unit. Young children easily pick on such hidden messages and consequently develop perceptions and attitudes that may not be consistent with their democratic and civic upbringing. In fact, many adults find themselves in situations where they have to unlearn the prejudices and perceptions they acquired during their childhood. Similarly, while teachers make an effort to teach their students tolerance, empathy, respect and other human values, they may feel compelled in many cases to *unteach* prejudice, stereotypes, false perceptions, and hatred.

Banks (1997, pp.68-69), in his ethnic studies approach, illustrates the various emerging stages of ethnic development and multicultural maturation. These include:

Stage 1: Ethnic Psychological Captivity:

> "During this stage, the individual has internalized negative ideologies and beliefs about his or her ethnic groups that are institutionalized within the society."

Stage 2: Ethnic Encapsulation:

> This stage is "characterized by ethnic encapsulation and ethnic exclusiveness, including voluntary separatism. The individual participates primarily within his or her own ethnic community and believes that his or her ethnic group is superior to that of others."

Stage 3: Ethnic Identity Clarification:

> "At this stage, the individual is able to clarify personal attitudes and ethnic identity, reduce intrapsychic conflict, and develop positive attitudes toward his or her ethnic group."

Stage 4: Biethnicity:

> "Individuals within this stage have a healthy sense of ethnic identity and the psychological characteristics and skills needed to participate in their own culture, as well as in another ethnic group."

Stage 5: Multiethnicity & Reflective Nationalism:

> This stage "describes the idealized goal for citizenship identity within an ethnically pluralistic nation. The individual at this stage is able to function, at least at minimal levels, within several ethnic sociocultural environments and to understand, appreciate, and share the values, symbols, and institutions of several ethnic cultures."

Stage 6: Globalism and Global Competency:

> Within this stage, individuals "have clarified, reflective, and positive ethnic, national, and global identifications and the knowledge, skills,

attitudes, and abilities needed to function in ethnic cultures within their own nation as well as in cultures within other nations. These individuals have the ideal delicate balance of ethnic, national, and global identifications, commitments, literacy, principles of humankind and have the skills, competencies and commitments needed to act on these values."

These stages vary from one individual or group to another especially, in many cases, there is often an inchoate foreboding about moving from one stage to another. Nonetheless, the multi-stage process provides a useful account of how multicultural competency can evolve over time. Ideally, everyone should reach the highest level of global competency that entails a vast conceptual awareness and comprehensive and positive outlook.

At the same time, Banks (1997) describes several approaches that vary on the continuum for multicultural education. In his widely cited accounts of integrating ethnic studies as part of multiculturalism, Banks (1995, 1997, 2007) outlines a multi-level classification:

Level 1—The Contributions Approach: focuses on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural element.

Level 2—The Additive Approach: focuses on contents, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum without changing its structure.

Level 3—The Transformation Approach: the structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

Level 4—The Social Action Approach: students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them.

In most schools, the multicultural treatments vary considerably and generally range between levels 1-3. Very few schools have reached the desired fourth level of multicultural integration. At the highest level, Level 4, of the multicultural integration continuum, ALL participants (students and teachers, educators, and leaders alike) are regularly engaged in the process through their daily academic and social discourse which empowers them to make learning/teaching events *for* them, *by* them, and *about* them. That is to say, the ultimate consumers of curriculum, instruction, and assessment are highly engaged in the critical aspects of their educational, social and civic upbringing. At this highly desired level, the marked differences (race, gender, disability, color, language…etc.) diminish in the face of reaching out to all involved. Ultimately, this task would not be feasible without effectively meeting the unique needs of each and every individual in the diverse culture of classrooms and schools. It presumes that individual differences, group expectations, democratic values, and pluralistic visions are all the driving force for curriculum and instruction as well as evaluating learning/teaching outcomes.

In addition to the expected levels of competency required in any discipline, multicultural literacy should overarch teachers' and leaders' conceptual awareness and skills. This requires minimum expectations that are reflected in the professional characteristics of teachers and leaders in the diverse schools. Bennett (2005) outlines the following several traits that characterize multicultural brokers in schools who should:

1. Possess democratic attitudes and values
2. Have clarified pluralistic ideology
3. Be able to view society from multiethnic viewpoints
4. Have knowledge of the complex nature of ethnicity
5. Have knowledge of the emerging stages of ethnicity
6. Have ability to function at Stage 4 or above

In addition to these traits, teachers and leaders should have the ability to integrate several dimensions in curriculum and instruction on daily basis. Banks (1995, 2007) outlines five dimensions of multicultural education that have direct implications in all educational settings. These dimensions are necessary in pluralistic schools for successful development of multicultural competency in students, teachers, and leaders alike. These dimensions include:

1. *Content Integration:* Content integration deals with the extent to which teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their subject areas or discipline.

2. *The Knowledge Construction Process*: This process relates to the extent to which teachers help students to investigate, and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed within it.

3. *Prejudice Reduction:* This dimension focuses on the characteristics of students' racial attitudes and how they can be modified by teaching methods and materials.

4. *Equity Pedagogy:* This dimension exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, and social-class groups. This includes using a variety of teaching styles that are consistent with the wide range of learning styles within various cultural and ethnic groups.

5. *Empowering School Culture and Social Structure:* Grouping and labeling practices, sports participation, disproportionality in achievement, and the interaction of the staff and the students across ethnic and racial lines are among

the components of the school culture that must be examined to create a school culture that empowers students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.

Intricately linked, these dimensions complement one another and are equally essential components for curricular activities, instructional treatments, and assessment practices in democratic schools. They aim to ensure that all participants are engaged and included in the educational process. At the same time, they are based on core democratic principles and have far-fetched and global vision.

However, the main step for developing multicultural competency is to ensure that individuals and groups are free from prejudice, bigotry, and intolerance. Although it is impossible to inoculate individuals and groups against the virus of such social ills, there are many concrete ways to cultivate democratic values and positive human relations. In school settings, symptoms that are detrimental to the democratic core values of all participants must be combated on daily basis. Thus, developing multicultural literacy is a daily ritual inside and outside schools.

Most importantly, the educational vision in democratic societies is essentially based on the foundations of multiculturalism and pluralism (Banks, 2007; Gay, 1995; Grant & Gomez, 1996). Thus, all education is, or should be, multicultural. In other words, multiculturalism should embed everything students, teachers, educators and leaders do. It should be an unmarked seamless process in the democratic educational and social institutions. In order to become skillful in achieving equity and social justice, educational leaders should operate from the following set of goals:

1. Demonstrating an understanding of and appreciating the different experiences and contributions of all minorities and other ethnic groups in the American society;

2. Acknowledging and appreciating the nature of the pluralistic society and conflict in the American society and the basic causes of institutional racism, sexism, and social inequity;

3. Promoting positive attitudes and optimistic outlooks towards diversity as the rule, not the exception, in pluralistic societies;
4. Seeking to eradicate negative stereotypical images fostered by ethnocentrism, white privilege, and bridging the gap of differences through understanding and empathy;

5. Engaging in difficult conversations about issues of race, color, ethnicity, and other aspects to understand the contemporary conditions of inequity and social justice in schools and beyond; and

6. Reflecting and acting upon the democratic principles and beliefs to defy the status quo and implement sustainable actionable school wide plans to bring about desired social change.

The growing global realities and geo-political events world dictate humanistic soul-searching to overcome cultural gaps, combat racism, and achieve equity and social justice. As agents of change, educational leaders can spearhead the movement towards transforming schools as they seek to fulfill these goals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Zhao, 2009). Undoubtedly, educational reform efforts embodied in preparing teachers and leaders require drastic steps in pluralizing educational treatments. Unless all participants are immersed and engaged in the realm of multiculturalism, we will continue to alienate and deprive society from the benefits of pluralism its promising consequences.

Summary and Conclusions

The multicultural framework is a comprehensive educational approach that aims to multiply learning opportunities for all participants and celebrate the cultural diversity represented in various educational and social institutions. In particular, it permeates the curriculum and teaching methods including the socialization and interactional processes among diverse participants in the culture of schools. Furthermore, the content and methodology of multicultural education must be founded on a democratic philosophical base that reflects a clear understanding of cultural pluralism and its sociopolitical implications in educational settings. The theoretical and pedagogical foci of multicultural approaches are centered on integration of multicultural education into not only a specific unit or course, but in all content areas in a systematic and vastly expansive manner. According to multiculturalists, to promote civic values and instill social justice in a pluralistic society, agents of change must construct relevant knowledge, create novel equitable pedagogical practices, and celebrate diversity in educational institutions.

Finally, multicultural education is a democratic collaborative process that is both affectively and cognitively developed. To enhance democratic values through teacher and administrator education programs, the mere incorporation of content is not sufficient in and of itself; through the understanding and true empathy of what cultural pluralism and democracy are, we can accomplish the goals of multicultural education that is key to combating inequity and social injustice.

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