DEVELOPING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERS THROUGH ONLINE LEARNING AND TEACHING APPROACHES

By

ALISA TALIAFERRO

Assistant Professor, North Carolina Central University.

ABSTRACT

The article will discuss culturally responsive leadership theory as a means to developing pre-service Master of School Administration (MSA) students as culturally responsive leaders who understand and are able to bridge differences that arise in diverse educational settings. The issues explored include those related to the cultural heritages and educational histories that students, faculty and stakeholders bring with them to the educational setting. The article will discuss ways that educational leadership can employ 21ˢᵗ Century technologies to enhance online instruction and teaching strategies. Moreover, the article will explore how online teaching approaches are effective in providing a forum for meaningful and in depth experiences for students.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Leadership, Social Capital, Social Theory, Online Learning.

INTRODUCTION

The rapidly changing demographic landscape of American schools requires that school leadership preparatory programs reconceptualize their role in the preparation of successful school leaders. Successful twenty-first century school leadership preparatory programs must take a fundamental approach towards forging across cultural borders to engage in meaningful ways with students from diverse cultural contexts and marginalized populations (Marshall and Oliva, 2005). Marshall and Oliva (2010) contend that the changing immigration, family, social and current economic realities are becoming the norm rather than the exception of public school populations (pp. 103). The large increases in diverse student populations require twenty-first century leaders be culturally responsive in their approach to addressing the language and cultural barrier issues that often exist between teachers and students who speak English as a second language or non-standard forms of English. The 21ˢᵗ Century school principals must know how to, in the words of Fillmore and Snow (2000)"understand that student talk is the key to analysis of what students know, and how they understand" (p. 5). Thus, successful school leaders must be culturally responsive and have the necessary communication skill sets for understanding a student's language, cultural and diverse identities. School leadership preparatory programs must prepare their candidates as culturally responsive leaders who are able to establish communication that allows for the free flow of information between the students, teachers, and community in which they serve (Marshall and Oliva, 2005).Therefore, it is essential for culturally responsive leaders to be able to use and understand 21ˢᵗ Century technological systems as means to communicate effectively with their school community.

In order to prepare these leaders for diverse culturally context, educational leadership professors should model 21ˢᵗ Century learning environments. This will require school leadership preparatory programs to establish a culture of how to fuse technology with current leadership practices in order to produce the type of culturally responsive leader who is able to navigate through the world of technology and infuse innovative technological practices on a day-to-day basis. Educational leadership professors must design their courses to incorporate advance technologies to broaden their students' perspectives on the many modalities and uses of innovative technology in schools.

Background

What is Culturally Responsive Leadership?

The author's research has found that culturally responsive leadership can be based on work about culturally

responsive teaching Gay (2000). It was found that Gay's principles defined culturally responsive teaching as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative and emancipatory. Gay's principles were outlined for cultural responsive teaching and applied to leadership in order to develop a framework for culturally responsive leadership. This included leading with an understanding of self as an additional principle in defining culturally responsive leadership.

Within this framework, culturally responsive leaders are leaders who understand themselves. They lead with an understanding of how their values and beliefs influence their day-to-day decision-making and behavior in the schools (Sergiovanni, 1992). Culturally responsive leaders understand the relationship between "what they say they believe" and "what they actually do"(Sergiovanni, 2007). Sergiovanni terms this as the synergy between your heart, hand and head of leadership. These leaders are adept to understanding the underlying principles that influence their behavior. They lead with an understanding of self.

Culturally responsive leaders are validating in their response and actions toward their school communities. Gay (2000) found that culturally responsive teachers acknowledge the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of their students (para.1). However, this concept can be applied to culturally responsive leaders in that it is important for them, not only to acknowledge the culturally heritages and educational histories of the teachers, but also acknowledge cultural heritages and educational histories of their staff and the parents within their school communities. Gay explains that with this acknowledgement, culturally responsive leaders understand the need to build bridges of meaningfulness between their school and the community as well as between academic expectations and the practicalities of the day (para.1).

Moreover, culturally responsive leadership requires school leaders to understand and be sensitive to the emotional, intellectual, and physical well-being of the teachers, staff and students who they serve in their buildings. Although, Ladson-Billings (as cited in Gay 2000, para. 2) uses the term cultural referents to refer to how teachers can use their students' background, this concept can be applied to culturally responsive leadership. Culturally responsive leaders must understand how to use the cultural referents of the students, teachers, and community to lead their school community toward academic success (Ladson-Billings, as cited in Gay 2000). This means that culturally responsive leaders encourage teachers in their schools to use culturally valued knowledge in their lessons as a way to strengthen the connection between the home and school environment (Hollins, as cited in Gay, 2000). Hollins coined the term culturally valued knowledge (as cited in Gay 2000, para.2). Thus, culturally responsive leaders understand the importance of academic success, but also of maintaining the cultural identity and heritage of the students during the educational process (Gay, 2000,para. 3). Thus, culturally responsive leaders are comprehensive in their approach to school governance.

Like the role of teacher, culturally responsive leadership is comprehensive and multidimensional (Gay, 2000). This leadership approach encompasses many facets and dynamics. Culturally responsive leadership requires school leaders to be aware of every aspect of the schooling process. Culturally responsive leadership also requires principals to focus on community relations, macro and micro political issues that may impede student learning. This leadership approach also requires school leaders to be uniquely sensitized to the roles in which their school community plays in the lives of these students.

Culturally responsive leadership is empowering. These leaders empower their teachers to take risks within the educational framework. They understand that the way to academic success for all students is to allow teachers to have ownership or to take ownership of their work through commitment and motivation to the school's goals (Sergiovanni, 1992). Gay (2000) reports "empowerment can be described as academic competence, self-efficacy and initiative (para. 6)." Culturally responsive leaders know that to enable feelings of empowerment among teachers is essential to their commitment and motivation to the work (Sergiovanni, 2007). Once, teachers are committed to the work, this leads to a positive school climate and bold expectations for the students. Freier (1993) states that school leaders must educate students for

liberation. It is only through educating for liberation that school leaders can transform those educational structures that impede the success of students. Culturally responsive leaders educate to liberate and are transformative in their leadership practice. Banks (as cited in Gay 2000) explains that transformation is born out of the ability to help students develop the knowledge and skills needed to become social critics (para. 7). Culturally responsive leadership asserts that this transformation is also needed for staff and community members to become social critics who have developed a deep understanding and skill sets for diverse culturally contexts (Banks, as cited in Gay 2000). Moreover, transformational leadership requires the practice of responding to a higher calling of leadership as it relates to the spiritual, sociological, and psychological needs of the students, staff, and the educational community (Sergiovanni, 2006). Thus, requiring school leaders to let go of the old and "make room" for new ideas, initiatives and practices.

In culturally responsive leadership environments, the members of the school community are empowered to take risk with instructional practices, initiatives, and programs for students. Culturally responsive environment is affirming towards diversity, multidimensional, empowering for staff, students, community and it creates a climate that is liberating (Villegas, 2002; Gay, 2000). A school community that is liberating responds to the notion that there is no single truth as it relates to the schooling experiences(Gay, 2000, para. 8). This freedom, liberation, results in improvement across many boundaries of the schooling and education process. For example, students are more successful in environments that are caring, supportive and accepting of their identities. Teachers and staff members are more connected to each other in environments where their identities are supported and their educational and schooling histories are validated.

The Role of Technology in Aiding Educational Leadership Professors in Developing Culturally Responsive Leaders

School leadership preparatory programs must provide opportunities for students to employ culturally responsive leadership practices throughout their programs of study. The paradigm shift from traditional management practices to culturally responsive leadership for students will only happen if their course work is supplemented with enrichment experiences (Villegas, 2002).Villegas (2002) argues that more support is needed outside of course work in order to support the construct of developing culturally responsive leaders. She states that the "add-on approach" to diversity does not work (pp. xiii). Villegas states that offering a few courses to the educational curriculum cannot adequately prepare teachers as leaders for the changing population of students (pp. xiii). She contends that it requires a broader vision, innovative strategies and bold initiatives to prepare students for this conceptual and paradigm shift as they transition from teachers to culturally responsive leaders. To address the shift, Villegas proposes using the infusion model as a strategy as a way to illuminate and address issues "not only in multicultural classes" but throughout the entire curriculum. She posits that in order to support this development, one must reach beyond the classroom to engage in frequent and varied learning opportunities that "include workshops, seminars, study groups, peer coaching and curriculum development projects (pp.xvii)."

Recent budget deficits across colleges and universities have limited the access to resources needed to provide students with "real" enrichment experiences. The infusion of 21st Century technologies can help to bridge that gap and provide the "virtual" experiences needed to provide educational leadership students with the contextual environments and immersion experiences needed through online learning and teaching approaches. Johnson and Aargon (2003) expand on this view:

Context is an essential central element in learning because knowledge is a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989).Wilson (1993) identifies three major premises of context and how these affect knowing and learning. The first is the idea that learning and thinking are social activities that are structured by constant interpersonal interaction. Second, the available tools within the particular situation significantly guide an individual's ability to think and learn. Third, human thinking is supported by interaction with the environment. (pp. 38)

According to Livingston and Condie (2006), "the research suggests that interactions with technology provide opportunities for learners to engage actively in the learning process… (pp. 150.). This approach is deeply entrenched in the concept of transformative learning. Brown(2006) states, "Transformative learning is a process of experiential learning, critical self-reflection, and rationale discourse that can be stimulated by people, events, or changes in context which challenge the learner's basic assumptions of the world. Transformative learning leads to a new way of seeing. "Values are not necessarily changed, but are examined-their source is identified, and they are accepted and justified or revised or possibly rejected" (Cranton, 1992, p. 146)." (pp. 2).

Conversely, this approach is most advantageous for the adult learner because it combines adult learning strategies with peer support. Moreover, this approach is well suited for online learning and teaching approaches because it incorporates social learning and social capital theories as a means for extending students' learning experiences. Both of these theories provide a conceptual context for online learning and teaching approaches in that social learning and social capital expands the students' social capital beyond the classroom by providing a network of colleagues that can provide a protective environment where they can feel safe, secure and take risks as they navigate their world toward becoming school leaders. Social capital theory posits that the more opportunities students have to interact with each other and diverse cultures, the greater their social networks and the more likely they will become culturally responsive leaders.

Innovative and Bold Online Learning and Teaching Approaches

One of the fundamental principles of teaching and learning is "modeling" what you expect in the classroom for your students. Educational leadership professors should model the new technologies in the classroom that they would like the pre-service Master of School Administration students to demonstrate once they become school leaders. Moreover, by providing a contextual learning environment for students that is technological rich will provide them with the opportunity to become familiar with new technologies and be able to incorporate them on a day-to-day basis as school leaders. Johnson and Aragon (2003) have outlined some innovative practices that can provide a rich context and "virtual experiences" for prospective school leaders:

Organize Online Courses Around Projects

The best way to accomplish this in an online environment is through a project-based approach. Application-rich courses can be designed around major projects and specific activities to be completed in order to create a final product. (pp. 40). An example of a project is to assign students to create mini documentaries about an aspect of culturally responsive leadership. The students work in small groups to accomplish this task.

Think-Pair-Share in a Virtual Environment

Having online students work in groups of two or three within a virtual environment is a greatway to keep students active and focused on their learning. Think-pairshare is an active learning technique used in many face-to-face classes but is rarely used in a virtual environment. The goal is to help students organize prior knowledge, brainstorm questions, or summarize, integrate, and apply new information. (pp.40). This approach works best when students are assigned the task of analyzing vignettes. This approach provides the students with an opportunity to consider multiple perspectives regarding the specific issues at hand. The students are also asked to examine the issues through "culturally responsive" lenses.

Online Diaries or Reflective Journals

Diaries and Journals promote continuous reflection throughout the course. Entries can be self-directed or promoted by an issue, question, or experience posed by the instructor. Journals allow students to reflectively interact with various course topics and experiences as noted earlier, critically examine how their values, beliefs, and attitudes fit with the material. This is a way that promotes growth beyond what regular instructor-and-student interactions provide. (pp. 42). Educational leadership professors can create a course blog where students can post their reflections and their classmates can respond to their post. Student can also post video diaries, as well as audio diaries as a reflection.

Some additional instructional approaches to use are the following:

Twitter

The instructor can create a twitter account for his or her course. Next, the instructor will assign a "tweet" day to a small group of students. On the students' assigned "tweet" day they will tweet about their experiences at their school site. This approach will allow their classmates to take a 'virtual" field trip to their site. For educational leadership students, this is an important activity because it will provide them with a context to understanding the diverse cultural contexts of schools.

Web Conferencing

Web-conferencing allows students and faculty to interact through virtual classrooms. Students are able to make class presentations, game simulations, provide immediate feedback and create independent chat rooms during a course session. Web conferencing also allows the instructor to record and archive their sessions.

Conclusion

Developing culturally responsive leaders through online learning and teaching approaches is essential to the growth and development of pre-service Master of School Administration students who will be able to create positive learning outcome for students. Educational leadership professors will need to incorporate new technologies through online learning and teaching approaches to expose, develop and create "new knowledge" bases for pre-service Master of School Administration. The students will be able to use these technologies to communicate effectively within school community they will one day lead. Moreover, the infusion of online learning throughout school leadership preparatory programs allows for students to experience "virtual" learning experience through varied teaching approaches. Online learning and teaching approaches provides the needed contextual experience for pre-service Master of School Administration students to enrich their course content as well as develop as culturally responsive leaders.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Alisa Taliaferro is an Assistant Professor at North Carolina Central University in the Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology. She has also served as the Master of School Administrator program coordinator for the Master of School Administration Add-on Licensure, Second-Degree Program in School Administration (which she created, developed and implemented during her tenure as MSA program coordinator), North Carolina Principal Fellows and the traditional Master of School Administration program. She also created a distance education program for school administrators in a partnering school district. She also created and designed the newly Master of School Administration Online Degree Program; which is on track to begin fall 2012. She has demonstrated outstanding talents in her function as an Assistant Professor. She has a reputation as a dedicated educator and was most recently nominated by her students for the North Carolina Central University Award for Teaching Excellence. Her colleagues presented her with an Excellence in Teaching Award for Incorporating Innovative Instructional Practices in Classroom Instruction. The Master of School Administration students presented Dr. Taliaferro with a plaque for her outstanding service as the MSA program coordinator.