Preparing School Leaders to Advocate for Social Justice

Jaymi Abusham

Introduction

The purposes of schooling are many, but the potential to ameliorate societal inequities is considered among the most essential (Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2016). Immeasurable effort has been expended to address inequity: federal and state funding, district and school improvement goals, professional development, financial awards, and even sanctions. None of these have succeeded in substantive progress toward closing the gaps that exist between underresourced students and their peers (Reardon, 2013).

In fact, some argue that the institution of schooling only works to advance inequity (Diamond, 2006). In today's schools, students of color continue to be disproportionately referred for special education services and disciplined to a greater degree than their peers. Blume (1998) argued decades ago that individuals who do not learn in typical ways should be considered neurodiverse and should not be seen as deficient. Yet neurodiverse students and their families continue to fight for access to meaningful instruction and a more inclusive education. And English learners continue to be viewed from a deficit perspective despite dual language skills.

Jaymi Abusham is an assistant professor and program chairperson for the Master's Degree in Educational Leadership in the School of Education at the University of La Verne, La Verne, California.

School leaders are positioned to address these needs, but they do not inherently possess the tools to do so. In fact, the role of school leadership has changed so drastically that future leaders are hired to replace individuals with very different skills sets. If neither prospective leaders nor field-based mentors possess these skills, it is incumbent upon leadership preparation programs to equip future leaders to address the reality of today's schools.

Although alternative methods for credentialing are available in some states, most school leaders continue to prepare through university programs. Unfortunately, many of these programs are out of date and ill equipped to develop social justice competencies. Built upon content from management and the social sciences, school leadership programs traditionally emphasize leadership theory, personnel practices, and, more recently, instructional leadership.

As a result, these programs typically resemble a master's degree in business administration that is specialized to the school setting. This curriculum produces leaders with a static set of antiquated skills who are ill equipped to advocate for the students who most need their leadership.

If we believe that future school leaders need social justice competencies, how do university programs work to develop them? Several core changes can substantially improve the readiness of future school leaders to address inequity, including an asset mind-set, safe spaces, diverse voices, embedded experiences, and explicit development of leadership efficacy.

Develop an Asset Mind-Set

First, school leadership programs must treat all diversity as an asset. It is commonplace for individuals to talk about how they *deal* with diversity, but diversity should not be seen as an obstacle to overcome. Diversity is an asset to organizations, yielding broader understanding, better decisions, and deeper knowledge (Homan et al., 2008). Reframing difference as a contributor to the school community positively impacts the culture of the school, particularly when resources are scarce.

The asset mind-set should be applied not only to race, gender, and ethnicity, but also to other categories of difference. For example, individuals are diagnosed with autism based on deficits in communication and social skills. However, research has documented that there are many traits associated with autism that would be labeled as strengths in another person (Grandin & Panek, 2013). These traits include strength in seeing details, recognizing nonsocial patterns, associative thinking, and long-term memory. Grandin and Panek argue that this combination of strengths can culminate in a greater capacity for creative thought.

Neurodiverse students labeled with autism will likely continue to require supports and services to succeed in traditional schooling. Nevertheless, asset-minded school leaders will likely build school communities in which these assets are valued. Leader preparation programs should apply an asset-based perspective to all types of diversity, including race, ethnicity, gender, neurodiversity, economics, language, and more.

Provide Safe Spaces

In class and during field experiences, candidates for school leadership should be able to discuss problems of practice and daily challenges that are encountered when addressing issues of equity. While it is common practice to assert that the university classroom should be confidential, a truly safe space requires more.

It is also important to minimize lecture and other didactic instructional practices that reinforce the notion that there is only one way to be a leader and one correct answer for each problem. Ideally, courses are taught by instructors with great experiences as school leaders, but they should be explicitly discouraged from teaching every concept with a story from the field.

Anecdotes from personal leadership experience are commonplace in school leadership programs but are also among the most ineffective ways to build leadership efficacy (Abusham, 2018; Bandura, 1977). A typical assignment in school leadership programs asks students to evaluate school data, identify achievement gaps, determine a plan of action to improve student achievement, and present this information to their school personnel for feedback.

In a traditional environment, students commonly identify the achievement gaps that have been discussed in their own districts and develop a plan that mirrors the initiatives in their current settings. While the traditional assignment might lead students to develop an understanding of the process for improvement initiatives, it is a missed opportunity to address pervasive inequities.

If the same assignment challenges students to push beyond the work of their current school settings and explore the root causes for achievement gaps, students are more likely to press beyond surface-level explanations and identify meaningful ways to truly support learners whose needs have not traditionally been met. If students receive simulated feedback from classmates, they develop a plan that challenges the status quo in a manner that is not possible if presented to school or district personnel whom they hope will hire them for a leadership position.

Educational leadership programs that wish to promote social justice thinking should carefully consider both classwork and field experiences and seek alternate ways to develop competencies in environments that will allow risk taking.

Incorporate Diverse Voices

Diversity among school leaders has increased, but the rate of change is extremely slow. Considering race alone, 82% of school principals were White in 2004, and the percentage remained at 80% in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Diversity decreases at every point along the school leadership pipeline; consequently, the number of students of color in educational leadership programs is low and fails to reflect the composition of diverse schools and communities. For this reason, school leader preparation programs often lack diverse voices.

Leadership programs must find ways to include the diverse voices of groups that are not represented by the students in their courses. Efforts to hire diverse faculty and admit diverse students are not enough. Regular review should be conducted to determine who authors the required texts and whether better resources are available that cover professional standards within an equity framework rather than those that cover professional standards without this lens. Guest speakers can easily be invited to visit courses to share their expertise.

In addition, digital resources can be used to give voice to groups that are not present in our student populations. For example, the University of Florida's Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform provides numerous resources for the inclusion of neurodiverse individuals, with many specifically identified for school leadership. Likewise, America's Course on Poverty and Inequality, produced by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, addresses the impact of poverty on educational access and outcomes, among other topics. Similar digital resources are available to give voice to marginalized groups not present in university classrooms.

Finally, leadership preparation programs should engage local activist groups within the curriculum or as part of advisory committees. A field experience assignment might ask students to attend a local Latinx or African American parent advisory group meeting and develop a plan for engaging this group in the school setting. In addition, advisory panels should purposely include members of regional action groups for inclusive causes, such as Black Lives Matter.

Provide Embedded Experiences

Well intentioned, some institutions have attempted to develop social justice acumen through a single course on multicultural education. While the content of these courses varies, they are likely inadequate to develop the competencies needed to lead for equity.

In contrast, programs that embed issues of equity throughout all coursework and field experiences are better able to develop a full range of social justice competencies. Critics may argue that such an approach adds learning objectives to courses that are already packed with content.

Consider a course that covers the basics of research methodology: scientific inquiry, problem statements, literature reviews, hypotheses, and so forth. These fundamentals can be taught using current research on issues of equity. Students can identify quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies on disproportional special education referrals for students of color. They can explore county, state, and national data sets on children in poverty and draft research questions. They can evaluate researcher bias in large-scale achievement gap studies. Each of these activities maintains the content of the research course, while simultaneously supporting students as they learn about critical issues of equity facing school-aged children.

Applying an equity lens to all courses also allows future school leaders to develop deeper content knowledge. For example, the capacity to use data when making educational decisions is an essential competency for today's school leader. Teaching this content in isolation leads students to assume that quantitative data sets are objective, although substantial evidence shows that this is not the case (Gillborn, Warmington, & Demack, 2018).

Furthermore, challenges faced by underresourced students can be overlooked if traditional data sources dictate the content that is taught. If we focus solely on problems of practice that are reflected in easily accessed data sets, we fail to prepare future school leaders for the realities they will face. Examples include the socioemotional needs of transgender students, the impact of homelessness and mobility on English learners, and numerous other social justice issues.

Explicitly Develop Leadership Efficacy

Many schools and districts are still very homogeneous, and leadership candidates might not have the opportunity to

develop skills in working with disadvantaged students. Leadership programs can develop social justice skill by providing aspiring administrators with performance experiences that promote leadership efficacy with underresourced students (Abusham, 2018).

Bandura (1977) demonstrated that people with stronger efficacy set higher goals for themselves and are more committed to accomplishing them. He asserted that efficacy is best developed through performance accomplishments specific to the domain. Therefore future school leaders will be more successful in addressing issues of equity if they participate in field experiences that directly address those issues in their own schools and districts.

A high school teacher could implement a structured goal-setting program with foster youth. An elementary school teacher could lead a yearlong collaborative inquiry group at her grade level to identify reading strategies that promote growth in African American students. A middle school teacher could examine the impact of flexible seating on the acquisition of academic language for long-term English learners. These projects, which specifically target support for marginalized groups, will work to develop leadership efficacy in areas of equity and, consequently, produce leaders who are more efficacious in meeting these needs.

Conclusion

American public schools were founded on the premise that education could mitigate social inequities (Growe & Montgomery, 2003). Despite considerable effort, much work remains to be done. The leaders of our schools and school districts can support this effort and complement other initiatives.

However, they must be trained to do so. As Breen (cited in Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2016) argued, the success of the school community hinges on maximizing the potential of every member of the community. Our future school leaders are positioned to drive this effort, and preparation programs must provide them with the tools to do so.

References

Abusham, J. (2018). Do something that scares you each day: The role of self-efficacy in preparing school leaders. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development, 29*, 64–75.

Ahram, R., Fergus, E., & Noguera, P. (2011). Addressing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: Case studies of suburban school districts. *Teachers College Record, 113*, 2233–2266.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review, 84*, 191–215. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191

Blume, H. (1998, September). Neurodiversity. *Atlantic.* Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/09/neurodiversity/305909

Diamond, J. B. (2006). Still separate and unequal: Examining race, opportunity, and school achievement in "integrated" suburbs. *Journal of Negro Education, 75*, 495–505.

Gillborn, D., Warmington, P., & Demack, S. (2018). QuantCrit: Education, policy, "Big Data" and principles for a critical race theory of statistics. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 21*, 158–179. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1377417

Grandin, T., & Panek, R. (2013). *The autistic brain: Thinking across the spectrum.* New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Growe, R., & Montgomery, P. S. (2003). Educational equity in America: Is education the great equalizer? *Professional Educator, 25*, 23–29.

Homan, A. C., Hollenbeck, J. R., Humphrey, S. E., van Knippenberg, D., Ilgen, D. R., & Van Kleef, G. A. (2008). Facing differences with an open mind: Openness to experience, salience of intragroup differences, and performance of diverse work groups. *Academy of Management Journal, 51*, 1204–22. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2008.35732995

Reardon, S. F. (2013). The widening income achievement gap. *Educational Leadership, 70*(8), 10–16.

Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. (2016, November 10). *Gaps in educational attainment: Richard Breen* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0X2972bRuSQ

U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *The state of racial diversity in the educator workforce.* Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf

Welsh, R. O., & Little, S. (2018). The school discipline dilemma: A comprehensive review of disparities and alternative approaches. *Review of Educational Research, 88*, 752–794. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318791582